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

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

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

Q1: What is the current state of refugee children’s education in Greek primary schools like from teachers’ perspectives?
Q2: Has there been any academic or social progress among refugee students?
Q3: What do teachers think needs to be done to improve refugee children’s education in Greek primary schools?

These objectives were explored through teachers working in the three types of infrastructures where the refugee children have the opportunity to be educated. The semi-structured interviews conducted in three major Greek cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa.

**Literature Review**

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

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1. DYEP, the Greek acronym that used in the dissertation and the translated English acronym is Reception Facilities for Refugee Education, RFRE
with the main host country being Turkey (UNHCR, 2015). The year of 2015 meant to be a significant one for the EU because of the continuous human movements to European counties. Using the sea route to reach the Western world under dangerous circumstances, hundreds of people lost their lives or have been lost.

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

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

Immediately upon the beginning of the refugee flows in Greece started a flow of international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Chtouris and Miller, 2017). The European Commission has also formed the main funding source for the Greek government since 2015. Describing the refugee context in Greece, the most recent report of the EU refers that additional measures are required. Despite the progress that has been made in the country there are still problems that need to be addressed such as a faster asylum procedure and further health support for the refugees living in the hotspots (European Commission, 2019). Another issue is the protection of the unaccompanied minors. The Greek authorities have to care more for this vulnerable group because there is no specific plan for the unaccompanied children and the accommodation is not adequate increasing this way the risk for the minors (UNHCR, 2019). The Greek government being supported by NGOs and the European Commission has responded to the refugee crisis in a satisfying way, taking into account the level of the crisis and the poor economy of the country. However, the difficulties to provide accommodation for all refugees, the problematic migration policies and the distance among the refugees and the natives due to the language and the dissimilar cultural background provide negative effects and concerns for the future actions (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2017). The European Commission stated that in 2019 the refugee movements
to Greece were 30 percent greater than in 2018 (European Commission, 2019). Pointing that in 2018, more than 50,000 individuals with refugee background indicated in the country (UNHCR, 2018), it is urgent to find solutions for better living conditions and social adaptation for the refugees.

The Refugee Child

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

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

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

Firstly, the Article 22 of the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees published by UNHCR focuses on “public education” for the refugee children and states that education has to be convenient for every student with similar background in every education level (UNHCR, 1951). Secondly, the Article 22 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) indicates directly the refugee children and the obligation of
the authorities to support them adequately in order to “enjoy all the rights in the Convention” (UNCRC, 1989). Amongst the rights of the Convention is the Article 28 which refers to an equal and effective education for every child (UNCRC, 1989).

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

Refugee Education

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

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

Since 2016, the Greek MoE started to actively care about the access of refugee children in the national education system. The first year of refugees’ integration in Greek schools was characterized as “pre-integration” year by the government. During this period, the Ministry had placed a professional team which was responsible for organizing education opportunities in Refugee Reception Accommodation Centers (RACs) as well as suitable ways to regularly incorporate the newly arrived refugee children from 7 to 15 years old
in the mainstream classes. The law no. 4415/2016 “Arrangements for Greek
language education, intercultural education and other provisions” published by
the Greek government in order to clarify and endorse the education provision
for students with a different cultural background (European Web Site on
Integration, 2019). Before analysing the steps that the MoE followed for
making education accessible for all, it is considered vital to provide key
information about the Greek primary education.

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

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

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

Refugee children who live in apartments with their families enter the
public primary school of the neighborhood. Reception Classes (RCs) for
supporting the refugee students have been established in primary schools
around the country. The MoE has recognized some areas as Zones of
Education Priority (ZEP) in crucial locations where a lot of refugee families
gather (Ministry of Education, 2017). The main idea of the reception classes is that the refugee students follow some subjects in the mainstream class and some school hours per day attend the reception class.

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

These actions try to place children in education as soon as possible but the movements of refugee families around the country until their maintenance in a place take refugee minors out of school for a long period. Moreover, families may not encourage the education of their children as this in not their main concern. Greece is following the bad example of other European countries where the students with migrant backgrounds present lower academic achievements than the native students (OECD, 2015). The economic crisis that the country faces had an impact on the teaching stuff. The government is not hiring permanent teaching stuff and teachers especially in reception classes, DYEP school and special education infrastructures change year by year. This is an important case for the educational stability and improvement (OECD, 2018).

