

# SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS ON REFUGEE STUDENTS' INTEGRATION IN GREEK SCHOOLS

## ΟΙ ΑΝΤΙΑΨΕΙΣ ΤΩΝ ΔΙΕΥΘΥΝΤΩΝ ΠΡΩΤΟΒΑΘΜΙΑΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΝΤΑΞΗ ΠΡΟΣΦΥΓΩΝ ΜΑΘΗΤΩΝ ΣΤΑ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΑ ΣΧΟΛΕΙΑ

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### **Abstract**

The study aimed to identify the barriers and facilitators that affect refugee students' integration in the host society's education system (Greece). In-depth interviews were conducted with ten principals of public schools in Athens, who shared their understanding of the process of integration of refugee students into the Greek education system. Schools from all levels of education participated in the study (i.e., early childhood education up until vocational high schools). Interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Results included school principals' opinions about the factors that can challenge or enhance the integration process, such as the language barrier, parental involvement, and cultural differences as well as school principals' insights regarding their own role, revealing a more profound perception that school reflects aspects of their social identity. The study took place in the context of the UNINTEGRA project (Universities leading full and stepwise approach to the integration of refugees, AMIF 2017-2019).

### **Key words**

*Refugees, social integration, school principals, barriers, facilitators, education.*

### **Περίληψη**

Ο στόχος της έρευνας ήταν να αναγνωριστούν οι παράγοντες που εμποδίζουν και διευκολύνουν την ένταξη των προσφύγων μαθητών στο εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα της Ελλάδας. Διεξήχθησαν συνεντεύξεις με δέκα διευθυντές δημόσιων σχολείων της Αθήνας, οι οποίοι μοιράστηκαν τις εμπειρίες και τις απόψεις τους σχετικά με τη διαδικασία ένταξης των προσφύγων στο ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα. Στην έρευνα συμμετείχαν σχολεία από όλες τις βαθμίδες εκπαίδευσης (προσχολική εκπαίδευση μέχρι επαγγελματικά λύκεια). Οι συνεντεύξεις μεταγράφηκαν και υποβλήθηκαν σε θεματική ανάλυση. Τα αποτελέσματα περιλάμβαναν τις απόψεις των διευθυντών

σχετικά με τους παράγοντες που μπορούν να εμποδίσουν ή να διευκολύνουν τη διαδικασία ένταξης, όπως τη γλώσσα, τη συμμετοχή των γονέων, τις πολιτισμικές διαφορές, καθώς και τις γνώσεις των διευθυντών σχετικά με το δικό τους ρόλο, αποκαλύπτοντας μια αντίληψη ότι το σχολείο αντανakλά πτυχές της κοινωνικής τους ταυτότητας. Η μελέτη πραγματοποιήθηκε στο πλαίσιο του έργου UNINTEGRA (Universities leading full and stepwise approach to the integration of refugees, AMIF 2017-2019).

### *Λέξεις κλειδιά*

*Πρόσφυγες, κοινωνική ένταξη, διευθυντές σχολείων, εμπόδια, διευκολυντικοί παράγοντες, εκπαίδευση.*

## **0. Introduction**

Education is one of the most important factors that can facilitate the integration of refugee children in the host society (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). As is the case in all European countries, all children in Greece are required to attend the minimum school duration regardless of their own and/or their family's legal status (Asylum Information Database, 2020/ law 3386/2005). Furthermore, all refugee and migrant children are eligible to enroll in the Greek public education system, even without possessing all the required documents at the time of enrollment (law 4251/2014 article 21, par.8).

The aim of the present study was to explore how Greek school principals of public schools, with a significant number of refugee students in Athens, perceive school integration of refugee students. Greek schools were required to address the challenges that emerged within a brief period due to the overwhelming refugee flows since 2015. It is estimated that there were 37,000 refugee and migrant children in Greece during October 2019, of which 1/3 (12,8000) were enrolled in formal education (UNICEF, 2019). Identifying and understanding such difficulties and the way that culture affects one's views towards school are key in developing appropriate educational programmes and policies to address these children's needs and facilitate their integration in the education system. As a result, various studies have aimed to examine the barriers and facilitators of refugee students' integration in the education system. Understanding the barriers and facilitators of integration is crucial in enhancing refugee students' school experience. School principals are responsible for the school's management, as well as for reinforcing parental involvement. Additionally, they have access to daily information and experiences, something that enables them to describe the situation from within the core of the education system. Also, the literature review shows that a qualitative approach of the principals' account on the school integration of refugee students is limited. To examine the above, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten principals of public schools in Athens, Greece.

