

# **The Academic Achievements and School Life Interactions of the Recently Arrived Refugee Children in the Greek Primary Schools: Teachers' Perspectives**

The ongoing conflicts in Syria resulted in a major refugee crisis in Europe which is one of the main political and social concerns of our times. This project focused on Greece as one of the main host countries of refugees across Europe and analysed the ways the Ministry of Education is trying to include refugee students in Greek primary schools. The aim of this study was to explore refugee children's academic achievements and school lives in Greek schools according to teachers' perspectives in order to see how the relevant government education policies and plans are effectively being implemented in the school context as well as to suggest ways to help improving any gaps between the policies and plans and their implementation. The research outcomes revealed some particular gaps in the educational policy and some school sections that need to be better organized. Even if refugee students are making academic progress in the area of native language learning, they are not ready to follow the classes and obtain an adequate education regarding to their age. Refugee education describes a quite complicated topic and more specific guidelines which will respect the culture of the students and will connect them with the whole society need to be enhanced.

Keywords: education, refugees, multicultural, Greece, policy

## **Introduction**

The unstable political situation in the Middle East resulting from the ongoing conflicts and violations have forced individuals to constantly leave their motherlands (Menjívar and Perreira, 2017). During the year of 2015 there was a surprising number of refugees, migrating from the Middle East to the Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus and Malta. In that year, over 850,000 refugees arrived in Greece, while at the same time severe socioeconomic complications were occurring in the country. This unexpected arrival of individuals in a number of Greek islands, caused an immediate need for accommodation and nutrition for these people. The Greek authorities were completely unprepared to handle such a situation (Buchanan & Kallinikaki, 2018; Hebebrand et al, 2015).

Among the refugees that arrive in the European countries, children seem to also be a big part of the refugee populations. These children should be protected and educated in the host country, by providing them with opportunities for social inclusion (Dryden-Peterson, 2018). The unexpected appearance of refugee individuals around Europe, made it difficult for the EU Members States to successfully integrate refugee children in school and protect their right to education (Essomba, 2017). Researches have shown that migrant students school performance is poorer than the education outcomes of the native students (Crul et al., 2017). The current intense requirement of placing refugee children in formal school systems in EU Member States has forced the European Commission to come up with new action plans and ways to address

1 this situation. This research focused on Greece because it happens to be one of  
2 the main doorsteps for refugees in Europe (Rozakou,2012). The country has to  
3 control many problems considering the refugee children's education.

4 According to recent data, almost 27,000 refugee children arrived in Greece  
5 in 2018 (UNICEF, 2018). A "Scientific Committee" was organized by the  
6 Greek Ministry of Education (MoE) in order to revise the educational policy  
7 for children with migrant background (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.6). The  
8 highlights of this policy for refugee students 7 to 15 years old, were the  
9 reception classes established in the mainstream schools and the afternoon  
10 educational infrastructure for refugee children living in camps. Thus, the  
11 refugee students who have recently arrived, can be educated in mainstream  
12 primary school, in mainstream primary school with the provision of reception  
13 class and in afternoon schools named DYEP<sup>1</sup>. The main goal was the refugee  
14 children to be part of the Greek educational system (Ministry of Education,  
15 2017). This study was aiming to investigate the academic achievements and  
16 school life interactions of the newly arrived refugees in the Greek primary  
17 schools. The most important aims of the study were to evaluate the academic  
18 outcomes and school lives of refugee children and examine the gaps in the  
19 Greek educational policy for refugee students in primary schools. An empirical  
20 research took place in order to achieve these aims. Teachers who are employed  
21 by the MoE and work in Greek public primary schools had been questioned.

22 Focusing on these objectives, the main research questions of the present  
23 study were framed as follows:

24  
25 Q1: What is the current state of refugee children's education in Greek primary  
26 schools like from teachers' perspectives?

27 Q2: Has there been any academic or social progress among refugee students?

28 Q3: What do teachers think needs to be done to improve refugee children's  
29 education in Greek primary schools?  
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31 These objectives were explored through teachers working in the three  
32 types of infrastructures where the refugee children have the opportunity to be  
33 educated. The semi-structured interviews conducted in three major Greek  
34 cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa.  
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## 37 **Literature Review**

38  
39 The title of the most discussed global issue of this decade can be  
40 applied to the refugee crisis without doubt. The flows of population from the  
41 Global South have spread around the world aiming to survive the war and  
42 violations that largely happen because of the Syrian Civil War. The United  
43 Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that more than  
44 50 million people were forcibly moved from their countries in 2013. One year  
45 later, close to 60 million individuals were described as refugees worldwide

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<sup>1</sup> DYEP, the Greek acronym that used in the dissertation and the translated English acronym is Reception Facilities for Refugee Education, RFRE

1 with the main host country being Turkey (UNHCR, 2015). The year of 2015  
2 meant to be a significant one for the EU because of the continuous human  
3 movements to European countries. Using the sea route to reach the Western  
4 world under dangerous circumstances, hundreds of people lost their lives or  
5 have been lost.

6 The European country which received the greatest number of refugees in  
7 2015 was Greece, as more than 800,000 refugees arrived in the Aegean islands  
8 (UNHCR, 2018). The picture of unsafe boats full of refugees in every age  
9 moving from Turkish mainland to Greek islands, Mytilene and Chios, became  
10 viral in the global media in the summer of 2015. The wide publicity of the so-  
11 called refugee crisis forced the stakeholders, governments and international  
12 organizations to focus their attention on the unparalleled occurrences that were  
13 appearing in the EU (UNHCR, 2015; Berry et. al., 2016). A natural  
14 consequence of this unexpected emergency was the reform of the national  
15 policies of European Member states. This was considered as the biggest  
16 worldwide emergency following the end of World War II (UNHCR, 2015).

