Access to education for refugee children: A future for an ageing Europe?

Lydia Vaiopoulou
M.A. Student, University of Piraeus
Department of International and European Studies
University of Piraeus
lydia_vaiopoulou@yahoo.gr

Abstract
Europe is coping over many decades with low birthrates and high immigration levels of the youth, while longer life expectancies seem to be a feature of European societies. In such a context, the need for renewing the supply of younger workers at the member states and providing support to their pension systems becomes clear and the refugee influx seems like a long-term benefit for European communities that could breathe new life into Europe's growth by contributing significantly to this direction. Nevertheless the unprecedented surges of refugees that Europe receives have leaded many Europeans to skepticism regarding the new conditions that their social inclusion might bring to their lives. Education can be a powerful tool in times of displacement in order to reach the objective of social and economic integration of refugees as well as the mutual respect between natives and refugees. This is why access to education for refugee children is crucial so as to help them pursue productive and meaningful lives but also to provide them the tools to build future communities on the basis of peaceful coexistence. This paper discusses how the integration of refugee children can reinvestigate and enrich the European society in the long term as well as how this attempt can be accomplished through a systematic and holistic approach in the educational field that will ensure educational opportunities to all refugee children, whereas it presents inspiring practices for their integration in the school community through a case study of a Greek primary school.

Key-words: Refugee children, access to education, Europe's development, social integration, educational practices

1. Introduction

During the last decades Europe has received unprecedented surges of refugees who are forcibly displaced according to Article 1A of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Article 1A of the 1951 Geneva Convention applies to any person who, due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term 'the country of his nationality’ shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national”, see UNESCO, Learning to live together. Retrieved on February 14, 2017.
from their country of origin and put their lives in peril to seek asylum to the member states for reasons of political, social and religion upheavals, while a large proportion among them are children. More precisely, as estimated in August 2016 30% of the asylum seekers in Europe were children, whereas in 2015 the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum reached the 88.300 and their number in some European countries shows a steady increase (Europe Council, 2010). However refugees are protected under the international law, as the right of asylum is enshrined from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Europe is obliged to confer them protection.

However, in many cases the huge number of refugees at the member states is negatively perceived and the extreme right political parties seem to reinforce this point of view. What is more, Europe is at the same time in front of great demographic challenges and an ageing population which highlights the need for new workforce. Thus, beyond the necessity of the development of a solid relationship for a harmonious coexistence between natives and refugees in the European societies, it is crucial for each side to realize that each side the positive outcomes that this relation can bring to Europe’s general growth in the long term.

What is for certain is that the refugee “crisis” consists a socio-economic challenge that Europe has to handle successfully and meet the needs of the new social conditions and those of the greater cultural diversity within the member states in order to achieve a social cohesion and reach full potential of the benefits that these new conditions can bring for all sides through a comprehensive and solidarity approach. The EU sets the inclusive growth of Europe as an objective through Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010) and the objective of a coherent society based on mutual respect (European Commission, 2009) while peace and security consist factors that it heavily promotes. In order to achieve these objectives, refugees' social integration to the host countries and local communities seems to be a key requirement (Sacramento, 2015) that presupposes a constructive relationship between natives and refugees.

Education is considered a key factor in times of displacement that can foster social cohesion, and help refugees rebuild their communities and pursue productive, meaningful lives, while it strengthens the cooperation and social interaction between individuals from different ethnic groups (Sacramento, 2015). Hence the education of refugee children, who will be part of the future European societies, consist a vital issue in which Europe has to invest tremendously. Nevertheless, according to the UNESCO's International

---

2 “The General Comment n. 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of Child refers to two types of minors. Both definitions regard: Unaccompanied minors who are children (below 18) outside their country of origin and have been separated from both parents/other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. Separated minors who are children (below 18) outside their country of origin separated from both parents/previous primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives, including children accompanied by other adult family members.”, see Council of Europe, (2010). The protection of separated or unaccompanied minors by national human rights structures. (pp.11-12). University of Padua, Italy. Retrieved on February 14, 2017, from http://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/public/docs/minors_debriefing_oct2009.pdf.


Conference on Education (2008) the education that schools provide is not sufficient to train the citizens of tomorrow to be able to live in complex societies⁶. Hence the need for educational approaches that will provide students with skills to approach EU’s objectives emerges.

This paper focuses on the key role that education can play in the integration of refugee children and thus in the sustainability and growth of the future European societies, while it stresses the barriers that refugee children often meet in their way to school in the host countries. What is more the need of a systematic and holistic approach from schools and governments is highlighted, whereas the author presents some inspiring practices from a Greek school in a multi-cultural context.