### ***0.1. Theoretical Framework***

School education is a major facilitator of the refugee children's integration in the host society (Correa-Velez, Gifford, McMichael and Sampson, 2017, Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). However, school attendance and successful school integration is a multifactor social phenomenon. On the one hand, parents' beliefs and attitudes about education, poor comprehension of the host society and school system (Denessen, Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2001, Hustinger & Jose, 2009), affect their level of involvement. On the other hand, attendance due to families socio-economic situation, hazardous context and traumatic or discriminative experiences present huge challenges (Correa-Velez, Gifford, McMichael & Sampson, 2017, Sidhu, Taylor & Christie, 2011).

In order to understand refugee students' experience of integration in the host society's education system, each refugee's cultural background should be considered. Specifically, it has been argued that each person develops a sense of "self" and "others" based on the effects from his/her culture and this in turn affects the way in which a person perceives and interprets what he/she experiences (Veroff, 1983, White & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Furthermore, the sense of "self" is perceived differently based on whether someone is from a different cultural background (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Specifically, people from an individualistic culture tend to emphasize the notion of the "self" over the context of the group (independent view), whereas people from a collectivistic culture, tend to perceive the "self" with relation to the group (interdependent view) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, as schools become multicultural systems, it could be argued that culture acts as a macro-system that, together with other factors, greatly influences each child's development as well as their views and attitudes towards school and education. As a result, as refugee students come from various cultural backgrounds they should not be perceived as a homogeneous group (McBrien, 2005, Rutter, 2006). Indeed, it has been argued that in order to identify refugees' particular needs within the education system, individual backgrounds, experiences and cultures need to be considered (Sidhu, Taylor & Christie, 2011). In the same way, culture affects the way parents of refugee students perceive the integration process as well as their level of involvement in their child's education (Denessen, et al., 2001). Difficulties with parental involvement in schools could arise if parents' beliefs and attitudes about education differ from the host society's educational structure (Denessen, et al., 2001). It has been found that families with a collectivistic cultural background tend to be less involved in their children's education, as they are more likely to believe that teachers are responsible for the child's education (Denessen, et al., 2001). However, the integration of refugee students in the education system of the host society as well as the level of parental involvement in schools is a two-way process. Both sides need to be considered in order to enable the development of children's identity, facilitate the integration process and apply the education system to meet the needs of all students' cultural backgrounds.

However, numerous barriers can affect the integration of refugee students in schools. One of the main consequences that can arise is refugee students' poor school attendance (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Specifically, a longitudinal study conducted by Correa-Velez, et al. (2017) concluded that refugee students are at higher risk of not finishing secondary education, something which in turn can greatly affect their wellbeing and socio-economic situation. Importantly, their study showed that the two factors that were associated with high percentage of school drop-out amongst refugee students were older age of refugees on arrival to the host country and having experienced discrimination during the first 8 years of arrival (Correa-Velez, et al., 2017).

Different studies have adopted different approaches when examining the integration of refugee students in the education system of the host society. For example, some studies have focused on identifying the barriers to integration (e.g. Guo, Maitra & Guo, 2019) whereas other studies have focused on identifying the institutional/academic factors that can affect refugee students' integration in schools (e.g. Crul et al., 2019). One of the main findings regarding the examination of school programmes showed that including refugee children in mainstream classrooms is a great predictor of long-term school completion, whereas separation of refugee students from the rest of the students for an extended period increases the likelihood of poor school attendance and/or drop-out (Crul et al., 2019, Katsigianni & Kaila, 2019).

