

MODULE 6. MOTION IN PROGRESS

Capsule 1. Migrant Children & Education

Letter from 20 Refugees Education Coordinators: They are concerned about the education of refugee children

https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaionomata/338604_epistoli-20-syntoniston-ekpaideysis-anisyhoyn-gia-tin-ekpaideysi-ton

Greek Refugee Education Coordinators' open letter of concern, regarding the rapid developments in the refugee issue, in relation to the education of refugee-children.

We, the following signatories, Refugee Education Coordinators of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs are observing the refugee flows from Ukraine increase due to the war with grief and anxiety. While bearing in mind that many of the over 18,000 Ukrainian refugees, who have entered our country are children, we nonetheless feel the need to express our concern about the provision convention of equal, inclusive and quality education to all refugee children without exception on behalf of the Greek state.

At a time when the Ukraine issue rightly monopolizes all of the publicity spotlights, we are witnessing the articulation of a new, selectively humanitarian public discourse that in fact intensifies existing forms of discrimination and produces new exclusions. In Greece, after almost seven years of receiving a large number of asylum seekers, we regret to hear the Minister of Immigration and Asylum (henceforth M.I.A.), Mr. Notis Mitarakis, publicly categorizing

refugees into "normal" vs "non-normal" ones. Thus, while the distinction between the "normal" refugee (that deserves our full support) and the "non-normal" one becomes indirectly established, the existing accommodation structures for asylum seekers begin to get armored with "protection measures", which are otherwise only found in high-security prisons that are destined to detain criminal convicts. Those measures consist of concrete walls, razor-blade barbed wires, turnstile gates, robotic cameras, drones, etc. Hence, we are wondering what the future will be for those "Others", the "non-normal" ones...

Admittedly, according to the Geneva Convention (1951), refugees are all persons who, due to a justified fear of personal persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership in a certain social group or due to their political beliefs, are outside their country of origin and cannot - or do not want to- return to it, precisely due to that kind of fear. Subsequent legislations extended the right to international protection onto persons fleeing as a result of widespread violence, conflict and / or war taking place in their places of residence (commonly referred to as "war refugees"). Besides belonging to the above category, Ukrainian refugees are entitled to "temporary protection". This right, which unfortunately did not apply to Syrian refugees or other war refugees from third countries arises from the European Directive 2001/55 / EC and provides for a 12-months stay in EU countries without the need of an asylum application.

However, in matters of education, according to: The Convention on the Status of Refugees (1951), Article 22 (Ratification by Law 3989/1959), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 28 (Ratification by Law 2101/1992), the P.D. 220/2007, Article 9, the P.D. 141/2013, Article 28, Law 4251/2014, Article 21, Law 4415/2016, Article 38, Law 4636/2019, Article 27 & Article 28 children are entitled to attend public school regardless of their origin,

religion and residence status. Consequently, the Greek state has the obligation to ensure equal and quality education for every child. However, with regard to the refugee-children's education we observe that in recent years, a number of measures are implemented that not only do not facilitate, but even create obstacles to those children's school attendance and therefore, impede their smooth educational and social integration, by depriving them of their fundamental rights. One such case is the forced relocation of families from one area to another when the accommodation structures get closed for various reasons. The consequence of this change is a stunning increase in school dropout, resulting from the disruption caused to those children's fragile routine. Yet, among them, there are some that suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, some others that face learning difficulties but also several ones that have severe disabilities. Under the circumstances, all of them fall out of any specialized help, are left without any supportive framework outside of the foreseen reception classes and are forced to live through the unbearable stress and the same trauma of persecution and loss over and over again.

Respectively, this kind of political management bears adverse consequences also for the refugee children's host school community, since any effort made to integrate them into the existing, bureaucratically burdened and financially weakened school environment ends in cancellation through their departure after a short time period. What is left of their presence in the Greek school is the image of a constantly moving population that produces pointless, additional bureaucracy and "simply" raises the school dropout rates. In result, refugee children remain "strangers": the faceless outsiders, who will never bond either with the school community or with the local environment as a whole.

In this context, we are deeply worried about the consequences of the decision of the Minister, Mr. Mitarakis, to further reduce the number of beneficiaries of the ESTIA II program, which is the sole housing

option framed by a supply of social services that remains open to cases of vulnerable families but also to individual applicants of international protection. This program, which was initially implemented by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, passed in January 2021 -after multiple delays- under the M.I.A. management. As a result, it led all the beneficiaries to financial misery, once that it withheld for many months the payment of their meager financial help. Having moreover already entered the stage of a drastic reduction of accommodation places in contracted flats, the state management of ESTIA II now threatens with homelessness all of its beneficiaries. Therefore, we wonder about the future M.I.A. plans for our asylum seeker students, who will soon become homeless. Will there be any solutions to protect them outright and effectively?