17 As the title indicates, this study concentrated to Greece as a European  
18 country that has received the greatest numbers of refugees around Europe and  
19 as a result it was found particularly exposed to the refugee crisis. More  
20 specifically, the Greek Government was not ready to handle this situation, as it  
21 was completely unaware of how to provide support in emergency conditions  
22 (Buchanan and Kallinikaki, 2018; Kotsiou et al., 2018). Given the struggling  
23 economy in the country, which had led Greek people to follow the austerity  
24 measures placed by the European Commission, it can be understood that  
25 Greece was not equipped with the vital facilities in order to effectively deal  
26 with the new condition (Heisbourg, 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2017;  
27 Tsitselikis, 2018; Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2019)

28 Immediately upon the beginning of the refugee flows in Greece started a  
29 flow of international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Chtouris and  
30 Miller, 2017). The European Commission has also formed the main funding  
31 source for the Greek government since 2015. Describing the refugee context in  
32 Greece, the most recent report of the EU refers that additional measures are  
33 required. Despite the progress that has been made in the country there are still  
34 problems that need to be addressed such as a faster asylum procedure and  
35 further health support for the refugees living in the hotspots (European  
36 Commission, 2019). Another issue is the protection of the unaccompanied  
37 minors. The Greek authorities have to care more for this vulnerable group  
38 because there is no specific plan for the unaccompanied children and the  
39 accommodation is not adequate increasing this way the risk for the minors  
40 (UNHCR, 2019). The Greek government being supported by NGOs and the  
41 European Commission has responded to the refugee crisis in a satisfying way,  
42 taking into account the level of the crisis and the poor economy of the country.  
43 However, the difficulties to provide accommodation for all refugees, the  
44 problematic migration policies and the distance among the refugees and the  
45 natives due to the language and the dissimilar cultural background provide  
46 negative effects and concerns for the future actions (Anagnostopoulos et al.,  
47 2017). The European Commission stated that in 2019 the refugee movements

1 to Greece were 30 percent greater than in 2018 (European Commission, 2019).  
2 Pointing that in 2018, more than 50,000 individuals with refugee background  
3 indicated in the country (UNHCR, 2018), it is urgent to find solutions for better  
4 living conditions and social adaptation for the refugees.

## 5 6 **The Refugee Child**

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8 As the literature reveals, there are some characteristics which differentiate  
9 the refugee child from the migrant or the native child. Children and adolescents  
10 who were forced to leave their countries becoming this way refugees, have  
11 been exposed to violence and different kind of terrible experiences from a very  
12 sensitive age (Amnesty International, 2002; UNHCR,2008; Kaplan et al.,  
13 2016). The literature has found that three phases in the life of the refugee child  
14 can cause significant trauma. Hodes described three phases that affect the  
15 psychological situation of the refugee children in the UK (Hodes, 2000). The  
16 experiences of the refugee child prior and during the arrival in the host country  
17 as well as the events after the resettlement shape their mental health (Hodes,  
18 2000; Fazel, 2002). As pre-settlement experiences described the danger of been  
19 killed, abused or sexually harassed together with a possible separation from the  
20 family. Minors are also likely to be witnesses of awful events (Amnesty  
21 International, 2002; UNHCR,2008; Kaplan et al., 2016). Likewise, such  
22 horrible events may happen during the long journeys that refugee children take  
23 together with their families or alone (Hodes, 2000; Fazel, 2002). It should also  
24 be mentioned that this group of children has remained out of school for a long  
25 period (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Essomba, 2017; Wrench et al., 2017). These  
26 experiences and bad events cause mental health issues among the refugee  
27 minors. Numerous studies have found specifically Post Traumatic Stress  
28 Disorder (PTSD) symptoms between refugee children (Fazel, 2002; Bronstein  
29 and Montgomery, 2011; Kaplan et al., 2015). The violence that the child has  
30 been exposed to, the family conditions, and the process of acculturation in the  
31 new society form the psychological conditions of the refugee minor (Fazel et  
32 al., 2012).

33 All the above confirm that a refugee child has been deprived of its  
34 childhood and it is a responsibility of the host country and international  
35 stakeholders to protect these children, while helping their adjustment in the  
36 community.

37 Why is education considered essential for the refugee children's  
38 acculturation? How can an effective primary education be described? These  
39 questions will be answered in this section. Before analyzing the role of  
40 education in the refugee child's life, it is vital to remark the international  
41 conventions which protect the right to education specifically for those children.

42 Firstly, the Article 22 of the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status  
43 of Refugees published by UNHCR focuses on "public education" for the  
44 refugee children and states that education has to be convenient for every  
45 student with similar background in every education level (UNHCR, 1951).  
46 Secondly, the Article 22 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the  
47 Child (UNCRC) indicates directly the refugee children and the obligation of

1 the authorities to support them adequately in order to “enjoy all the rights in the  
2 Convention” (UNCRC, 1989). Amongst the rights of the Convention is the  
3 Article 28 which refers to an equal and effective education for every child  
4 (UNCRC, 1989).

5 Governments have to ensure that all refugee children have access to an  
6 education which respects their unique characteristics. Education is a powerful  
7 tool which can endorse minors with strength and long-term rehabilitation from  
8 the trauma (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Refugee students have better chances for  
9 acculturation and psychosocial improvement when receiving valuable  
10 education (Fazel et al., 2012). This mutual connection between academic  
11 achievements and school life interactions is the reason why this study aims to  
12 explore both of them. To conclude, students with migration experiences except  
13 from the basic levels of literacy, need a further connection with the community,  
14 well-being and self-motivation in order to surpass their afflictions and built  
15 their resilience (OECD, 2018).

## 16 17 **Refugee Education**

18  
19 Refugee education is a complex, multidimensional subject which require  
20 efficient policies because of the huge positive impact that can provide in  
21 minors’ lives (Essomba, 2017). The European law protects the right to  
22 education for the refugee children while requires the entrance of the minors in  
23 formal education in the first three months of their arrival (article 14,  
24 2013/33/EU). Numerous laws and action plans have been published by the  
25 European Commission in order to protect the rights of the refugee minors. The  
26 most recent being the “Action Plan on the integration of third country  
27 nationals” published in 2016. According to this plan, the main concern of the  
28 governments around Europe should be the early integration of the recently  
29 arrived refugee children into the national education system. This publication  
30 highlighted the language acquisition as a core step for the successful  
31 integration of migrant children (European Commission, 2016).

32 The children with refugee and migrant background who have spread  
33 around Greece are “estimated” to be more than 25,000 as the UNICEF report  
34 for 2018 revealed (UNICEF, 2018). Almost half of those children are living  
35 together with their families in apartments or hotels, whereas approximately  
36 3,400 of those children were unaccompanied minors. Only in 2019, the refugee  
37 children in Greece reached the number of 32,000 presenting a 50 percent  
38 expansion (UNICEF, 2019). It is obvious that the migration movements are  
39 still ongoing and the issues will be analysed by presenting the most recent  
40 available information and reports.