Regarding the academic and institutional factors, the inclusion of refugee children in mainstream classrooms appears to be a major predictor of long-term school completion (Crul et al., 2019, Katsigianni & Kaila, 2019). In particular, factors that are connected to the school inclusion of refugee students affecting their overall social integration are related to: a) the difficulties of the social and relational life in school (poor friendships and incidents of racism and unfair treatment), b) the importance of collaboration among teachers, interpreters, and other school staff, c) the teachers' ability to identify these students' needs ensuring an accepting environment, d) assistance in helping students learn the local language, e) enhancing the communication between parents and schools, and f) addressing students' mental health needs (Guo, Maitra & Guo, 2018, Banerjee, 2019, Katsigianni & Kaila, 2019, Aydin & Kaya, 2019, Banerjee, 2019). The language barrier intervenes of course in all these levels/dimensions (Bohon, McPherson & Atilas, 2005, Öztürk, 2013).

Based on our research of the existing literature, it seems that there is a limited number of studies that have provided a phenomenological presentation of refugee students' integration in schools based on the descriptions of school principals' own insight regarding this topic in Greece. Therefore, due to the limited phenomenological and ethnographic approach to the subject, and in line with the above literature review, a qualitative study was designed with the following main research questions:

- What are the representations and experiences of Greek school principals in relation to the integration of refugees into the education system?
- What are the barriers that can prevent school integration of refugee students in Greece?
- What are the facilitators that can enhance refugees' school experience and integration in Greece?
- In what way can Greek school principals support refugees' school integration?

## **1. Methods**

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with ten principals of public schools in Athens. Purposive sampling was applied to include school principals, who worked in schools with a significant number of refugee students. Two participants were principals of vocational high schools, four of primary schools, two of early childhood education schools and one of a secondary compulsory school (Table 1). An interview guide was developed addressing thematic areas such as a) programmes/measures implemented to facilitate the integration process, b) barriers and facilitators to the integration of refugee students in the education system, c) assessment of the collaboration with the refugee students' families and d) school principals' experiences and perceptions regarding refugees' integration in the education system. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide that was developed in accordance with the theoretical framework and the research questions.

All interviews were conducted, and audio recorded in Greek, and transcribed verbatim/translated in English. Transcripts were treated using manual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identifying emergent themes and sub-themes (Table 2). Specifically, all transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarization with the transcripts. Initial emergent themes were identified, and themes were examined to identify connections between them, leading to the formation of a thematic analysis map. Once themes were categorized, core themes and sub-themes (codes) were identified. All themes were discussed and examined by three members of the research team.

**Table 1:** Sample Characteristics

<b>School Code and Type of School</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Total Number of students (including refugee students)</b>	<b>Number of Refugee Students Only</b>	<b>Nationalities of Refugee students in each school (some principals also referred to nationalities of migrant children)</b>
SP1 (evening vocational high school)	M	350	220	Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Guinea, Egypt, India
SP2 (vocational high school)	F	132	16	Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Morocco
SP3 (primary school)	M	147	83	Syria, Afghanistan and others (not mentioned)
SP4 (vocational high school)	M	412	178 (number includes migrant children as well)	Guinea, Iraq, Iran, Kudristan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria
SP5 (primary school)	F	244	25	Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq
SP6 (primary school)	M	250	50	Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa
SP7 (early childhood education)	F	49	20	Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, Eritrea, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines
SP8 (primary school)	F	112	21	Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq
SP9 (early childhood education)	F	45	5	Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria
SP10 (compulsory secondary education)	F	240	20	Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria

**Table 2:** Themes and Codes of Qualitative Analysis

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of Principals that mentioned it</b>
Educational Background	Perceptions of the students' educational background	9
Family context	Communication Barrier	5
	NGOs' mediation	7
	Cultural differences in parental Involvement	4
	Facilitating parental involvement	4
School Attendance	School drop-out	8
	Changing schools	2
	Poor attendance	3
	Poor collaboration between NGOs & schools	3
Perceptions of the inner school relationships	Dealing with conflict	10
	Inter-group avoidance	2
	Tension among refugee students	2
	The school's multicultural "identity"	4
	Good relationship with teachers	10
	Differences between teachers' point of views	2
	Perceptions on the Greek parents' attitude towards integration	4
Challenges – Integration Barriers	Language barrier	9
	Institutional Barriers: Lack of resources	5
	Need for up-skilling teachers	9
	Cultural Barriers: Unfamiliar with the "school culture"	6
	Psychological/Emotional Barriers:	2
	Psychosocial Barriers	1
Integration Programmes	Reception Classes (primary and secondary education)	8
	Other integration activities (early childhood education)	5
	Extra classes through NGOs	2
Integration Outcomes		10

External Support	Cooperation with NGOs	9
	Inadequate support from the Greek state	3
Suggestions for Improvement	Special training for teachers	4
	Use of English	2

## 2. Results

The themes that emerged from the thematic analysis are presented below. Each theme is complemented by representative quotes (verbatim) that were found in the interview transcripts.