Recently, during his meeting with the German Federal Minister of Interior Affairs Nancy Feser in Berlin, the Greek Minister of Immigration and Asylum expressed his intention to institute special classes in Ukrainian and / or Russian in Greek schools for the coming school-year. This intention initially finds the majority of us RECs, as well as our further colleagues who have scientific training in intercultural education completely in agreement. At the same time, of course, the reasonable question arises as to whether this circumstance will eventually be the occasion for the general introduction of mother-tongue teaching for other large groups of non-native students attending the Greek public schools. In fact, that kind of request has been repetitively articulated by larger national communities that have been living in our country for decades now, such as the Albanian-, the Bulgarian-, the Georgian-, the Iranian-, the Nigerian ones, etc. Furthermore, the current memorandum of cooperation signed between the M.I.A. and UNICEF raises questions, as it claims to comprise “an adjunct to formal education”. We therefore wonder what is the role of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in this partnership since that -according to the legislation- the latter is the institutionally and scientifically competent

body to bridge, supervise and guide the formal and non-formal education programs that are implemented outside and within all kinds of “hospitality” structures. Given all the difficulties that prevent refugee children from finding their way into the formal education system and to stay within the classrooms, we wonder if this partnership ultimately marks the transition of the asylum-seeking children’s education exclusively to Non-Governmental Organizations and all the more, under conditions of confinement. Besides indirectly violating their right to equal access to public education, in psychosocial terms, such a contingent would imply the intensification of their institutionalization and isolation, while also setting the local communities back to an era of intolerance and monocultural fanaticism.

We, the REC signatories, faithful to our professional assignment, defend for years now, in every way the right of children of any confession, nationality, color, physical status and sexual orientation to qualitative, inclusive education and take care to promote their integration into the Greek school system. Beyond the seemingly grandiose “action plans” resulting from the occasional synergies among transnational organizations, state institutions and NGOs, which in our view haven’t had any practical impact on the daily lives of children so far, over the last six years we the RECs repeatedly suggest a series of necessary reform measures that could be launched to improve those children's access to education and reduce their school outflow. In our view, the changes that would contribute to a substantial, qualitative upgrading of the non- native children’s education and would contribute to the psychosocial protection and inclusion of all those who have suffered hardship and de-scholarization are the following:

1. The ensuring of their undisrupted and veritable attendance in the public schools of their neighborhoods. To achieve this, it is necessary for children and their families to enjoy relative stability in their lives.

2. The recruitment of stable, permanent teaching staff in the Reception Classes of all schools where E.P.Z. (Educational Priority Zones) have been instituted, since the beginning of each school year.
3. The instituting of more Reception Classes, possibly in each school unit and the simultaneous abolition of the (evening) Educational Structures for the Refugees' Reception (ESRR), which actually function as segregation spaces of the native-settled children from the non-native ones that are on the move.
4. The provision of regular training opportunities (both, of academic and experiential character) in Intercultural Education for all of the teachers involved in those children's instruction.
5. The "capitalization" of experience: the colleagues with relevant training and previous service should be hired as a priority.
6. The Increase of psychologists'- and social workers' numbers and the instituting of their constant presence in schools, with the possibility of being provided with assistance from professional interpreters.
7. The improvement of the material and technical infrastructure of the schools attended by a large number of students with refugee-migrant backgrounds.
8. The clarification-delimitation of the terms and conditions of cooperation between the various stakeholders implicated in the refugee-children's education (such as the different ministries, the NGOs and the public schools).
9. The instruction of the largest migrant-refugee children's communities' mother tongues.
10. The timely ensuring of their transportation to- and from schools, wherever delays or obstacles have been observed.

11. The reliable and regular psychosocial intervention through holistic child protection programs within the accommodation structures.

Ultimately, we are convinced that even the seemingly greatest difficulties can be removed, provided the political will to design solutions that get vulnerable social groups out of the impasse and the despair caused to them by the sense of loss of any prospect for a dignified life.

Refugee children, like any other children, are a valuable human-cultural asset for our country and society. Therefore, we want all of them near us and with us.

The Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs):

- Asimina Athanassiou (REC of Livadia Urban Web)
- Despina Asiatidou (REC of Eleona)
- Christos Alexiou (REC of Ritsona)
- Sofia Vlachou (REC of Filippiada)
- Sofia Grigoriadou (REC of Drama)
- Chrysanthi Zindrou (REC of Katsika Ioannina)
- Evangelia Kirkine (REC of Polykastro)
- Eleni Karagianni (REC of Schisto)
- Victoria Koemtzopoulou (REC of Open Structure of Refugees' Reception in Diavata).
- Dimitra Makri (REC of Doliana)
- Antonios Marmarinos (REC of Urban Attica)

- Theofanoula Balita (REC of Open Structure of Refugees' Reception in Diavata)
- Christina Lousta (Urban Web REC of Western Thessaloniki)
- Maria Panagiotaki (Urban Web REC of Crete / Heraklion)
- Kalliopi Papadimitriou (REC of Ritsona)
- Theodora Papamanou (Urban Web REC of Eastern Thessaloniki)
- Dionysis Pavlou (REC of the First Reception- Identification Centre of Lesvos)
- Maria Skargioti (Urban Web REC of Ioannina)
- Parthenopi Soilemezi (REC of Open Structure of Refugees' Reception in Diavata)
- Ioannis Stavrou (REC of Katsika-Ioannina).