2. Scope and methodology

The central question that this paper examines is whether the entry of refugee children to schools in the host countries is finally a challenge or a big opportunity for a Europe that is in front of great demographic challenges and rapidly changing social conditions. The main assumptions of the paper are:

1st assumption - Refugee children can highly contribute to Europe’s growth in the long term.
2nd assumption - Education is a presupposition for the integration of refugee children and the social cohesion at the host states.
3rd assumption – The access of children who are refugees or asylum-seekers to full educational opportunities requires a whole-of-government and a whole-school approach.

As far as the structure of the paper is concerned, the author discusses at first how the entrance of refugees in Europe is perceived by a great part of the European population and underlines the great benefits that the integration of refugee children can bring in the long term to the economy of Europe. Furthermore, the paper stresses the crucial role that education can play in the integration of these children in the host societies and their labour markets, while it refers to the obstacles that they meet on their way to school, as well as the factors to which they are owed. What is more, the need of a systematic and holistic approach from schools and governments is highlighted, whereas the author presents some inspiring educational practices for the integration of foreign students in the school communities through a case study of a Greek school characterized by intense multiculturalism. The paper was based on a literature research and on the case study which in particular was based on a book written specifically for this school in order to describe the several efforts made in order to create a school community that will provide equal opportunities to all children regardless of their ethnic background and promote respect and interaction between students, their families and the educational staff.

3. The refugee "crisis"

The notion of “crisis” that is widely used in order to describe the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers in Europe has a deeper meaning linked to the notion of "threat" (Ansems de Vries, Carrera & Guild, 2016). Hence it is clear that the entry of refugee children in the schools of Europe will be perceived also as a threat for the balances of the school communities. However it is crucial that Europe and all interested parts realize the benefits that refugee children can bring to the Europe's economic and social development in the long term as well as to its cultural diversity by participating actively to the host societies.

In a Europe with no foreign population, another type of crisis would come to affect the European societies with serious social and economical effects, as immigration influences also a distribution of economic costs and benefits that in that case would be also absent from the European economy (Muus, 2013). More specifically in 2014 it was estimated that EU would lose in the next 20 years 33 million people of working age, while the non-working parts of its population would exceed the working parts. What is more changes are also expected in the school age population that will vary among countries as well as a decrease of the school population, while Eurostat estimates that by 2040 there will be 3% fewer people aged 5-18 in Europe.

Hence the future entry of refugee children in Europe's labour market could be beneficial through occupying jobs in Europe that have to be filled and contributing to the funding of the pension system. Additional labour from foreign countries and highly qualified personnel is indispensable for Europe's growth as for several years the ageing of its population in combination with the low birthrates and the shrinking of its workforce are sounding the alarm for its future sustainability, whereas these issues are considered to take larger dimensions during the years, which will make this need greater and greater (European Commission, 2014). In particular, on 1 January 2015 half of the EU-28’s population was older than 42.4 years, while half was younger, whereas the birth reduction in the Member States results in a reduction of the youth in the total population (Eurostat, 2016). Thus the Member states should decide on a supply-based immigration that gives emphasis on the human capital, on the future employability and on the prospects of the social integration of refugee children, through highly investing in their education (Muus, 2013).

4. The key-role of education to refugee children integration

The increased need of Europe for highly-skilled workers implies the need for an appropriate profile of this new workforce. Research shows that educated foreigners can integrate more easily, whereas they contribute to a larger extent to the economic development of the host state (ibid). Hence education becomes a powerful tool for the economic integration of migrants and their entry to the labour market.

However schools can play an even more essential role to the life of a child that has been though

---


conflicts and disasters. Given that refugee children have been through forced displacements and humanitarian crises, while some of them have been separated from their families, education can be crucial for both their development and protection. What is more, educated refugees are provided with the knowledge and the skills to contribute to social transformation and to sustainable and peaceful coexistence (UNHCR, 2012). Particularly high-quality education for refugee children is among the Global Strategic Priorities of UNHCR for 2017 in order to promote human potential and provide them with essential skills for building healthy and productive lives and promotes self-reliance (ibid).

Nevertheless education is not only crucial for the displaced children that the host countries receive but also for the native children in them and for the whole community in general. Schools consist environments that reflect social convictions, thus they can highly contribute through education to tackle the rise of violence, racism, discrimination and xenophobia among students from different ethnic groups (De Paola & Brunello, 2016) that can make their appearance in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural school community. Furthermore, education cannot only prevent from the rise of such factors that can increase in times of displacement, but it can foster equality and intercultural dialogue, promote respect in the resolution of problems and disputes through the education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, as well as mutually beneficial cooperation and social interaction (Sacramento, 2015).