### 2.1. Educational background

#### 2.1.1. Perceptions of the students' educational background

Initially, principals express surprise on the limited or no previous school experience of some refugee students.

*"Most of those children have never been to school, something which is almost unbelievable..."* SP5

They point out the insufficient evaluation of the refugee's previous academic skills, since often official documents are missing or are difficult to verify.

*"In order for them to enroll in the vocational high school, they need to have gone to school for at least 9 years in their country. But their information is not true. For example there may be someone, who has never been to school but because he is 17-18 years old and he can't enroll in compulsory secondary education or he doesn't want to go to an evening compulsory secondary school because he is afraid of going out at night, he falsely states that he has gone to school for nine years and he enrolls in the vocational high school"* SP4

An additional challenge is evaluating the children's academic level due to the language barrier. Math is the only acquired knowledge that can at least to some extent be evaluated. Furthermore, the child's age does not match their educational level. In such cases, the law allows some flexibility regarding school year allocation with the parents' and teachers' consent.

*"These students, first of all, you don't know where to put them, because you have a child that was born in 2007, where will you put him/her? The law gives you the opportunity to be a bit flexible, for example if he is supposed to go in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, you can put him in 4<sup>th</sup> grade if the parents and the teachers' association also agree and we do that"* SP5



## **2.2. Family context**

### **2.2.1. Communication barrier**

Communication with refugee families is very difficult due to the fact that refugee parents/families don't speak Greek or English in many cases.

*"I mean even now there are some parents that only speak Arabic, and unfortunately we don't speak Arabic and the interpreters cannot be here all the time..." SP7*

Such difficulties often affect the relationship between teachers and students. As teachers may not obtain all necessary information regarding the student's background, they may not be able to provide appropriate support.

*"We cannot know each child's true personal story because we have difficulties communicating with the parents as well in order to obtain some additional information or to understand how recent or traumatic this transition was for them" SP9*

### **2.2.2. NGOs' mediation**

School principals discussed their dependency on the NGOs' efforts to mediate between families and schools supporting the communication with parents, either by translating over the phone or providing interpreters and visiting the school together with the families.

*"...and when I needed to contact them, I don't contact the parents, the organisations have given me their phone numbers and I communicate with them and they communicate with the parents because they don't know any Greek so this needs to happen..." SP2*

### **2.2.3. Cultural differences in parental involvement**

Some principals mentioned that refugee parents are very much interested in their children's education regardless of their participation in the school activities. Indeed, it has been shown that parents' interest in their children's education is not necessarily reflected through their involvement in school (LaRoque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011).

*"But I have seen that all the children that I have are from families, who are interested in their children's education even for the girls. And I like that a lot." SP10*

### **2.2.4. Facilitating parental involvement**

Principals emphasized the importance of the schools providing support to the refugee families in being more involved in their children's school life. Such help may be in the form of providing interpreters or even more practical issues such as giving them a ride to the

school. Such statements show that principals assume responsibility for taking initiatives to facilitate the integration of refugees and recognize the school's role in enhancing parental involvement.

*"The families don't come because they don't have the culture of coming but they try when we add them in the game, they respond... in order for them to come though, usually they are brought by the coordinator with the car. If there is no personal initiative and flexibility, which we have, nothing can happen"* SP5

## **2.3. School attendance**

### **2.3.1. School drop-out**

Principals reported school drop-out as a major challenge, since it is common for refugee students to enroll and then stop attending. This happens because being enrolled in the school system may be beneficial to refugees e.g. when applying for asylum.

*"We also have another phenomenon that I have noticed recently that they come and they enroll in order to get a certificate from the school that shows that they are enrolled in order to use it in various services and mainly in asylum services because this certificate helps them because it shows that they are in a system within the Greek society."* SP1

This is due to the fluidity in the refugee families' lives. It is a common reality to leave abroad or to be in constant movement within the country depending on work and accommodation opportunities. This is also related to low motivation as refugees consider Greece a transit country not willing to invest in the local education.