Furthermore, the language barrier leads many children not to attend school regularly (ESPN, 2017). It appears that primary education for children is well organized, but this is not the case for early childhood education or high secondary schools especially outside of the cities.

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

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

**Methodology**

As it arises from the literature review, it was a challenge for the Greek Ministry of Education to find ways to integrate the refugee children in schools around the country. It was only during the school year of 2016 and 2017 that the Greek government intensively focused on integrating the refugee children in the formal schooling system (Ministry of Education, 2017). Thus, this study aims to examine the current educational system of Greek public schools in terms of educational provisions for refugee children. Additionally, this study will explore the effective teaching methods and successful school integration programs which used by the teachers. The way this will be conducted will be
by focusing on teachers’ views about the academic achievements and social interactions of refugee students.

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1: The maps shows the Greek cities, where the interviewees were working.
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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of educational Infrastructure</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Reception/ Preparatory Classes for the Education of Refugees” (DYEP)</td>
<td>3 (D1, D2, D3)</td>
<td>- 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).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Reception Classes” in</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>- Participants were recruited from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.  

### Interview Implementation

Interviews were meant to be face to face while the researcher travelled to Greece due to this reason. Unfortunately, three of the participants could not meet with the researcher, so in these cases the interviews took place over the telephone.

Continuing with the interview process, the information sheet) and consent form had been given to the participants before the interview. The interviewees had to sign the consent form, where included their approval to be recorded, before the beginning of the process. The interviews were conducted in Greek language, which is the native language for the participants as well as for the researcher. Moreover, the information sheet and the consent form had been given translated in Greek language. All participants, except one, gave their permission to record the interview.

Qualitative interviewing is a research method where ethical concerns may appear (Mason, 2018). All interviews were conducted after the participants signed their consent form, being clear that their names and the schools’ names will not be mentioned in the study. The King’s College London ethical guidelines were followed and undertook a demanding ethical evaluation of the present research project. Ethics clearance of the project was obtained by the King’s College London research ethics committee on 28 May 2019 (see appendix 1) and the reference number was LRU-18/19-10531. The research conducted caring about sensitive issues and the participants’ protection.

In order to meet all the ethical issues, the researcher continued to the KDPR-King’s Data Protection Registration approval. The confirmation of registration provided to the researcher on 10 June 2019 with the reference number DPRF-18/19-9450 (see appendix 2).

The interview data in this research was analyzed through thematic analysis, using codes to cover the essential topics of the research. The themes of the analysis were carefully selected and connected them with the research questions. The most frequently answers formed the main bodies of the analysis. Nonetheless, less repeated yet critical answers also included.

### Findings

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

Findings about Academic Achievements of Refugee Students

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

Goals and Achievements

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

Students’ Language Achievements. When I asked teachers about the refugee students’ achievements during the year they specifically focused on the native language acquisition, trying to describe the language level that the students have attained. All teachers mentioned in their answers that students have a “basic knowledge” of the Greek language. Nevertheless, the “basic knowledge of a language” has not been translated in the same way by every participant. In their answers, teachers mentioned that students “understand simple phrases in Greek”, “can communicate with their classmates in the native language” and “have learnt the everyday vocabulary that we use in schools”. Students’ main difficulties focus on writing and reading in the native language. These are skills that students need more time to gain according to teachers. However, most of the teachers’ answers concentrated on the progress that students have made, not that much on specific results. “I started with students who had zero level of the Greek language and by the end of the school year
they could communicate and write their name and some phrases; this is incredible given the fact that they have no additional support.” D1 described.

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

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

Positive Factors on Refugee Children’s Academic Achievements

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

Age and Previous School Experience. Refugee students who entered the Greek primary education at the age of 7 or 8 will have better progress than older ones according to teachers. These young refugee students will be placed in 1st grade classrooms and they will start learning the Greek language together with the native students. As M2 said: “Of course, young refugee students face difficulties but they will have better academic progress and adaptation in the long term.”. This is describing a fact about the age that the children are
entering the educational systems. Refugee children, who enter the primary school later than the compulsory school age, are presenting a group with excessive difficulties in learning and often fail to meet the desired level (Koehler C., and Schneider J., 2019).

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

Prior school experience for students has proved important for the academic progress especially of the older students. “Students who have been to school in the past learn easier and quicker that the rest of the refugee children.”, mentioned D1.