5. The enshrined right of children to education

A child's right to education is enshrined in both an international and European level from a number of human rights instruments and committees. More precisely it protected by:

-Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26
-European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR-1950), Article 2 Protocol No. 1
-Refugee Convention (1951), Article 22
-Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960)
-International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right ((ICESCR-1966), Article 13, General

---

Comment 13, Article 14\textsuperscript{16}
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC-1989), Article 28, 29, Article 2 for non discrimination\textsuperscript{17}
- European Social Charter (ESC-1996), Article 17\textsuperscript{18}
- Council Resolution on unaccompanied minors who are nationals of third countries (1997), Article 2\textsuperscript{19}
- Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum, UNHCR, (1997), February 1997\textsuperscript{20}
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), Article 5\textsuperscript{21}
- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), Article 14\textsuperscript{22}
- Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2004)\textsuperscript{23}
- General Comment No. 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin (2005)\textsuperscript{24}
- EU Resolution on Unaccompanied Minors (1997-Article 3)\textsuperscript{25}

6. Barriers to refugee children education

Although both European and International law protect the fundamental right of refugee children to education, yet a great number of them are today left out of schools\textsuperscript{26}, while the access to education is even more limited for girls and at secondary levels (UNCHR, 2011b, P.12). What is more, a large number among these children has no access to quality education (UNCHR, 2012). Thus, these children are deprived of the physical protection and the personal skills and competencies that education can provide them waiting for long periods of time for the examination of their asylum application at refugee camps. A common measure of governments is the institutionalization of the refugee camps as a temporary solution, but such partial efforts

\textsuperscript{22}Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, (2000).
\textsuperscript{24}Committee on the Rights of the Child - General Comment NO. 6(2005) - Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, CRC/GC/2005/6, 39th Session, 3 June 2005.
cannot cover the increased needs of these children, neither can they contribute to their integration to the local communities.

Nevertheless, the view of an asylum application can be a very long procedure given the complexity of the issue; the different factors that have to be examined; the lengthy bureaucratic processes; as well as due to the vast number of asylum seekers applications pending. Hence refugee children are eventually being marginalized with dire consequences for Europe's development and for these generations of children. However the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted the negative impact that delays can have on children\(^{27}\). Hence the question of the early examination of children applications arises particularly in case of unaccompanied children in order to give primary consideration to their best interests as the Article 24 of the Charter requires\(^{28}\).

The number of refugee children out of school includes also children whose asylum application has been favorably considered and stay out of schools for several reasons, as in many member states there are negative reactions of the local communities towards them. This may be attributable to the fact that, like in the case of children with a migrant background, particularly parents and politicians consider that the entrance of children coming from different cultural backgrounds at schools will affect negatively the performance of natives (De Paola & Brunello, 2016). Educating children coming from various cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or religious backgrounds is often considered to be problematic (Bourgonje, 2010) and can lead to the rise of discrimination and racist attitudes. However, the existing researches reach different conclusions on the effects that foreign students can have at the educational achievements of the native students (De Paola & Brunello, 2016).

These perceptions that in some cases can take large extent, as well as school and class segregation\(^{29}\), can result in the "Whight Flight" phenomenon which seems to be a common feature of all member states with a big number of foreign citizens, in which many students of native parents seem to switch to other schools without changing residential area when the foreign population of the school is rising\(^{30}\). However, UNHCR underlines the importance of the participation of refugees in mainstream education in the same school environment with the local students (UNHCR, 2011a). In this context, the unwanted school population does not participate in the life of the local society, while the regions in which students are segregated can turn into ghettos and be considered as declining regions. The upshot of these conditions is the spread of a feeling of rivalry between the two sides whereas these students never really become part of the school community which can put in risk their school attendance.

However, it is a fact that students coming from third countries have on average lower academic

\(^{27}\) UN, Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013), General Comment No. 14, 29 May 2013, CRC/C/GC/14.


\(^{29}\) Segregation is a concept for social and physical spatial separation and distance between groups and individuals. School segregation means that the student body of a school – and sometimes the teaching body as well – is primarily composed of one migrant ethnic group or of migrants of different ethnicity." see NESSE, (2008), Education and Migration: strategies for integrating migrant children in European schools and societies. A synthesis of research findings for policy-makers, European Commission, 2008, p.24.

Access to education for refugee children: A future for an ageing Europe?

Achievements compared to native students which can be explained by several factors (Essomba, 2014) and face more challenges in educational achievement (Bartlett, 2015). Moreover, the language difficulties and their socio-economic differences stand out among them (OECD, 2010). The language consists a means to communicate with the world around them and the local community in order to get integrated in it, though refugee children as do not speak the language of the host country are at risk of falling behind. The language difficulties that they are facing can also be due to the frequent exposition of children to many languages of instruction as well as poor quality of English in countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). What is more, many refugee children have to work informally in order to ensure their families' economic survival (Fairfield, 2016). This highlights the weak monitoring mechanisms of Member States that are needed in order to identify such cases of children, as well as their inability to provide to these individuals an appropriate standard of living and integration.