*"There are two main cases: one is that they leave for abroad (...) and they don't inform anyone, one day they just stop coming..."* SP6

### **2.3.2. Changing schools**

An issue that arises with regards to changing schools is that school principals are not necessarily informed about it resulting in double enrollments and inaccurate data.

*"..and there are other cases that's why I was confused with the number, that change schools internally, i.e. they have found a house nearby so they enroll here but afterwards they find another house in X or through these programmes that are funded, this is probably the case because I see that they usually change municipality"* SP6

### **2.3.3. Poor attendance**

Another issue, especially in high schools, is poor attendance, due to low motivation and poor communication in the class related to the language barrier.

*"...I had accepted many children at the beginning, who maybe came at first then stopped or didn't come at all or they come and then they stop (because they cannot communicate in the classroom)..."* SP10

#### **2.3.4. Poor collaboration between NGOs and schools**

Regarding the issue of double enrollments, principals discussed the NGOs' lack of prompt information.

*"The NGOs don't inform us. For example, a child left from Greece, doesn't the school need to be informed? If we don't show interest, if we don't call them, if we don't pressure them, the NGOs don't inform the schools. It's not simply that you take a child, you enroll it in a school and then what? I cannot address, no principal can address the parents because there is not a common language of communication."* SP10

### **2.4. Perceptions of the inner school relationships**

#### **2.4.1. Dealing with conflict**

Principals advocate the absence of discrimination and conflict in their schools repressing any negative attitudes in their multicultural classes and preventing conflicts.

*"Generally, the relationships are good... I mean there aren't any situations of racist discrimination, there is nothing like that neither from the parents, or from the children. The arguments that we mention have nothing to do with the ethnicity, where you are from etc. but it's usual things that happen in a school and we don't have bullying. There are certain incidents like we had in school, the normal things. I mean anything like that, if we understand that something like that is about to happen it immediately stops, there is no way that it will happen."* SP3

*"We are a friendly school towards this population, we are tolerant but as you can understand not all people are the same so not all of us have the same point of view. Not that there is anyone, who sees them in a hostile way but we simply don't have the same point of view."* SP1

#### **2.4.2. Inter-group avoidance**

It is reported that relationships between refugees and Greek students are limited. It is usually children from the same nationality that shape peer groups. However, it could be argued that such forms of avoidance in daily interactions could be part of what is known as "everyday racism", i.e. "a sense of feeling of discrimination in everyday encounters that are not explicit" (Parker, 2018, p. 119).

*“Most of them are reserved, there are a few friendships and some are neutral but we don’t have any problems” SP1*

*“It’s mainly with other children, ok not everyone is compatible with everyone, but let’s say they aren’t with the good native Greek speakers, they aren’t very close, to hang out, they aren’t with the Greek children, who those are the ones who mainly have a good grasp of the Greek language” SP9*

#### **2.4.3. Tension among refugee students**

In contrast, some participants prefer to focus on conflicts between refugees.

*“But the biggest problem is between them. For example, you may see Syrians with Syrians, Afghans with Afghans or even Syrians with Afghans I mean the problem is mainly between them and less with the other children, who have started from kindergarten” SP3*

#### **2.4.4. The school’s multicultural “identity”**

Participants highlight the multicultural composition and “character” of their schools.

*“...the area is such that there is a multicultural population since kindergarten, the children are familiar with this. This is a school that has all the nationalities... We have many children. 80% of the children are from other countries. (Children) are used to it” SP10*

#### **2.4.5. Good relationships with teachers**

Principals pointed out the teachers’ effort to build supportive relationships with refugee students.

*“They are very good, the people in this school have been here for many years, there is a culture of cooperation and a culture of handling the things in a democratic way from the side of the teachers. They are people that have chosen to be in this school” SP8*

#### **2.4.6. Perceptions on the Greek parents’ attitude towards integration**

A few of the principals mentioned that they never encountered any problems with Greek parents regarding the issue of refugee students in their school. One principal mentioned that some of the Greek parents have been very supportive and have even helped refugee families by providing them with clothes, school materials and paying for school visits for their children.

