(REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Inclusion of refugees in mainstream schools: Existing policies, the role of school leadership, student perspectives, and recommendations for enhancement

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been observed a significant influx of refugees, mainly from Eastern countries to European states, and especially to Greece, due to its geographical location. As a result, new needs and challenges have arisen in contemporary societies regarding the attitude towards refugees at multiple social levels. One of these levels, which this paper addresses, is the pedagogical treatment of students of different ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: Inclusion; Refugees; Leadership; Student Perspectives; ICTs

1. Introduction

In this domain, various theories have been formulated, and considerable research interest has been observed, both regarding existing policies and their improvement, aiming to reduce racism and prejudices and promote an intercultural model of society. Keywords: intercultural education, refugee, educational leadership, culture of inclusion. Specifically, to enhance inclusive practices in the educational context, it is necessary to explore and improve the treatment of refugee students by existing educational leadership. It is important to investigate the situations experienced by the children themselves and the challenges they face. Additionally, the support for educators in this endeavor should be considered.

2. Definitions-basic terminology

In order to successfully approach and analyze the above-mentioned issue, it is advisable to provide the significant definition of intercultural education and training under the concept of "interculturality," which, according to Kanakidou and Papagianni (1994), has a very important central axis of interaction, reciprocity, and genuine solidarity (Kanakidou & Papagianni, 1994). Kaloforidis (2014) expresses the view that intercultural education essentially teaches respect and coexistence between immigrants and the children of indigenous populations. By extension, the goal of intercultural education is not simply smooth coexistence and acceptance of diversity, as advocated by "multiculturalism," but interaction and collaboration at all levels to create an interacting social structure that promotes deeper cooperation among the various cultural groups that comprise it.

Furthermore, in order to analyze the current issue, it is necessary to define the broader concept of a refugee. For this reason, and in accordance with the Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status (2009), as well as UNHCR data (2005), "a refugee is someone who falls within the definition... being outside the country of nationality or habitual residence, who is unable to return to it due to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity, or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events that have seriously disrupted public order," as outlined in the 1950 UN Statute and the 1951 Convention, which are still in force. According to the definition above,

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refugees face very severe adversities or even exceptional difficulties, and they have been forced to leave their countries of origin, often using violence or involuntary departure, and settle in the new reality of host countries.

3. Existing policies

According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority's census in 2011, from the data that emerged, 'the Permanent Population of the country aged one (1) year and over, amounted to 10,712,409 individuals..., out of these individuals, 78,420, a percentage of 0.7%, settled in Greece from foreign countries' (ELSTAT, 2011). Taking into account the significant migration flows of Greeks in previous decades, one can understand that Greece is faced with an unprecedented situation for which there was not an organized network for the settlement and integration of refugees. Until 1996, the majority of immigrants were Greeks, but after that year, the trend reversed" (ELSTAT, 2014). The unprecedented influx of refugees constantly arriving in Greece (Kaloforidis, 2014), due to its significant geopolitical position, has created the need for immediate asylum provision, the establishment of policies and action groups for the restoration and integration of these individuals, as well as the education of refugee children.

Specifically, Hatzipoulos, along with his research team (2017), issued an annual report describing the current situation in our country regarding the restoration and education of refugees, which was institutionalized by the Greek state for the school year 2017-2018, during which the school structures hosting Reception and Education Centers for Refugees were designated. In the same report, there is mention of the establishment of language learning programs by immigrants in Greek and English for the better "ability of individuals to integrate into different environments, deepen their cultural understanding of the host country, and respond to communication situations in the social and professional sphere" (Hatzipoulos et al., 2017). From this report on current policies, it can be observed that the Greek government primarily practices a multicultural perspective, integrating refugees into modern Greek reality through the learning of the Greek language and adopting the mode of communication to meet the requirements of the Greek labor market.

The Greek government, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, is implementing programs for the settlement of refugees in rural areas and concurrently planning for their permanent integration into these regions. Through these programs, "support can be provided for professional training, skill acquisition, demonstration activities, and information actions for refugees in various sectors of activity in rural areas, with an emphasis on acquiring skills in the fields of food, forestry, and SMEs that operate in rural areas" (Ministry of Agriculture, 2016). From the above informational bulletin describing the actions, the term "integration" is used, emphasizing the overall disposition of the state towards refugees in terms of their integration into areas of Greek territory. The goal is to provide training for them to meet various labor needs in these areas and to be assimilated into the native populations.