The lower school performance of foreign students can be also linked to discrimination and mistreatment in school settings. Teachers' stereotyped expectations on these children’s’ skills and capacities is a factor that affects negatively their learning pathway and lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Furthermore, lower competencies may be due to disrupted schooling with small or large school gaps as well as to sporadic pre-resettlement schooling (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). What is certain is that all these factors lead to the deterioration of their educational outcomes, skills and general quality of life and risks high levels of early school leaving for the children who will finally manage to get into schools as pupils educational expectations and school engagement consist predictors of early school leaving (Nouwen; Clycq; Uličná, 2015).

Barriers are also set in the way of refugee children to school by the procedures of the educational system of the host country. More precisely the lack of official documentation that is required for the enrollment of children to school, which displacement often implies, is also a key barrier to the education of refugee children (Fairfield, 2016). In the majority of the European countries schools ask for mandatory documents in order to enroll a child, hence the identity, residence, birth or the child’s health cannot be documented and schools cannot accept the child to the school community. In addition there are families that live in irregular situation and they do not have the regular legal status in order to register births and thus their children to the education system of the host state (Mooney & French, n.d.) as well as obstacles that they may face in obtaining certificates for their educational skills and level (FRA, 2011). What is more financial implications such as the school fees and material requirements that have to be covered in many schools for each student also deter the enrollment of children with migrant background to school (Mooney et al., n.d.).

7. The necessity of governments' active engagement

Displacement brings both EU and refugees to huge challenges that cannot be addressed through unilateral actions but require a comprehensive and balanced approach based on the respect of human rights. Nevertheless, beyond the EU actions, Member States have a crucial role to play on the engagement of
refugee children to education and they can be catalytic factors in ensuring that there will be no lost
generation and highlights the decisive role that governments can play to this attempt. Therefore energetic
actions on the part of the receiving countries through whole-of-government approaches are needed in order
to achieve substantive results, yet such efforts seem to miss from many European countries31.

In principle, it is crucial that governments ensure an effective system of guardianship for both
unaccompanied and separated children32 in the absence of their parents and standardize the procedures that
concern these two specific categories with urgent needs. Hence governments should provide them early with
a guardian who will ensure their access to services and information and support them during their stay33 as
well as their best interests and general well-being, as required by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the
Rights of the Child and Article 24 of the Charter.

Furthermore, the need of improving the education of foreign students is highlighted in many OECD
countries. Governments steer educational policy for individuals with migrant background at the national,
regional and/or local level using the following tools (OECD, 2010, p.3):

- setting explicit policy goals for immigrant students within broader education policy goals;
- setting regulations and legislation;
- designing effective funding strategies;
- establishing standards, qualifications and qualifications framework;
- establishing curricula, guidelines and pedagogy;
- building capacity (especially training and teacher support);
- raising awareness, communication and dissemination;
- monitoring, research, evaluation and feedback.

Nevertheless broader policies cannot always take consideration of the different characteristics of
students, whereas this is more feasible to a regional and local level (Sacramento, 2015). Hence, given that
children coming from third countries have the most urgent educational needs in Europe (Essomba, 2014), it
becomes clear that governments have to highly investigate in human capital34. High quality education 35

33 Ibid
35 Quality education includes:
Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities; environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities; content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace; processes through which trained teachers use child-centered teaching approaches in well-
should also be a priority at national level in order to provide foreign students with adequate knowledge and skills and hence sustain Europe’s social and economic development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015), while it is considered as a presupposition for the protective education that refugee children are in need of in order to overcome their traumas (UNHCR, 2011b).

The UNHCR considering education as a durable solution has pointed out through an Agenda for change in order to ensure to refugees high quality education, which include (ibid, p.13):

- The integration of refugees into national education systems, particularly in urban areas;
- The provision of post-primary education for all refugees up to the end of secondary school, with emphasis on access for girls and other marginalized groups education;
- Investment in teacher training and basic qualification of their skills;
- Development of new standards and indicators for education that measure learning outcomes;
- Recognition of the connections between education and conflict in all education policy and planning, emphasizing the use of conflict-sensitive analyses to assess the content and structures of education;
- Support for increased and predictable human and financial resources in education

The ECSR has proposed institutional changes to be made an pore precisely a functioning system of primary and secondary to include an adequate number of schools; ensure a fair geographical distribution, especially between rural and urban areas; aim at enrolling 100% of children of the relevant age; aim at reaching a reasonable teacher-pupil ratio and adequate class sizes; establish a monitoring mechanism to ensure the quality of education and of teaching and ensure that education is compulsory until the minimum age for admission to employment\(^\text{36}\).