41 Since 2016, the Greek MoE started to actively care about the access of  
42 refugee children in the national education system. The first year of refugees’  
43 integration in Greek schools was characterized as “pre-integration” year by the  
44 government. During this period, the Ministry had placed a professional team  
45 which was responsible for organizing education opportunities in Refugee  
46 Reception Accommodation Centers (RACs) as well as suitable ways to  
47 regularly incorporate the newly arrived refugee children from 7 to 15 years old

1 in the mainstream classes. The law no. 4415/2016 “Arrangements for Greek  
2 language education, intercultural education and other provisions” published by  
3 the Greek government in order to clarify and endorse the education provision  
4 for students with a different cultural background (European Web Site on  
5 Integration, 2019). Before analysing the steps that the MoE followed for  
6 making education accessible for all, it is considered vital to provide key  
7 information about the Greek primary education.

8 One main characteristic of the Greek education system is that all decisions  
9 and actions are organized and applied by the MoE. The title of the “most  
10 centralized system” among the OECD countries is given to Greece because the  
11 government authorities control every aspect of education and schools are  
12 hardly able to make any decisions. Primary education concludes after six years  
13 in Greece. The Ministry or the Greek parliament have to approve the schools’  
14 guidelines of the programme, the subjects’ specification and the whole  
15 procedure of a primary school (Dimitropoulos and Kindi, 2017). Education in  
16 Greek public elementary school is free for every student aged 6 to 12 years old  
17 and it is obligatory (OECD, 2018). The main subject in these six grades are  
18 Greek language, mathematics, science, geography, history, foreign languages,  
19 computers. Students participate in school from 8.00 a.m. to 14:00 p.m. and at  
20 this primary level there are no school assessments for students. The Greek  
21 curriculum has been found to be ethnocentric and Eurocentric. The school  
22 curriculum focuses on the national history and pre-history without offering  
23 global perspectives (Faas, 2011). In general, international ratings concerning  
24 education like PISA place Greece in a low position (Dimitropoulos and Kindi,  
25 2017).

26 The Greek authorities have separated refugee families according to their  
27 living circumstances. Therefore, two categories arise: 1) families who are  
28 living in refugee camps, 2) families who have found appropriate housing.  
29 Refugee children from camps and housing cannot be educated in the same way  
30 mainly because of their asylum status (UNHCR, 2016).

31 The MoE started to organize Reception Facilities for Refugee Education  
32 (RFREs, hereafter DYEP as in Greek). This infrastructure aimed to help  
33 refugee children living in camps to fulfil their right to education. The refugee  
34 camps are located outside of the cities where there are not transportation  
35 opportunities. This fact eliminates the opportunities of education and social  
36 integration for the refugee minors who live there. The Greek government  
37 considered this afternoon school policy as an effective way of acculturation  
38 before the relocation of the refugee families and their entering in the  
39 mainstream public schools. DYEP schools are operating from 14:00 to 18:00.  
40 During these hours, the refugee students are being taught Greek language,  
41 maths, English, IT, physical education and arts subject (Ministry of Education,  
42 2017).

43 Refugee children who live in apartments with their families enter the  
44 public primary school of the neighborhood. Reception Classes (RCs) for  
45 supporting the refugee students have been established in primary schools  
46 around the country. The MoE has recognized some areas as Zones of  
47 Education Priority (ZEP) in crucial locations where a lot of refugee families

1 gather (Ministry of Education, 2017). The main idea of the reception classes is  
2 that the refugee students follow some subjects in the mainstream class and  
3 some school hours per day attend the reception class.

4 The last primary education provision for refugee students is to attend the  
5 mainstream classrooms in schools without any extra support (Ministry of  
6 Education, 2017). Unfortunately, reception classes have not been established in  
7 every primary school in the country.

8 These actions try to place children in education as soon as possible but the  
9 movements of refugee families around the country until their maintenance in a  
10 place take refugee minors out of school for a long period. Moreover, families  
11 may not encourage the education of their children as this is not their main  
12 concern. Greece is following the bad example of other European countries  
13 where the students with migrant backgrounds present lower academic  
14 achievements than the native students (OECD, 2015). The economic crisis that  
15 the country faces had an impact on the teaching staff. The government is not  
16 hiring permanent teaching staff and teachers especially in reception classes,  
17 DYEP school and special education infrastructures change year by year. This is  
18 an important case for the educational stability and improvement (OECD,2018).  
19 Furthermore, the language barrier leads many children not to attend school  
20 regularly (ESPN, 2017). It appears that primary education for children is well  
21 organized, but this is not the case for early childhood education or high  
22 secondary schools especially outside of the cities.

23 The fact is that there is no official evaluation of the refugee education in  
24 the country as organized in the past two years (Skleparis, 2017). The actual  
25 academic results and the level of school life interaction that the refugee minors  
26 have achieved have not been estimated. Most of the researches and reports  
27 refer to the difficulties and the deficiencies of the Greek education system to  
28 incorporate the new students.

29 This study aims to analyze the actual educational outcomes in refugee  
30 students and the way the system is welcoming the children through the  
31 teachers' perspectives. It is significant to examine the situation on the inside.  
32 The numbers of refugee students in Greek schools and the acculturation actions  
33 are not valuable when they are not implemented with the best possible way or  
34 the results after the implementation are not satisfying. To conclude, the paper  
35 will try to show the actual academic progress of the refugee students and their  
36 level of integration into the Greek public primary schools.

### 37 **Methodology**

38  
39 As it arises from the literature review, it was a challenge for the Greek  
40 Ministry of Education to find ways to integrate the refugee children in schools  
41 around the country. It was only during the school year of 2016 and 2017 that  
42 the Greek government intensively focused on integrating the refugee children  
43 in the formal schooling system (Ministry of Education, 2017). Thus, this study  
44 aims to examine the current educational system of Greek public schools in  
45 terms of educational provisions for refugee children. Additionally, this study  
46 will explore the effective teaching methods and successful school integration  
47 programs which used by the teachers. The way this will be conducted will be

1 by focusing on teachers' views about the academic achievements and social  
2 interactions of refugee students.