Hatziisotiriou (2014) points out that states, in order to address this increased influx of refugees, resort to policies summarized in three models: the assimilationist, the integrationist, and the inclusive model. According to the aforementioned model of action, one realizes that until recently, the Greek state adopted a policy characterized by an assimilationist disposition towards refugees. However, it should be noted that there have been recent efforts by the Greek Ombudsman (2017) regarding the education of refugee children in Lesvos, which is a hotspot for refugee reception in the Greek reality. In this effort, research is conducted, actions are taken, such as informing parents and parent associations or guardians for awareness, and, in parallel, raising their awareness about refugee issues and ensuring the enrollment of refugee children in schools, alongside Greek students.

An equally important aspect highlighted by Chiotakis (2015) concerns the description of the Gemeinschaft model, which involves "the insistence of certain entities on using patterns and symbols... evident, for example, in the choice of the term 'genos' (Greek word closely related to the origins) instead of 'nation,' particularly by representatives of the church... the tendency to define as elements of national identity characteristics that are particularistic or belong to the private sphere, such as religion, undermines national homogeneity, which should transcend religious or other individual differences... with biased and particularistic criteria that divide rather than unite." These elements characterize the Greek state and the tactics it follows.

In accordance with all of the above, it becomes apparent that the new reality, which emphasizes the coexistence and interconnection of different cultures, makes it clear that society is moving towards a pluralistic society. This society will not separate or assimilate its members into the prevailing mainstream but will ensure individual freedoms and rights while simultaneously safeguarding interaction among them. It will not interfere with individuals' natural choices regarding language, religion, and customs, ensuring the seamless execution of the above wherever and whenever individuals desire it, as the goal of existing practices.

4. School Leadership

This change towards a pluralistic society of interculturalism can be achieved through education. In this context, school leadership plays a crucial role, both in ensuring individuality and independence and in fostering a spirit of respect and smooth interaction with diversity within the sphere of educational reality, reflecting a better society in the future characterized by similar virtues. School leadership is defined as 'the set of behaviors used by a school principal to influence behavior and effectively transmit the school's mission to the staff, parents, students, and the community' (Pasiardis, 2004). The concept of school leadership embodied in the person of the principal is considered to play a significant role in inclusive education as a 'multi-dimensional process that utilizes the knowledge and skills of educators, students, and parents with the goal of achieving common educational objectives' (Kollias & Hatzopoulos, 2013).

It should be emphasized that in the new inclusive education frameworks, the distributed leadership model opposes centralized management models that place the school principal as the sole leader within the school context. Instead, in distributed leadership, the principal shares leadership responsibilities with a network of educators.

According to Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006), for a school organization to be successful, its educational leaders need to possess specific leadership capabilities, which can be summarized as follows: a. Building a vision and setting directions, b. Understanding and developing people, c. Redesigning the organization, and d. Managing the instructional and learning program.

Based on the above excerpt, school leaders should be able to build a vision and define directions for the inclusion of refugees, highlighting inclusive policies in this specific case. This vision should be grounded in the equally important virtue of understanding the people around them, including educators, parents, and students, as well as actively listening to the issues that concern them.

All of the above have particular significance in the current socio-economic situation prevailing in many European countries. It should be emphasized that the school leadership faces a very challenging task in cultivating a culture of inclusion among all educators. Some educators may only be partially willing to assist in the inclusion of refugees in the school environment because they are compelled to do so by state laws, even if they do not believe in or consider this endeavor achievable. Deep-rooted beliefs among educators that children with migration backgrounds cannot be included in mainstream schools could pose significant problems and potentially lead to the exclusion of these children from education.

On a second level, school leaders have the responsibility to cultivate a sense of inclusion and a willingness to cooperate among both refugee parents and parents of native populations. This can be particularly challenging in many cases due to the rise of extreme political ideologies that view refugees as a threat to integrity and identity. Additionally, deeply rooted racist and divisive perspectives, exacerbated by economic hardships in many countries, paint refugees as a primary source of unemployment and poverty in the modern world. The school principal should take steps to address such prejudices towards refugees and create a positive climate of welcome and cooperation that will aid, rather than undermine, their efforts to include all students.