Additionally, governments should emphasize to the acquisition of the language of the host country from refugee children, given that proficiency in the language of instruction is a precondition for learning (OECD, 2010). Encouraging an early start at these children student life and learning is essential to this attempt, thus governments should organize early learning programs which will highly contribute to the acquisition of the language of the host country and thus, will contribute to the effective linguistic and cultural integration\(^\text{37}\). Furthermore, governments need to ensure education provision close to the refugee communities through accessible places for refugee children at schools and training centers in the local area in order to ensure that they won't have to travel long distances or pay additional costs to get to school\(^\text{38}\).

---


Funding on the part of governments is indispensable through a developmental approach\(^\text{39}\) for the implementation of policies and actions organized, whereas it can contribute to the management of inequities by targeting to the educational priorities that have been established. What is more, monitoring is crucial for the assessment of educational programs, policies and actions in order to help these pupils have higher educational achievements by realizing at first the barriers that they meet on their way to education in order to design the appropriate interventions (OECD, 2010). Hence governments should evaluate systematically what progress has been made, what works and what does not, but also support schools with the right measures and tools for the internal evaluation of the school's actions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

The complexity of interactions which characterize discrete policy tools makes the institution of strong governance systems crucial (OECD, 2010). In a holistic approach the active role and the engagement of stakeholders and civil society is more than essential. Governments in collaboration with the interested parties can support the relevant policy and contribute legislative development with regard to children well-being and meeting their increased educational and mental needs. The European Website on Integration (EWSI)\(^\text{40}\) can be a useful tool which contributes to the engagement and collaboration of policy-makers and professionals, as well as to their interaction and the exchange of practices for the successful integration of individuals coming from third countries. Programs have already been organized in association with municipalities, NGOs, welfare organizations, voluntary associations and in some cases with regional or federal state service organizations (NESSE, 2008).

8. In need of a whole-school approach

The entry of refugee children at schools is an issue that has to be carefully approached from the school community as a whole, as individual attempts will fall short at meeting the urgent needs of these children and maintain the balances between the several parties involved in the school life. The school environment has to build the sense of belonging to these children and provide them a safe environment that will empower them and give them the possibility, skills and knowledge to turn out to educated and competent citizens that will give the best that they have through their active participation in the future European societies. The sense of belonging of immigrants at school is related to the assistance that school provides them in order to overcome difficulties they are facing in their learning pathway and building a new life (OECD, 2015).

Therefore, schools should consist for these pupils more than a place of imparting knowledge. For a great number of refugee children, school represents their first contact with the receiving society through their contact with their native peers and the school teachers and it can turn into a powerful tool for the assertion of their rights. For this reason, the school community has to lay the foundations and create favorable conditions that will permit the recognition of the potential and general respect of these children and lead to their quick

\(^{39}\) “The developmental approach recognizes education as a long-term investment for society and the lack of quality education in a crisis as holding back development potential, even allowing backward development” (UNHCR, 2011b, p.9).

integration. What is certain is that the simple recognition of diversity is insufficient to foster school cohesion (Orton, 2012). Thus, schools have to emphasize positive interactions\(^4\) in order to achieve cohesion and harmonious coexistence inside the school communities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2009). They are called to figure out ways to achieve these objectives, whereas the practices that every school will implement may differ from school to school as these should be based on the needs of the receiving school population which may also differ.

The fact that refugees come from different socioeconomic, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds to these of the host countries can result in many cases in language barriers and cultural misunderstandings between students and teachers (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Hence, schools should highly invest in supportive students-teachers relations. Teachers' participation in training programs is crucial so that they can deal with the different forms of diversity in the school environment and help them change any stereotyped attitudes in order to foster equality between students. The role of school leaders can be crucial to this attempt in fostering diversity and awareness among the school staff, as well as in ensuring a balanced allocation of refugee children at school classes as the class composition can strongly affect students' educational achievements (De Paola & Brunello, 2016). Teachers and school leaders as a whole should work cooperatively to establish a positive climate at a school and classroom level in which diversity between students will consist a resource for successful teaching and learning, promote their integration at school and after-school activities and develop new ways of communicating and collaborating between students (OECD, 2010). What is more there must be a coordinated from the teaching staff on the acquirement of the language of instruction in order to avoid difficulties in communication as well as ensure high educational outcomes. For this reason, language training, independent literacy assessments and access to reading material consist actions that can bring positive results inside the school community and help the integration of the foreign students (UNCHR, 2012).