Parents and Family Circumstances. Another positive factor arises when parents have positive attitudes for their children’s education. “There are refugee parents who care about education and consider it important for their offspring. I realise this as an additional motivation for the refugee students.” explained R1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Findings about School Life Interactions of Refugee Students

In this part, the school life interactions of refugee students regarding their new school environment will be examined. There were positive and negative examples of school life interactions in Greek primary schools according to the
teachers. We will explore the positive and negative factors that affect the school life of recently arrived refugee children into school.

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

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

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

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

**Negative Factors on School Life Interaction**
Mental Health and Stress Factors. Mental health issues of refugee children seem to affect their school interactions as it was the case with the academic progress. Six to nine participants mentioned “aggressive behaviors” and “frequently changed behaviors” between the refugee students. These characteristics had a negative influence in the relationships between the native and the refugee students.

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

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

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

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the academic achievements and school integration of refugee students in Greek primary schools. Before discussing the findings, the mutual connection between academic progress and school life interactions has been highlighted in the present study. Entering refugee children in the education system of the host country is the first step for academic and social growth (McBrien, 2005). American teachers when interviewed by the researchers highlighted successful acculturation and social integration as the best way to support academically and emotionally the
refugee children (Bartlett et al., 2017). Greek teachers, who were interviewed, indicated their worries about language learning more than the importance of integration in the society. This may have happened because teachers were not aware of the asylum status of the refugee families as well as their effort to stay in the country. As most of the teachers mentioned “we extract important information from the children because the students’ records are not completed as they should be.”. Unfortunately, a low adjustment in the host country usually brings low academic improvement for the refugee students (Sheikh and Anderson, 2018).

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

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

Family circumstances can also affect the school and academic life of the refugee child. Parents themselves need to adjust in the new society and cope with big problems arising day by day (Beiser, 2009; Kaplan et al., 2015). They probably do not know the native language and they cannot help their offspring
with the school assignments (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). Research found that refugees in Greek camps developed severe mental health issues and almost 70% of those had children (Poole et al., 2018). The interviewees mentioned that parents have their own problems to solve and they cannot provide adequate support to their children. The wellbeing of the parents will gradually provide positive effects in refugee children’s’ school life, as mentioned above (Weine, 2008). The social provisions of the host country are necessary for refugee parents’ safety and welfare (Correa-Vele et al., 2010). The mechanisms of social integration provided by the Greek government have proved notably insufficient (Kragia et al., 2010; Zsofia, 2018). Although NGOs’ support is well organized mainly in the big cities like Athens (Clarke, 2013), the opportunities of assimilation are remarkably eliminated for refugee adults in the Greek society (Kragia et al., 2010).

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

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

Conclusions

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

Research Outcomes

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

As teachers often say, the students’ academic progress is to achieve but in most cases these children are still not able to follow the mainstream classes. Refugee children need time to acquire the Greek language while the gaps in policy and teachers’ training delay the students’ progress. Reception classes have been established in order to support the students’ language learning. It is a positive policy example, while students have the opportunity to get intensely taught the native language in small groups. Students who have been in reception class for two years have made significant progress and are able to integrate in the mainstream class as mentioned in two examples. Despite this optimistic view of this policy, reception classes cannot be established in every school around the country, mainly because of the limited funding. The MoE allows the refugee parents to send their offspring in every school around the country with or without the provision of extra support. This fact may be helpful for parents’ everyday life because they do not need to search for a specific school for their children, but the children’s needs are not respected. When a refugee child enters the primary school without knowing the native language and without any specific support, it is highly likely that they will face many problems. Teachers who work in mainstream schools without reception class often discuss their personal difficulties to include the child in the classroom and their worries about the limited learning of the refugee student during the year. To conclude, this total immersion experience of the refugee children does not seem to have yielded satisfying results.
The students’ age, their previous school experience and the limited records are predominant issues in all three educational infrastructures. All teachers have mentioned that placing students in the classrooms based on their age and not their educational level is causing problems. This is due to the fact that students are not able to follow the rest of the class. It is also essential for the teacher to know the prior educational experience of the refugee child whether it is formal or informal. Interviewees argued that the students’ information is not sufficient, while there is important data missing. However, the gatekeeper of the school is responsible for the students’ records, but the procedure of introducing the refugee children in the school follows quick steps and they skip some information. The quick and unorganized processing, made us realize that the government is aiming to the refugees’ integration in public schools without paying attention to the details. Even if the MoE recognized some problems concerning the students’ age, it has not organized any specific action yet in order to solve them.

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

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

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

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

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

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23