3 An empirical study was meant to be suitable for exploring and evaluating  
4 the current situation in Greek primary schools. The research approach which  
5 was used in this research was inductive. This research was not based on  
6 theories to explain the findings. In contrast to this, the analysis of the data lead  
7 to a conclusion, taking in mind that the results cannot be generalized (Gilbert,  
8 2008). Moreover, the ontological approach being used is constructivism. In this  
9 case, the participants are presenting a subjective version of reality, which is  
10 deriving from their own, personal experiences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison,  
11 2018). The epistemological perspective is interpretivist, while the researcher  
12 focuses on the perspectives and knowledge of school teachers in order to  
13 investigate the refugee education in Greece (Thomas, 2009). The working  
14 environment, the background studies and the individual beliefs of the  
15 participants are likely to determine their answers during the interviews.

16 The research design which was considered to be appropriate for this study  
17 is a qualitative approach. More specifically in this project, it is important to  
18 understand the teachers' inner thoughts, as well as the way they teach and get  
19 involved in refugee education in order to critically evaluate the effectiveness of  
20 the relevant educational policies. This study aimed to give the teachers the  
21 opportunity to express their school experiences using everyday examples,  
22 explaining their educational approach and giving their perspectives for the  
23 Greek primary education. This could not be achieved with a structured  
24 interview, so semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most  
25 suitable method. The use of qualitative semi-structured interviews will bring us  
26 closer to teachers' everyday life into schools (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

27 The researcher sought for teachers to interview in DYEP schools and  
28 mainstream public primary schools with and without reception class, in order  
29 to explore the academic and social progress of refugee students in primary  
30 education, as presented below.

31 The sample came from schools around the country mainly in areas where  
32 the higher percentage of refugees has been gathered. The main idea was that  
33 the interviewees should work in the north, central, south Greece and in Greek  
34 islands, covering this way the biggest part of the Greek land. The cities with  
35 the highest population in these areas were Thessaloniki, Larissa and Athens in  
36 north, central and south Greece respectively, as shows the map below. The  
37 researcher approached head teachers leading schools as gatekeepers  
38 specifically in these three cities due to the great gathering of refugees there.

39 The gatekeepers were extensively informed about the research project via  
40 email and the information sheet and the consent form had been sent to them as  
41 they needed to be ultimately informed. The schools were chosen via the  
42 random sampling method (Bryman, 2016). This means that there was no  
43 specific reason for including these schools in the research, while they had not  
44 selected deliberately.

45  
46 **Figure 1:** *The maps shows the Greek cities, where the interviewees were*  
47 *working.*





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The teachers who would participate in this study needed to teach at least one refugee student in their classroom. Moreover, the participants had to be older than 28 years old or present work experience more than four years in Greek public primary schools. The reason why the researcher picked up this age range is due to the importance of advanced school experience among the interviewees. While interviewing teachers from all three infrastructures for primary refugee education, is both necessary and crucial for this study.

After emailing the head teachers just seven replied back to me giving their permission to conduct interviews in their schools. Seven (7) schools gave the approval and in total nine (9) teachers agreed to be interviewed, three (3) from each school infrastructure for refugee education. More detailed: 3 interviewees were teaching in DYEP schools allocated in two villages close to Larissa, 3 were teachers in reception classes in Athens and Thessaloniki and the last 3 were teachers in mainstream classroom in Thessaloniki. All participants had been working with refugee students at least this year or had previous experience in this field as an asset. The table below is providing more information about the participants.

**Table 1:** *Summary of characteristics of the interviewees*

Type of educational Infrastructure	Number of participants	Information
“Reception/ Preparatory Classes for the Education of Refugees” (DYEP)	3 (D1, D2, D3)	-Two interviewees were working in Terpsithea’s DYEP school in central Greece (Thessaly). -One participant was working in Kilada’s DYEP school in central Greece (Thessaly).
“Reception Classes” in	3	-Participants were recruited from

Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP)	(R1, R2, R3)	different schools. - One participant was working in Thessaloniki and the rest of them in schools in Athens.
Mainstream classes in primary schools	3 (M1, M2, M3)	All three participants were working in the same school in Thessaloniki.

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## Interview Implementation

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## Findings

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Refugee education is quite a complicated issue, as often many factors tend to influence the learning of refugee students, as well as their integration into the new school system. The findings from the semi-structured interviews with the teachers will be separated in two parts in accordance with the research

1 questions. In the first part, the academic achievements of the refugee students  
2 will be examined and in the second part their school life interactions will be  
3 examined. A detailed analysis of the key factors that influence these two  
4 dimensions of refugee children's education in the primary school will also be  
5 presented.

## 6 7 **Findings about Academic Achievements of Refugee Students**

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9 In the beginning, the teachers' goals and the students' achievements  
10 and progress during the school year will be examined. The interviews were  
11 conducted during the last month of the school year, so the teacher had a clear  
12 idea of what the students have learned and the teaching methods that have  
13 proved to be more efficient during the year. Additionally, regarding the topic of  
14 academic achievements, an analysis of the factors that influence positively and  
15 negatively the academic progress of refugee children according to the data will  
16 follow.

## 17 18 **Goals and Achievements**

19  
20 **Greek Language Acquisition.** As all teachers explained, the first and  
21 most important aim was the native language acquisition. In all three cases of  
22 refugees' primary education, teachers emphasised on Greek language learning  
23 "in order to intergrade refugee children in school and help them with their  
24 adjustment", as M1 mentioned. Moreover, "the core subject is the Greek  
25 language. I also deliver mathematics lessons one time per week mostly when  
26 students ask for it or when they face intense difficulties in the mainstream  
27 classrooms.", as R3 said. Language and mathematics are the main subjects  
28 delivered in reception classes and DYEP schools, as teachers have stated. In  
29 mainstream classrooms, teachers integrate refugee children in other subjects  
30 when the language difficulties are not a problem. Language is the first step for  
31 a successful inclusion and arises as the core aim in refugee children's  
32 education, as all teachers mentioned.