*“This school because of the reception classes as I told you, had an openness from the part of colleagues and from the majority of the parents, from the*

*parents' association, which supported to a great extent the functioning of the reception classes" SP5*

*"Between them they help each other, you can see that they bring things from their home to give them to the children, clothes, whatever you can imagine, food, even the tickets this year there were parents that paid so that all the children could watch the theatre plays." SP7*

## **2.5. Challenges-Integration Barriers**

### **2.5.1. Language Barrier**

All principals agreed that the biggest difficulty that refugee students face when they come to school in Greece is the fact that they don't speak any Greek, which has psychological and social implications.

*"Language, the fact that at the beginning they feel embarrassed because they are in an environment with an unknown language" SP8*

*"I wouldn't say that (not understanding Greek) differentiates them, apart from the emotional situation..." SP9*

### **2.5.2. Institutional Barriers: Lack of resources**

It is mentioned that a major challenge is the lack of basic resources such as school supplies (e.g. notebooks, art supplies etc). However, in these cases NGOs and other organizations, as well as Greek families often provide support and the required materials.

*"We can't pressure the refugee parents to buy things, basically we received help from the X (NGO) that brought us some things and from the funding that we have from the school, with which we do whatever we can and from parents" SP7*

### **3.5.3. Need for up-skilling teachers**

Provision of training for teachers is of great need and importance.

*"This also needs some training for the teachers because this is a new reality. When we say "school", we imagine a school, where you enter to give a lesson, to tell the pupils a few things, a few, in this situation though things are different. If you enter a classroom, where half the class doesn't understand half of the words you say, think of that, you enter and half of the words you say are not understood or you have to say each word really slowly in order for the other person to understand it so the way that one has to teach changes, the way that one approaches the classroom changes so you also need a period of time to integrate this change. It's a big change" SP1*

Principals mentioned that although there is no official and mandatory training, some seminars and unofficial group meeting are starting to take place discussing the integration of refugees in schools.

*“The teachers started to inform us and train us this year. Whatever we do on our own, the development of awareness, it’s difficult to familiarize teachers because we are at an age, where we cannot change easily. But the continuous training of teachers is very important, very. This year that I did the intercultural education in the university, I saw what good it did to me, how differently I see some things and I am X years old. The ministry of education needs to, I have two objections, the first one is this: firstly we should be educated and then the children should be integrated in the educational system. We do everything the other way round” SP10*

#### **2.5.4. Cultural Barriers: Unfamiliarity with the “school culture”**

Some participants believe refugees are unfamiliar with the notion of school in general.

*“What we call a school organization, an institution, it has rules that need to be followed, they have great difficulties adjusting to this, for example the timetable, the behaviour with their classmates, their behaviour in recess, there are children that have never even been to school so you see a child that is “wild”, we have some situations like that and all the things that they carry with them, because of their lack of knowledge due to their previous circumstances, we have a lot of behaviours, which I think is natural but the other children cannot understand it.” SP3*

Others report that refugees come from a different education system, with rules and behaviours that they do not encounter in the Greek education system.

*“The older ones that have gone to school, for example they expect the teacher to hit them and they have told me that this used to happen, they are taken by surprise when they see a different kind of educational method, which aims to avoid arguments and this takes some time...” SP6*

However, in some cases principals report a great respect towards the value of school and the education on behalf of the refugees.

*“First of all, they respect the school environment very much, they won’t do things that the other students don’t do, they follow the rules, this is very important. They don’t behave provocatively...” SP2*

*“Not all of them, but depending on the country, they consider school as being something big with respect. That is how some of them view school. Like the way that the Greeks viewed school I the decade after the war in the 70s with*

*respect, by believing that something important is happening here and you can feel this respect.” SP1*

### **2.5.5. Psychological/Emotional Barriers**

Refugee children are perceived as emotionally insecure and vulnerable individuals needing time to adjust to their new environment and gaining trust in the school.

*“First of all, it is a big emotional insecurity... the fact is that they feel insecure, fearful maybe a fear of abandonment, i.e. where are you leaving me now? If the family has not correctly explained the new conditions, we don’t know some of these children, because they are young, what experience of school they have and if they had some, so where is my parent suddenly leaving me? What is this now? This is the main difficulty at the beginning.” SP9*

### **2.5.6. Psychosocial Barriers**

Issues of cultural identity and acculturation are perceived as a significant challenge, since refugee students appear reluctant to integrate new elements in their identity.