The International Conference of UNESCO on Education (2008) has highlighted the importance of the participation of many interested parties in the learning process beyond educators, while it highlighted the value of non-formal education in developing school-community relations\(^4\). The community involvement in the educational process and activities has various positive effects on the establishment of continuity in the school life of foreign students (Sacramento, 2015), while it has been widely recognized. The Council of the European Union highlighted the need for foreign pupils to establish partnerships with local communities (2009)\(^4\). What is more, the European Commission’s Green Paper (2008)\(^4\) has given great emphasis to the

\(^4\) Positive interactions ‘refers to those processes which help these people to effectively build networks of mutually supportive relationships with each other in ways that contribute to a more cohesive society” see Orton, A. (2012). Building migrants belonging through positive interactions, Council of Europe, (2012), p. 9.
involvement of migrant communities in schools, addressing the learning needs of both children and parents, and taking into account both parents’ and children’s expectations of school. Parental involvement in the school community and life is considered to be linked to children’s school success (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2009), whereas actors outside the school environment can provide them academic help and support in interpersonal issues useful subsequently in their lives (Sacramento, 2015). Additionally School Management Committees, Parent Teacher Associations and Student Committees/Councils could foster leadership, financial management, and democratic decision-making and active participation of the different parties in the school community (UNCHR, 2012).

Education on Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education\(^{45, 46}\) can also play a key role in such multicultural educational contexts and requires a whole-school approach in order to be expressed by every aspect of the school community. Through such educational approaches schools can address violence in the school environment as well as provide students with competences for a democratic culture. The Council of European Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Education for Human Rights has focused on the link between democratic governance in the educational institutions and children's experimentation with the notions of democracy and human rights which are crucial particularly in multicultural environments where phenomena of racism and violence can arise, in order to provide the future citizens with the skills needed to foster social cohesion and tackle all forms of discrimination (Council of Europe, 2010).

9. The case of 132\textsuperscript{nd} Primary school of Athens

Based on: Charavitsidis, P. (2013). \textit{Building a democratic and human school in Athens}

Schools that receive refugee children are facing challenges as they are called upon to adapt to the new conditions that the change in the composition of the school population brings in the school community and maintain its balances, as well as translate principles and practices into action within the school environment in order to respond as far as possible to the different needs of all students. This is why the exchange of good practices between Member states is crucial in order to support the work of these schools and empower them with useful tools and inspiring practices.

Therefore it is crucial to spread the word about schools and educational institutions which not only managed to deal with students' cultural diversity, but also let it enrich the learning process and the cooperation


\(^{45}\) “Citizenship and human rights education is about learning to live together and respect each other. It is also about knowing and understanding your rights in order to play an active role in decisions that concern you” see Council of Europe, \textit{What is citizenship and Human Rights Education?}, p.1. Retrieved on February 14, 2017, from https://edoc.coe.int/en/human-rights-education/6439-what-is-citizenship-and-human-rights-education.html.

\(^{46}\) “Education for democratic citizenship and human rights education have common objectives due to the strong interdependency between human rights and democracy” see Council of Europe, (2012). \textit{Democracy and Human Rights}, Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.
interpersonal relationships between the parties involved in the school life, because they are the proof that the harmonious coexistence of students with different cultural backgrounds is efficient. 132\textsuperscript{nd} Primary school of Athens is a case in point which deserves to be heard due to the innovative practices and choices that it implemented in order to integrate successfully its foreign student population, as well as due to the results that it finally achieved. The practices and actions that this school community organized were based on the respect of the diversity and the objective of the integration of children coming from different countries, thus they could bring positive outcomes to the education of refugee children as well.

The 132\textsuperscript{nd} Primary School of Athens is a public school located to the city centre, characterized by strong elements of multiculturalism. More precisely, at school there were students of 12 nationalities, while the 72\% of the school population are speakers of other languages. Some years ago the smooth functioning of the school community had been disrupted as the school was showing high rates of early school leaving, as well as phenomena of racism and xenophobia which were taking place on a daily basis. What is more, foreign students were hiding their ethnicity and the parents of the Greek students were concerned about the impact that the multicultural composition of the school classes would have on the educational outcomes of their children. In order to tackle this situation the school principal organized innovative actions in cooperation with the teachers’ association that they implemented at school.

These actions were aiming at engendering a sense of belonging of foreign students and their families in the school community, as well as at the active participation of all students with no divisions between students with different cultural background. More precisely the school emphasized a lot the learning of the Greek language from the foreign students in order to facilitate their communication and their quick integration, therefore it provided students with lessons of Greek language which were assessed at school from the school teachers outside of school hours. What is more the school considered crucial the learning of the mother tongue of foreign students, thus it provided also lessons of mother tongue to pupils coming from families that were speaking other languages (Albanian and Arabic) in order to be thence able to attain the language of instruction.