Finally, there should be a redesign of goals, actions, and curricula in such a way that respects the individual needs of all members, values diversity, allows for individuality to exist and evolve independently from the whole, and promotes smooth coexistence and interaction in a harmonious and constructive manner. According to Tsiakkiro and Pasiardis (2012), these goals should cover three elements: suitability, applicability, and acceptability. Additional virtues of a school leader are described as follows: trust, respect, active listening, active participation, and support for inclusive practices (e.g., professional development activities, personalized program design) and justice toward all members of the school community (Billingsley, McLeskey & Crockett 2014).

It's worth noting that the researchers mentioned above mainly focused on the leadership abilities of school leaders in inclusive settings in relation to students with disabilities or specific syndromes. However, it is observed that the virtues needed for the inclusion of students from different ethnic backgrounds in mainstream schools are encouraged by the same conditions of leadership actions.

5. Children's voices

The once marginalized perspective of students is called upon to play a key role in decision-making in inclusive education and especially in intercultural educational policy. Children themselves, who are the protagonists of education, are often

pushed to the sidelines and are asked to passively accept decisions made by others, such as policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and experts from various fields. The views of children themselves, as well as how they experience coexistence with children from other cultures and backgrounds, should be taken seriously when planning educational practices and changes in the curriculum. This ensures the adoption of the new curriculum by all those responsible for its creation. Furthermore, students are given the opportunity to be heard and express their opinions responsibly and consciously, which can have very positive results in fostering empathy, both towards the educational process and towards the educators themselves.

In their study Brid O'Brien, Dympna Tuohy, Anne Fahy, and Kathleen Markey (2019), explored how students themselves experienced their educational coexistence with students from different ethnic groups. The results of the study showed that minority group students immediately recognized the benefits of their coexistence with other students in the classroom, such as gaining knowledge about the cultural situation of the dominant group which would offer motivation to them. On the other hand, dominant group students needed more time to come to the same conclusions.

According to the research of Maria Yarosh, Dane Lukic, Rosa Santibáñez-Gruber (2018), students' needs regarding intercultural study programs can be summarized as knowledge, perception, skills, and attitudes toward diversity. Analyzing these components, students considered that they need knowledge about the new country and procedural issues related to studies, such as bureaucratic matters, as well as cultural aspects like acceptable clothing or how to introduce themselves to other classmates. Students also expressed the need to be aware of situations in the new country. While they acknowledged that some aspects of perception come from everyday experience, they wanted to know how certain behaviors could lead to negative reactions from students of different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, students wished to develop productive skills, including teamwork abilities and leadership skills within a multicultural environment. As for attitudes, they emphasized the importance of openness to diversity, nonjudgmental views towards others, and a positive disposition for accepting and interacting with students who are different from themselves.

These findings highlight the significance of preparing students for coexistence in intercultural environments. These needs should be considered when designing curricula and teaching practices that promote better understanding and coexistence among different cultures.

As for the refugee students, which is the focus of this study, it's important to note the very different challenges they have to face. These children mostly come from countries that were in a state of war, and it's highly likely that they have experienced post-war stress and traumatic situations. Even during their journey to reach Greek territory, according to studies in the field, unaccompanied children are described as "the most vulnerable... (and may) become victims of abuse during the journey, including sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and even become victims of illegal trafficking and human trafficking due to their already disadvantageous position" (Sgoura, Manesis, Mitropoulou, 2018). Furthermore, even when they arrive in the host country, they are forced to live on the streets, fearing the risk of deportation, and sometimes they are compelled to engage in "sexual work or other illegal activities in order to secure money" (Sgoura, Manesis, Mitropoulou, 2018).

Often, the percentages of these children and the consequences they face due to the very harsh experiences they have endured, both during their journey and their stay as well as their struggle for survival, are alarming. "High levels of trauma are exhibited by almost half of these children (45%), showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.) and reporting symptoms of depression (44%)... They have serious needs in terms of physical health, including forms of disability. More than 70% of these children have experienced death in their family, often in a harsh manner. Furthermore, 60% of the children have witnessed acts of violence, and 30% have experienced shootings and physical violence" (European Parliament, 2016. Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015, as cited in Sgoura, Manesis, Mitropoulou, 2018).

According to the data described in the article, all these traumatic situations experienced by refugee children have multiple negative effects on their mental well-being and perception. Specifically, "exposure of minors to violence, the death of close relatives or even parents or siblings, and the sudden separation from the family burden their psychological condition and reinforce their low self-esteem... They report daily psychosomatic pains in extremities and frequent headaches... tend to have higher levels of behavioral or emotional difficulties, including aggression and other emotional disorders" (Dryden-Peterson, 2015. Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015. Watkins & Zyck, 2014, as cited in Sgoura, Manesis, Mitropoulou, 2018).