33  
34 **Students' Language Achievements.** When I asked teachers about the  
35 refugee students' achievements during the year they specifically focused on the  
36 native language acquisition, trying to describe the language level that the  
37 students have attained. All teachers mentioned in their answers that students  
38 have a "basic knowledge" of the Greek language. Nevertheless, the "basic  
39 knowledge of a language" has not been translated in the same way by every  
40 participant. In their answers, teachers mentioned that students "understand  
41 simple phrases in Greek", "can communicate with their classmates in the native  
42 language" and "have learnt the everyday vocabulary that we use in schools".  
43 Students' main difficulties focus on writing and reading in the native language.  
44 These are skills that students need more time to gain according to teachers.  
45 However, most of the teachers' answers concentrated on the progress that  
46 students have made, not that much on specific results. "I started with students  
47 who had zero level of the Greek language and by the end of the school year

1 they could communicate and write their name and some phrases; this is  
2 incredible given the fact that they have no additional support.” D1 described.

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4 **Teaching Methods and Material that Teachers Use.** What methods  
5 were the teachers using most often during the year? Before pointing out these  
6 methods, it would be of high importance to mention that the vast majority of  
7 participants had not taught students with refugee backgrounds. Among all  
8 teachers, only two teachers had taught refugee children in the past and could  
9 compare their experiences. Seven of the teachers expressed the need for  
10 additional training in order to provide more effective education in the refugee  
11 children. The MoE, it usually provides seminars every two years but this is not  
12 fixed. Most teachers insisted on “not using the traditional way of teaching” and  
13 “use of technology” in order to gain children’s attention. Moreover, all teachers  
14 specifically revealed that there is a need for revising courses, as R1 mentioned:  
15 “The new knowledge is not easily absorbed by the students. There is a need for  
16 going over the same things until students retain the new information.”

17 The MoE does not provide any specific material, except from one book  
18 named “Γεια σας” which means “Hello” in the Greek language. Most of the  
19 teachers find this book “useless” and “unsuitable” for their students. Only one  
20 teacher mentioned that: “I use the book with the older group of students and It  
21 is quite helpful, for the younger group I use material that I find online from  
22 various websites.”. All participants often search the teaching material online or  
23 borrow material from the 1st grade of primary school, mainly material about  
24 learning the alphabet letters. D2 pointed out the situation about methods and  
25 materials summarizing in her answer points from all nine participants: “There  
26 is no specific material or guidelines about what to teach and how to teach it.  
27 So, I am practically doing whatever I feel that is useful and can help my  
28 students. I try things! When a material or a teaching method works, I repeat it.  
29 If it does not work, I change it. This is the way we are working, while there is  
30 not specific training, guidelines or material from the MoE.”.

### 31 32 **Positive Factors on Refugee Children’s Academic Achievements**

33  
34 **Children’s Personal Motivation.** One of the key factors that was  
35 considered to be beneficial for the academic achievements of the refugee  
36 children in Greek primary school is their intrinsic motivation. All teachers that  
37 were interviewed with no exception revealed that the “personal motivation of  
38 refugee children plays the main role in their academic and social progress in  
39 school”.

40  
41 **Age and Previous School Experience.** Refugee students who entered the  
42 Greek primary education at the age of 7 or 8 will have better progress than  
43 older ones according to teachers. These young refugee students will be placed  
44 in 1st grade classrooms and they will start learning the Greek language together  
45 with the native students. As M2 said: “Of course, young refugee students face  
46 difficulties but they will have better academic progress and adaptation in the  
47 long term.”. This is describing a fact about the age that the children are

1 entering the educational systems. Refugee children, who enter the primary  
2 school later than the compulsory school age, are presenting a group with  
3 excessive difficulties in learning and often fail to meet the desired level  
4 (Koehler C., and Schneider J., 2019).

5 Thus, age can describe a negative factor as well. The interviewees revealed  
6 that this age group of refugee children who have just arrived in the country and  
7 enter the senior year grades are facing serious problems to follow their  
8 classmates. "Placing the refugee child in a class with students of the same age  
9 but not of the same educational level, reveals the need for a full extra learning  
10 support for the child. There are cases where the refugee student is sitting as a  
11 "flower pot" in the classroom while he is not able to follow and understand the  
12 lesson.", as R3 said.

13 Prior school experience for students has proved important for the academic  
14 progress especially of the older students. "Students who have been to school in  
15 the past learn easier and quicker than the rest of the refugee children.",  
16 mentioned D1.

17  
18 **Parents and Family Circumstances.** Another positive factor arises when  
19 parents have positive attitudes for their children's education. "There are  
20 refugee parents who care about education and consider it important for their  
21 offspring. I realise this as an additional motivation for the refugee students."  
22 explained R1.

23  
24 **The Reception Class.** The reception class is an educational policy which  
25 is broadly implanting in most of the EU Member States, allowing the refugee  
26 students to have extra learning support. Teachers pointed out that "The  
27 reception class in schools is an effective way to include students into the  
28 learning procedure quicker and with better results.", as D1 mentioned.  
29 Furthermore, the urgent need for extra learning support among refugee students  
30 in mainstream schools was confirmed by all six interviewees, who were  
31 working in mainstream schools. To understand how the reception class is  
32 organized, R3 explains: "The first weeks I assessed the students and separated  
33 them in groups of 3 depending on their level and needs. The first three months  
34 we focused on language learning. Then, I started to discuss with their teachers  
35 in mainstream classrooms about the students' progress and the specific  
36 difficulties that we need to work on more in the reception class. Team work  
37 and mutual responsibility of the teaching staff can bring incredible results for  
38 refugee youngsters."

39 Unfortunately, there are not reception classes in all primary schools in the  
40 country, as is the case in the school where three of the participants were  
41 working. Teachers who worked in reception classes, tended to be more  
42 optimistic about students' progress and their whole integration in the Greek  
43 schools.

#### 44 45 **Negative Factors on Refugee Children's Academic Achievements**

46

1       **Special needs and stress factors.** The most common answer, which is  
2 connected with the delayed academic progress of refugee students, refers to the  
3 probability of specific learning difficulties. Teachers were trying to explain the  
4 reason why in some cases of students they cannot see the progress they wish.  
5 Thus, M1 explained: “In the case of the refugee student this year, I have tried  
6 with different ways and material to achieve the basics. This child takes  
7 supporting language lessons from a NGO in the afternoons. In normal  
8 circumstances, he could learn more. I believe that there are other reasons why  
9 this child is not having academic progress, like a special learning difficulty.”.  
10 Other teachers mentioned “I was thinking that one student may need special  
11 help but as far as there is not specific assessment I cannot be sure.”