*“You have children that change environment, you have children that don’t yet know their own cultural identity, they are confused, so you start from there and ask how are they going to accept another cultural identity? The identity doesn’t change but you simply learn the other culture and include it in your life.” SP10*

## **2.6. Integration Programmes**

### **2.6.1. Reception Classes (primary and secondary education)**

With the exception of kindergartens, all schools operate reception classes for refugee students.

*“Since last year, the programme called reception classes began. Last year we had 3 reception classes and this year we have 7. So what are these classes? So the Ministry sends us Greek language teachers and we do Greek language classes 15 hours per week. 3 hours per day, 15 per week.” SP1*

Following the reception classes, the refugee students are distributed in the other classrooms that follow the main timetable together with Greek students to mingle with other nationalities.

*“They do both (classes), usually the tactic is that they leave the first 2 hours or whenever they have language class because either way it doesn’t have that much meaning, especially the first year, they do the ZEP (reception classes) and the rest of the classes, gym, computers, other languages, not*

*to miss those. They mainly miss the language class but this is not absolute, it's a programme that needs to fit 12 classrooms, we try to take them out of the language classes mainly, whenever they happen in each class.” SP6*

### **2.6.2. Other integration activities (early childhood education)**

Early childhood education schools don't have reception classes. Different activities are provided to facilitate the integration of young children, e.g. through story-telling, songs, visual materials, focusing on specific themes each week etc. Similarly, some of the other schools that offer reception classes may also include other integration activities, such as visits to museums, projects in different languages, bonding through creative activities etc. Sometimes, school psychologists offer skills-training courses for their students.

*“We start with getting to know-you games through these games we use images with a word so we help the children to develop linguistically, those that don't know the language because at the beginning of the year they come and some of them don't understand the language. In this case what do we do? We implement the imitation of role models, children, who speak both Greek and Arabic because there are such children act as interpreters, we teach songs, which is a very good way of learning a foreign language, story-telling with lots of activities, so through small projects every week we focus on a theme in depth and this allows us to work on all areas of the regions.” SP7*

*“We have used two programmes as “Umbrella programmes” in relation to ancient Greece and mythology, children like it very much, they learn humanistic values like peace, friendship all of the things that we aim for so that one approaches the other in order to get to know each other, to have good relations” SP7*

### **2.6.3. Extra classes through NGOs**

Often NGOs offer additional class in the afternoons that are open to both students and parents.

*“Recently X (NGO) operates here, they have 5 classrooms in the afternoon on the second floor (...) it is directed to parents as well, there are classes for adults (...) language, computers they have a good programme that's why I allow it to continue (...) this is in the afternoon 5-8, it's a different one.” SP6*

## **2.7. Integration outcomes**

Principals make a positive assessment of the children's academic performance over time, especially when they feel trust in the school's integration efforts.

*“An example of successful integration, we have a girl, who is in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade this year, we put her in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade because it matched her age, she should*



*have been in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but we don't do that it doesn't make any sense for a child to come, to stay a few months in the Greek primary school and to then send her to secondary school, where it will be chaotic. She will be absorbed and lost. Here the climate is more like a family, things are more measurable, so we have a girl that we put in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the classroom accepted her and her teacher helped her a lot. And this year she is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and you can see that this child is, regardless of the fact that she is an introvert, who is not greatly social, you can see that she is following what is happening in the school" SP5*

## **2.8. External Support**

### **3.8.1. Cooperation with NGOs**

Principals highlighted the collaboration with external stakeholders, such as NGOs and/or Public Education Counselors to address any students' needs, e.g. health issues, attendance, communication with the families, provision of materials etc.

*"We collaborate with organizations like X, Y, Z." SP7*

*"We have very good collaboration with the coordinator of education because they are responsible, they live in an organized institution so whatever is needed we are able to have a direct communication. Now in the last month and a half we have established having a communication-notebook, so it is even easier this way to communicate." SP8*

*"I call the NGOs, I tell them what health issue I have identified and I tell them to take the children to the doctor because I cannot communicate with the parents, they don't speak Greek (...) the good thing is that this year I cooperate with social workers, who are all really good, the ones that are responsible for the children and they are very cooperative." SP10*

### **2.8.2. Inadequate support from the Greek state**

However, principals feel that despite the regulations in place regarding the integration of refugees in schools, there is no systematic support tailored to these children's specific conditions. Many of the integration activities that take place are a result of the school's own initiative.