The creation of a safe environment consisted a key objective for the school which gave huge importance to the development of solid relationships between the parents of the foreign students and the school community. Hence the school sought the regular contact between teachers and parents in order to inform them on the progress of their children, as well as the development of personal relationships and meetings between them in order to create a climate of mutual trust between them and help them with any problems and difficulties that they were facing. Nevertheless the communication between the two parties was often hindered by language difficulties that foreign parents were also encountering. Hence the school decided to provide lessons of Greek language also to parents which were also assessed outside of school hours from the school teachers on the school ground. For the same reason the school community started to print announcements in three languages (Greek, Albanian and English) in order to inform them for the school issues. What is more the school staff focused on the active participation of all parents in the educational activities and their interaction with the students, whereas emphasis was also given to the interaction and
developing relations between the parents through the creation of a Parents' Association and through the arranging of parents meetings.

The school community took also breakthrough actions which provoked reactions even among the school teachers as there were many parts of the school life where a large number of the foreign student population could not participate, resulting in its targeting and marginalization. Hence, the school principal suggested the replacement of the morning Christian prayer by a prayer which was not referring to any religion in order to please everyone and give to all pupils the chance to participate considering that school is not a place of worship and should be neutral in religion issues, but also keep pace with the mandatory nature of the prayer at school nominated by the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. Furthermore, the change of the content of the celebration of the national holidays at school was another practice that they implemented. The school decided to concentrate these celebrations to universal values to permit the equal participation of all children with no discrimination, but also in order to alleviate the nationalistic character that they had arrived to have.

The actions and practices implemented and the new position of the school towards the presence of the foreign population in the school community had brought remarkable results. Early school leaving fell almost to zero; the outbreaks of violence disappeared, whereas there was an improvement of the school performance of the foreign students. There was also an extensive response on the part of the foreign parents who started to feel school a friendly environment which was demonstrating an active interest for them and their children and was recognizing and accepting their different cultural identity without criticizing it, which resulted in a friendlier position of their children to school. It is noteworthy that both foreign and Greek parents managed to overcome their inhibitions and realized that they were not a threat for the other but they were on the same side, whereas children managed to solve gradually the differences between them through dialogue and developed a climate of support and solidarity between them.

In the endeavor of the recognition and the respect of the diversity and the equality between the different ethnic groups of the school community, the cohesion and the trust in the Teachers' Association played a crucial role. Teachers had the will to cooperate with each other constructively and find collective solutions to the problems encountered. In addition no action or view was imposed but teachers were free to express their views and their objections on the implementation of some actions. In this whole-school approach the school adopted the role of the school principal was catalytic as regards the initiatives proposed and the tackling of the problems inside the school community without pointing fingers to the foreign students and families, while she had a significant involvement towards the change of the working methods and of the general philosophy of the school.

It is also noteworthy that the actions that the school took in order to meet the needs of its students, provoked the huge reactions to the relevant public authorities. In particular, the different direction of the school compared to other schools bothered the administration which intervened by placing her to a different school after receiving low assessment. The new principal of the school stopped all the actions that the school had implemented and brought back the old way of functioning of the school which caused huge reactions
from teachers and parents. In addition, he submitted a petition accusing the previous school principal of giving school classes illegally outside the school hours for the lessons of the mother tongue of foreign students. The great extent that this issue took and the huge support of a series of factors among the academic and educational community, trade unions, political parties and media as well as the complaint of the Teachers' Association to the Children's Ombudsman resulted in the examination of the matter; to the acquittal of both the initial school of principal and teacher and in the return of the school principal at school.

10. Discussion

In view of the above, schools turn out to key role factors that can define both the social integration and the learning pathway of entire generations that are arriving in Europe, as well as the cohesion and general development of the future European societies. Nevertheless schools cannot approach great objectives like these only as units. Social challenges require strong political leadership; accountability and systematic and coordinated action in order to ensure Europe's prosperity and sustainability in the long term. The European Union has only a consultative status in the educational field as Education consists a national competence. Hence Member States are responsible for the future that they will let these refugee children live, while governments are called to consist catalysts for equality and unity in a context characterized by a growing diversity.

Although dealing with diversity can be a huge challenge both in social and educational level, there are key points that have to be taken into deep consideration and require coordination from the national authorities given the social rights of the international protection beneficiaries. Great emphasis has to be given by all Member States to the high investment in the human capital, as well as to the early attendance of all refugee children and to their enrollment at schools. It is of great importance also to ensure the provision of education inside the refugee camps but only as a temporary solution because education cannot have the desirable outcomes in these contexts. What is more the asylum procedure in the case of children should be shorter in order to provide them true opportunities to access schools as soon as possible, as well as to get socially integrated and start living a normal life, leaving behind the traumatic experiences they faced in the past.