12       However, teachers were more certain when they explained the mental  
13 health issues which provide negative effects on children’s learning progress.  
14 “The student is still stressed about his adjustment into school. This provides  
15 bad influence during the teaching procedure. Sometimes he throws away the  
16 notebook saying that he is not capable to learn.”, R3 said. A teacher from  
17 DYEP school also mentioned: “Not all students are happy, some of them are  
18 too serious and they do not want to open up. Unfortunately, their mental health  
19 issues influence their ability to learn as I can see.”. The role of mental health  
20 issues in refugee children’s new life has been mentioned in almost all academic  
21 articles about refugee education and social integration.

22  
23       **Family Circumstances.** Family’s unstable circumstances influences the  
24 child’s mental health and his/her effort for academic progress. Many refugee  
25 families wish to leave Greece and move to another European country mainly in  
26 Germany. As teachers explained, the unwillingness of the families to stay in  
27 the country, makes students uninterested in learning the native language and in  
28 having academic progress. “The two girls are going to move to Germany with  
29 their mother, where their father lives. Even though they are smart, they are not  
30 interested in learning because they will not continue their education here.”, R1  
31 teacher mentioned.

32  
33       **Lack of Awareness of the Policy.** Another negative aspect of refugee  
34 childrens’ education is the fact that teachers are not well informed about the  
35 education policy. When refugee students entering the native school system can  
36 cause anxiety and nervousness in the school staff (Magos and Margaroni,  
37 2017), because most of the times they are unexperienced in teaching non-native  
38 students.

39       Teachers used expressions like “I don’t know”, “I am not well informed”,  
40 “nobody came to explain to us...” to answer the question about the policy that  
41 MoE is following.

## 42 43 **Findings about School Life Interactions of Refugee Students**

44  
45       In this part, the school life interactions of refugee students regarding their  
46 new school environment will be examined. There were positive and negative  
47 examples of school life interactions in Greek primary schools according to the

1 teachers. We will explore the positive and negative factors that affect the  
2 school life of recently arrived refugee children into school.

3  
4 **Positive Influence in School Life Interaction.** School life interactions are  
5 related to academic achievements of the refugee children in Greek primary  
6 schools. The findings revealed that there were identical positive and negative  
7 factors, which affect both academic and school life of the refugees. The main  
8 common positive influence was concerned with the personal motivation of the  
9 refugee children. There are also other positive influences coming from the  
10 school environment that assist the students' effort to integrate successfully as  
11 follows.

12  
13 **Special Preparation and Teachers' Role.** Students' relationships and  
14 interactions are not considered easy, especially when between students there is  
15 the difficulty to understand each other and their cultural backgrounds and  
16 experiences are very different. The way the school prepares the rest of the  
17 students to welcome their new classmates plays an important role, as the  
18 majority of the participants mentioned. "The head teacher contributed to the  
19 successful integration of the refugee students in school. The first day, the  
20 students were holding a poster in which it was written «Welcome to our school,  
21 we are all friends here. »", as D3 mentioned. On the other hand, teachers  
22 working in mainstream schools around the country mentioned that there was no  
23 special preparation for welcoming the refugee students or any special event  
24 during the year. Refugee students integrate on daily basis with the native ones in  
25 mainstream schools, whereas they do not have this opportunity in DYEP  
26 schools.

27 Teachers mentioned that "younger children were open" to follow their  
28 advice and to discuss with them. Older students did not want to talk about their  
29 school life or other topics and they "did not accept any kind of advice". Thus,  
30 we can realise that school life integration tends to be easier for younger  
31 students, as teachers considered. Of course this is not always the case, as two  
32 teachers mentioned the positive school life integration of two students around  
33 10-11 years old. However, at this point it emerges that the young age of  
34 refugee students is often positive factor not only for their academic progress  
35 but also for their everyday life into the school environment.

36  
37 **School Rules.** Some of the refugee students have been to school before,  
38 while others have not. Refugee students in Greece have found to ignore basic  
39 school rules like sitting in the chair during the lesson (Zsofia, 2018). Teachers  
40 mentioned during our conversation that except from the academic objectives  
41 they also devoted time to teach the basic school rules among the students  
42 aiming to an over-all successful school life integration. "There are differences  
43 in school functions between the origin countries of the refugee students and our  
44 country. We need to explain to students some basic rules and give them time to  
45 adapt the changes.", as D3 said.

46  
47 **Negative Factors on School Life Interaction**

1  
2 **Mental Health and Stress Factors.** Mental health issues of refugee  
3 children seem to affect their school interactions as it was the case with the  
4 academic progress. Six to nine participants mentioned “aggressive behaviors”  
5 and “frequently changed behaviors” between the refugee students. These  
6 characteristics had a negative influence in the relationships between the native  
7 and the refugee students.

8  
9 **School Environment.** Moreover, teachers said that some refugee girls did  
10 not want to play with their female classmates because they thought that native  
11 students “feel sorry” about them. These kind of beliefs may arise from  
12 children’s stress of adjustment or from deficient social and school life  
13 integration actions into Greek schools and society. No interviewee mentioned  
14 in discrimination practices against the newly arrived students in schools,  
15 whereas one teacher referred that native students were not willing to integrate  
16 with the refugee ones all the time.

17  
18 **Language Barrier.** Language emerged as a negative factor of school  
19 interactions especially in the beginning of the school year. “In the first months  
20 the language was a problem. Students could not communicate and understand  
21 each other but they were trying.”, M2 mentioned. Another teacher said that  
22 students were trying to communicate “using English and Greek words” but  
23 during the first weeks they were struggling.

24  
25 **School Life Participation.** Some teachers believe that participation in  
26 every aspect of the school life can help the refugees’ interaction in the school  
27 environment. The interviews revealed that refugees did not participate in  
28 school trips during the year, losing this way a nice opportunity to “integrate  
29 outside of the school environment, where children are free to play and have  
30 fun.”, a teacher explained. “When I asked the students the reason why he did  
31 not come to the school trip, he mentioned that his mother could not speak  
32 Greek so she could not come with him. At this school trip parents would  
33 accompany their children, too.” This reveals a cultural dimension in the limited  
34 school life participation of the refugee students. School environment cannot  
35 predict these factors and solve them.