*"The Greek state never formed the appropriate conditions in order for these people to be integrated in schools. Whatever happens, happens from the inside, happens from the side of teachers, something similar that had happened during the 90s when children from Albania had to be integrated and this was done by the teachers without any training without anything." SP3*

## 2.9. Suggestions for improvement

### 2.9.1. Special training for teachers

Participants focused on the need of expert school staff, i.e. teachers that are trained in intercultural mediation, and in teaching Greek as a second language.

*“Reception classes, they started and the teacher didn’t have a common language of communication with the children, these teachers should have been bilingual.” SP10*

*“What I wanted to say is that this education for refugees could have been much more productive if the reception classes were undertaken by people who had the experience...Also there is the issue of teachers, who have been trained to teach Greek as a second language, which should have been something to be taken advantage of.” SP8*

### 2.9.2. Use of English

Some principals mentioned that schools should take advantage of the fact that some of these children already speak English and should alter their focus on teaching them English because they believe that this would be very valuable for them.

*“...one very specific thing is the relationship between the children and English, because English needs to be a main vehicle for communication.” SP5*

## 3. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to present a qualitative account of the school principals’ perceptions on the integration of refugee students in the Greek public education system (i.e. early childhood education, primary and secondary education).

Most participants highlighted the inadequate educational background of the refugee students, school abandonment and poor attendance due to refugee families’ instable living conditions and lack of motivation to permanently stay in the host country. Main difficulties identified were the language barrier, lack of school supplies and institutional support, insufficient training for teachers and poor collaboration with the NGOs, as well as the students’ emotional, cultural, and psychosocial challenges, which are projected in the communication between the school and the refugee parents, including the perceived insufficient involvement of the latter in their children’s education. These aspects of the problem are identified by research findings that confirm poor school attendance (e.g., Reynolds & Bacon, 2018), the language barrier both for refugee students and their parents (e.g. Öztürk, 2013, Aydın & Kaya, 2019), insufficient training for teachers, limited school resources, poor parental involvement and difficulties forming relationships with children from the host country (e.g. Banerjee, 2019). Furthermore, previous research has shown

that cultural differences together with the language barrier can lead to low levels of self-esteem on the part of parents, which in turn can limit their involvement in their child's education (Bohon, McPherson & Atilas, 2005).

In addition, one of the topics that were often discussed in the interviews was families' cultural differences in their perception of school. Previous studies have shown that parents differ in terms of their expectations for their children's education based on their cultural background (e.g. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The fact that parents may be less involved in their children's school does not mean that they are less interested in their children's education (LaRoque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011).

Although, school principals appear highly conscious of their responsibility in facilitating the educational integration of the refugee students, it seems that they are eager to portray a positive account of their school's efforts to address the overwhelming challenge of the situation, highlighting their efforts, as well as the effort of their school's teachers and Greek parents to assist refugee students and families. They also appear reluctant to acknowledge possible discriminatory attitudes or behaviours that could have taken place in their schools ("*there's no way that such a thing would happen*") avoiding thus any potential criticisms about their school or even the host society as a whole (Parker, 2018). Furthermore, an impression (related to orientalism) could be detected in their speech regarding the fact that refugees come from a profoundly traditional culture with poor school attendance (especially for the girls), as well as a totally different educational culture, inadequate parental involvement, and practices such as body punishment. These, as well as some references regarding rare "successful integration" cases among the refugee population are indicative of the principals' undermined expectations about the outcome of their honest efforts.

Certain limitations should be considered when examining the present findings. The study's participants represent only the area of Athens. It could be the case that school principals of schools in other parts of Greece, i.e. islands, rural areas, might have shared different perceptions. The study results could be valorized in the context of policies/programmes for the facilitation of the integration of refugee students in the education system. Moreover, the present findings highlight the importance of establishing a system for evaluating children's previous academic experience to help allocate children in the most suitable school level depending on their needs.

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