Furthermore, Member States should prepare schools for receiving these children and lay the foundations for their smooth integration in the school communities through institutional changes and the promotion of positive interactions and strengthening partnerships with the private and public sector at local and European level. It is crucial to promote educational approaches and teaching methods which aim at learning to live together in a democratic and multi-cultural society to foster social cohesion and the respect of diversity and equality between ethnic groups and combat all forms of discrimination and violence (Council of Europe, 2010). Additionally, the desegregation of schools and classes, the improvement of the general quality of the school by monitoring the quality of programs and education, the support of teachers' and school leaders' work consist also factors in which governments have to focus. Furthermore, funding is also
crucial for the training of the education staff in multicultural pedagogy, as well as for the preparation of the native students to co-exist with the new population in their school and for the preparation of the refugee children before entering the new school environment.

For the same reasons there is not only a need for a whole-school approach but also for a whole community approach. Civil society, NGOs, academics and citizens should not see themselves as neutral observers and critics but they should show in practice their support in the social actions and pave the way with their example through their active participation to a more coherent and strong Europe. The way society is going to treat children coming from countries in military situation is after all a matter of humanity and a matter of education as the more educated that the individuals are the stronger preferences they are supposed to have for cultural diversity. What is more, the media should have full knowledge of their role and their impact on the society and ensure the public information for the relevant social events, while raise awareness and contribute to the development of the active citizenship.

Policy-makers have also a crucial role to play in Europe's development by contributing actively to the integration of refugee children who will consist future citizens of the host countries. They should build networks with the civil society, while recognize and respect the complexity of diversity when seeking to enable migrants to be involved in wider society, especially when involving them in developing policies, services and interventions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2009). In addition it is of great importance to enable refugees in the decision-making and not act like they are passive beings without view upon their lives and future. For this reason EU and policy-makers should include representatives of refugees in order to be able to express their interests and views as in a democratic society. Even though refugee children are not able to act so, their parents, family or their guardians will speak in the name of them. What is more policy-makers can facilitate the establishment of schools as learning communities that will promote an inclusion framework in the education systems where all the dimensions of children will be taken into consideration in the learning process (Essomba, 2014), but also support Member States to develop quality in their education systems and non-formal education. Thus, Europe has to continue to emphasize the priority of inclusion of third country nationals to the European societies, monitor the integration policies and outcomes, as well as support actions organized through funding provided and close cooperation with the stakeholders and policy-makers (European Commission, 2016).

11. Conclusion

The remaining political and social instability in third countries makes the presence of refugees in the Member States a reality that is to stay. European societies should approach comprehensively refugees and

---

asylum seekers showing solidarity and respect to the experiences they have through, while acting systematically as communities in order to integrate the receiving population. Communities and governments should lay the foundations which will give them the possibility to reach their full potential so as both sides will benefit and realize the positive outcomes that their quick integration can bring to the Europe’s general development and to its general existence in the long term through helping it overcome the demographic problem and the problems at its pension system that it is facing due to the low birth rates and the high life expectancy which result in the lack of workforce.

Hence refugee children should not be seen as an unwanted population but as Europe’s future citizens who have to be provided with the skills and competencies to bring positive transformation to European society through their fresh ideas and active citizenship. Education can be a powerful tool to achieve this objective, as well as to foster social cohesion and tackle racism, intolerance and violence inside the European communities. The education of displaced children should be based on a whole-school approach which will aim at empowering them and help them realize their voice and their rights in the host states, while provide them the skills to live productive lives and promote positive interactions, mutual understanding and equality between students of different ethnic groups.

Although teachers have a key role to these children integration and positive recognition as communicants of education, the effective resolution of the difficulties and challenges encountered requires the compulsive action of the host countries and policy-makers in order to achieve or approach desirable outcomes. Member States must take action in order to tackle the complex factors that limit the access of refugee children to education and quality education, whereas they should give emphasis at increasing rates of enrolment and help them overcome the barriers they come up to at the school environment. Furthermore, the provision of formal training on intercultural pedagogy to teachers and school leaders in multicultural educational contexts in order to help them meet the urgent needs of these children and embrace diversity is necessary, as well as the strengthening of school-community and school-parents relations and monitoring of the educational practices and programs.

Policymakers have also an important role to play in this attempt and help overcome the challenges. It is crucial to promote the collaboration of professionals and civil society, as well as the exchange of practices and discourse between Member States and educational institutions that will lead to the better resolution of challenges encountered. In addition, they have to ensure the implementation of the educational authorities and civil society actors in the both school community and deciding of the policies, while educators and refugees’ representatives should also consist part of this procedure. What is certain is that without the influx of new population in the Member States and on the other hand without social cohesion and mutual respect between its people, Europe will be soon in front of an uncertain future, that can only be prevented through raising awareness and ensuring equal educational opportunities that will set foundations for the development of every child and future citizen on equal terms.
12. References


European Commission, (2016). Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social


UN, Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013), General Comment No. 14, 29 May 2013, CRC/C/GC/14.


Access to education for refugee children: A future for an ageing Europe?

https://www.unicef.org/education/files/QualityEducation.PDF.