## 36 37 38 **Discussion**

39  
40 This study aimed to explore the academic achievements and school  
41 integration of refugee students in Greek primary schools. Before discussing the  
42 findings, the mutual connection between academic progress and school life  
43 interactions has been highlighted in the present study. Entering refugee  
44 children in the education system of the host country is the first step for  
45 academic and social growth (McBrien, 2005). American teachers when  
46 interviewed by the researchers highlighted successful acculturation and social  
47 integration as the best way to support academically and emotionally the



1 refugee children (Bartlett et al., 2017). Greek teachers, who were interviewed,  
2 indicated their worries about language learning more than the importance of  
3 integration in the society. This may have happened because teachers were not  
4 aware of the asylum status of the refugee families as well as their effort to stay  
5 in the country. As most of the teachers mentioned “we extract important  
6 information from the children because the students’ records are not completed  
7 as they should be.”. Unfortunately, a low adjustment in the host country  
8 usually brings low academic improvement for the refugee students (Sheikh and  
9 Anderson, 2018).

10 On the other hand, participants emphasized on the acquisition of the new  
11 language and the difficulties that they have experienced in order to teach the  
12 Greek language among the recently arrived refugees in the school. Recent  
13 studies in Turkey investigated the primary education of Syrian refugee children  
14 through teachers’ and children’s perspectives. The teachers of the neighboring  
15 to Greece country experience almost the same problems relating to language  
16 learning. Turkish teachers also consider it hard to teach the language in the  
17 mainstream class without any extra support for the students (Taskin and  
18 Erdemli, 2018), exactly as Greek teachers mentioned. Another study in the  
19 same country mentioned language as the key problematic factor which Syrian  
20 children have to deal with (Aydin and Kaya, 2017). Migrant education policies  
21 have focused on native language learning for many years now (Palaiologou,  
22 2007). Reception classes are aiming for quick and adequate language  
23 acquisition (Faas, 2011). The absence of assessment in students’ language  
24 skills and the material provision of their own mother language induces  
25 problems in the effective language learning in Greece (Palaiologou, 2007;  
26 Zsofia, 2018).

27 Nevertheless, there are factors that positively influence language learning  
28 and academic achievements in general. Previous educational experiences and  
29 better academic outcomes are associated (Kaplan et al., 2015). Children  
30 without any school experience or those characterized by limited and interrupted  
31 experience in the school environment are likely to have severe difficulties in  
32 language learning and lower academic achievements (Miller, 2009; Kaplan et  
33 al., 2015). The interviewees also revealed the role of age as crucial for the  
34 refugee children’s adjustment. In the systematic review appeared that young  
35 refugee children integrate in the new society more early than the older ones,  
36 and positive school experience plays an important factor. Besides, educational  
37 experiences for older students are most of the times more complicated (Sheikh  
38 and Anderson, 2018). Age is appointed an important factor for refugees’  
39 education. The Ministry of Education in Greece is dealing with the following  
40 problems: (1) the refugee children’s age is not provided correctly given the  
41 mistakes in their records and (2) children who placed in lower level classes in  
42 order to follow the lessons and learn the native language, is possible to quit  
43 schooling (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.43).

44 Family circumstances can also affect the school and academic life of the  
45 refugee child. Parents themselves need to adjust in the new society and cope  
46 with big problems arising day by day (Beiser, 2009; Kaplan et al., 2015). They  
47 probably do not know the native language and they cannot help their offspring

1 with the school assignments (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). Research  
2 found that refugees in Greek camps developed severe mental health issues and  
3 almost 70% of those had children (Poole et al., 2018). The interviewees  
4 mentioned that parents have their own problems to solve and they cannot  
5 provide adequate support to their children. The wellbeing of the parents will  
6 gradually provide positive effects in refugee children's school life, as  
7 mentioned above (Weine, 2008). The social provisions of the host country are  
8 necessary for refugee parents' safety and welfare (Correa-Vele et al., 2010).  
9 The mechanisms of social integration provided by the Greek government have  
10 proved notably insufficient (Kragia et al., 2010; Zsofia, 2018). Although  
11 NGOs' support is well organized mainly in the big cities like Athens (Clarke,  
12 2013), the opportunities of assimilation are remarkably eliminated for refugee  
13 adults in the Greek society (Kragia et al., 2010).

14 Students' emotional and psychological concerns affect their school  
15 performance. Teachers have to be well informed about the situation and the  
16 problems that arise when a child is accompanied by mental issues (Bartlett  
17 et al., 2017). Refugee education is a great challenge for teachers and research has  
18 found that most of them have a hard time due to the multidimensional needs of  
19 refugee students (Taylor and Sidhu, 2012; Aydin and Kaya, 2017; Taskin and  
20 Erdemli, 2018). Researchers mentioned that Greek teachers are not properly  
21 trained for teaching refugee students. The educational programmes of teachers'  
22 education in Greece are not providing courses about multicultural education  
23 (Palaiologou and Dimitriadou, 2013). Thus, teachers do not achieve the  
24 competencies for teaching diverse groups of students. Even the report of the  
25 MoE recognized the need for better trained teaching staff for the refugee  
26 children (Ministry of Education, 2017). This study presented the thoughts of  
27 Greek teachers who wanted to be well prepared and informed in order to  
28 effectively teach in the new era of multicultural classrooms.

29 Governments and policy makers need to pay more attention to teachers'  
30 and students' particular needs. A well-organized policy is mandatory for better  
31 results in primary refugee education (Taylor and Sidhu, 2012). Unfortunately,  
32 the Greek case is not the only one in which policy does not provide specific  
33 guidelines for refugee students. Educational policy in Australia, US and UK  
34 has been found to be unable to meet the needs of refugee students and  
35 sometimes there is no provision for a separate policy for this group of students  
36 (Arnot and Pinson, 2005; Lunneblad, 2017; Bartlett et al., 2017). In this study,  
37 the problem with the Greek education policy is summarized in two facts. The  
38 first one is when a good policy, as the reception class is, cannot be  
39 implemented in a right way because of the uninformed staff in the schools. The  
40 second case is similar with the global issues of education policy for refugee  
41 students where the needs of the children are not a priority. Other studies stated  
42 that the refugee education is not well organized in the country. Except from  
43 problems about the teaching staff and the poor intercultural influence in the  
44 schools, the xenophobic attitudes against refugees seem to influence  
45 undesirably the acculturation of the children (Kakos and Palaiologou, 2014;  
46 Zsofia, 2018).

1 It is obvious that refugee education is a complex issue and the school  
2 environment cannot provide solutions for every problematic situation.

### 3 4 5 **Conclusions**

6  
7 As the refugee rights are being in the centre of attention these days, this  
8 research has focused on the appropriate education for the refugee children.  
9 Given the importance of education and the obligation of the host countries to  
10 promote sufficient education for these children (UNHCR, 2010), this study  
11 focused its attention on the Greek reality of refugee education. The results of  
12 the study will be summarized below, along with the recommendations for a  
13 more effective primary education for refugee students in Greece. The  
14 limitations of this small-scaled study will be also considered and directions for  
15 future research will be delivered.

### 16 17 **Research Outcomes**

18  
19 It is noticeable that there are multiple factors that influence the education  
20 of refugees in Greek primary schools in both positive and negative ways. The  
21 research results cover the academic achievements and school life interactions  
22 of the refugee students that have recently arrived. The definition of “recently  
23 arrived” would be any children that have entered the Greek formal education  
24 within the past two years.

25 As teachers often say, the students’ academic progress is to achieve but in  
26 most cases these children are still not able to follow the mainstream classes.  
27 Refugee children need time to acquire the Greek language while the gaps in  
28 policy and teachers’ training delay the students’ progress. Reception classes  
29 have been established in order to support the students’ language learning. It is a  
30 positive policy example, while students have the opportunity to get intensely  
31 taught the native language in small groups. Students who have been in  
32 reception class for two years have made significant progress and are able to  
33 integrate in the mainstream class as mentioned in two examples. Despite this  
34 optimistic view of this policy, reception classes cannot be established in every  
35 school around the country, mainly because of the limited funding. The MoE  
36 allows the refugee parents to send their offspring in every school around the  
37 country with or without the provision of extra support. This fact may be helpful  
38 for parents’ everyday life because they do not need to search for a specific  
39 school for their children, but the children’s needs are not respected. When a  
40 refugee child enters the primary school without knowing the native language  
41 and without any specific support, it is highly likely that they will face many  
42 problems. Teachers who work in mainstream schools without reception class  
43 often discuss their personal difficulties to include the child in the classroom  
44 and their worries about the limited learning of the refugee student during the  
45 year. To conclude, this total immersion experience of the refugee children does  
46 not seem to have yielded satisfying results.

1 The students' age, their previous school experience and the limited records  
2 are predominant issues in all three educational infrastructures. All teachers  
3 have mentioned that placing students in the classrooms based on their age and  
4 not their educational level is causing problems. This is due to the fact that  
5 students are not able to follow the rest of the class. It is also essential for the  
6 teacher to know the prior educational experience of the refugee child whether it  
7 is formal or informal. Interviewees argued that the students' information is not  
8 sufficient, while there is important data missing. However, the gatekeeper of  
9 the school is responsible for the students' records, but the procedure of  
10 introducing the refugee children in the school follows quick steps and they skip  
11 some information. The quick and unorganized processing, made us realize that  
12 the government is aiming to the refugees' integration in public schools without  
13 paying attention to the details. Even if the MoE recognized some problems  
14 concerning the students' age, it has not organized any specific action yet in  
15 order to solve them.

16 Another outcome that needs to be highlighted is the lack of teachers'  
17 training. Greek teachers have no experience in intercultural education before  
18 and they do not have the knowledge of effectively teaching the refugee groups.  
19 Moreover, the MoE does not organize regular seminars in order to give them  
20 guidelines and inform them about the new policies. For example, teachers from  
21 Athens had participated in a government seminar this school year, whereas  
22 teachers from Thessaloniki mentioned that no seminar organized by the  
23 government this year. The fact that some teachers will be better informed or  
24 trained than others, is leading to the consequence of unequal education between  
25 the refugee students. Apart from the irregular seminars around the country,  
26 teachers have also complained about the special material provision. As  
27 highlighted in this study, the educational material for refugee students is  
28 insufficient, not covering students' needs in every grade and in some cases in  
29 not useful at all. More specifically, DYEP school the material and classroom  
30 organization is fully organized by the teacher. There is no specific curriculum  
31 or core goals concerning the multicultural education and this make it really  
32 hard to evaluate and assess, the policy and the students respectively. Most of  
33 the researches spotlight the numbers of students in schools, the teaching staff  
34 and policy in general. The adequacy of the teaching material and the actual  
35 academic achievements of the refugee students in Greece have not been  
36 examined enough by the researchers.

37 Actions for providing school life interaction between the native and the  
38 refugee students depend on the willingness of the school staff to help refugees'  
39 integration in the school environment. However, taking into account teachers'  
40 answers school life interactions are considering smoother for the refugee  
41 children than their academic progress into the Greek primary school.

42 To sum up, the fact the numbers of refugee children in education are  
43 increasing is really valuable. However, the Greek government needs to put  
44 more effort in order to promote an education which will respect the unique life  
45 conditions and prior experiences of refugee children.

#### 46 *Limitations and future research*

1  
2 This study took part in three big Greek cities with a limited number of  
3 nine participants. The results cannot be generalized or considered that are  
4 reflecting the refugee education around the country. Further research in the  
5 same context is meaningful in order to understand the way teachers estimate  
6 the refugee education and express their thoughts around it. Moreover,  
7 researches and assessment focusing on refugee children are today more  
8 essential than ever. Children are having a voice and we should give them space  
9 and opportunities to express their thoughts. As it arises for this study, an  
10 intense analysis of the materials that the teachers use for refugee education as  
11 well as an evaluation of their teaching methods they adopt need to explore  
12 further.

13 A child centred educational policy which will respect the refugee  
14 child's profile would be required. Greece has put a lot of effort to organize an  
15 adequate education for the newly arrived minors. Whilst the numbers of  
16 refugees in Greek schools are growing, we cannot be sure that the quality of  
17 education follows the same route. Government members, policymakers and  
18 stakeholders around the world have to ensure that the refugee children of the  
19 current refugee crisis will not belong to a lost generation in education with  
20 average or no schooling at all. There is an international responsibility to protect  
21 the right to education for the refugee children giving them the favourable  
22 circumstances for a better future.

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