The teacher in the classroom should be very attentive to the issues that concern these students and show particular understanding for their needs, as they will be very different from the needs of the other students. Additionally, the majority of refugee students reside in refugee camps and reception centers (hot spots) along with other refugees, where conditions may not be suitable for children of this age. Specifically, the situations prevailing in the Reception Centers

are such that "there are quite a few problems, both in terms of environmental conditions and in terms of their connectivity to other key service points for refugees" (Ministry of Rural Development and Food, 2016). All of this information, in conjunction with the feelings of insecurity and non-acceptance that refugee children may experience, makes it necessary to take proactive measures that will support their education in regular schools alongside their peers.

6. Inclusion recommendations

Taking into consideration the challenges of the new era, in combination with the students' proposals and the school leadership's commitment to inclusion and cooperation, educators are called upon to implement all these suggestions. The ultimate goal is to involve all students in the educational process and cultivate empathy among all students as successfully as possible.

The significant findings of Nikolaou's research in 2014, which indicate a high percentage of foreign students being victims of school bullying, underscore the importance of a targeted educational strategy through Civil Education. The aim is to enable students to develop an open-minded attitude, strengthen their empathy, and develop "a willingness to interpret knowledge and values about Others in a multi-perspective way within the framework of a democratic culture" (Bruner, 1990, as cited in Nikolaou, 2014). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the significant role of education in promoting 'Citizenship' and 'Peace Education' as a means of preventing school bullying. This approach is related to values and behaviors that enhance social acceptance (Brewer et al., 2008)

The ultimate goal of all the above is to transform the school into a space for shaping free, democratic, and tolerant consciousness that can resist undemocratic deviations (Nikolaou, 2014). This aligns with what Ramírez (2016) defines as the creation of a 'smart city,' where there is no place for racist or divisive ideologies. Instead, this city is characterized by the need for all individuals to maintain their individual identity and the elements that define them, both individually and socio-culturally. It also fosters a disposition for coexistence and mutual understanding, marked by creative interaction and collaboration (Ramírez, 2016).

The participatory role of refugee families in the school's educational policy is seen as crucial, as it can help build interpersonal relationships "among children, teachers, and their families to create dynamics of collectiveness and mutual acceptance" (Rengi, 2017). To achieve this, Rengi (2017) suggests organizing school activities based on the traditions, customs, and values of the students' countries of origin, as well as events to support refugee families. Furthermore, it could be beneficial to establish Greek language learning classes for the families of foreign students with the voluntary contribution of educators, parent associations, and organizations.

All of these exercises and activities, in addition to fostering awareness and a sense of acceptance among the entire student and parental population, can also be seen as essential in strengthening the national consciousness of refugees. The goal of intercultural education is not only to integrate refugees into the dominant culture but also to help them preserve their national identity intact. Specifically, educators are encouraged to use group games and activities aimed at fostering empathy throughout the student body, as well as a more experiential approach to multilingualism and interculturality through group collaborative activities (Kaga, n.d.)

7. The role of digital technologies

Last but not least, we emphasize the significance of digital technologies in the educational domain and refuges inclusion, which are very productive and successful, and how they facilitate and improve assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [27-30], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [31-50], and AI, STEM, Games and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [51-58]. Additionally, ICTs are being improved and combined with theories and models for cultivating emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and metacognition [59-92], accelerates and improves more than educational practices and results, especially in minority children, treating domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

8. Conclusion

From the above analysis of intercultural education, it becomes evident that inclusive education within the context of refugee students is a multidimensional and a relatively new issue for Greek standards. Based on all the analyses, the primary goal of the educational system should be interculturality rather than multiculturalism, with an emphasis on preserving the distinct cultural elements of ethnic groups and ensuring interaction among students with different

cultural backgrounds. To make this clear, a brief description of the prevailing political conditions was recorded, and some points that require improvement were observed. These areas can be improved through effective and constructive leadership, which should operate with clear goals, a comprehensive vision, and practical strategies, as described by various researchers who have dealt with this issue.

Furthermore, previously marginalized students who have had a passive role in decision-making by school leadership and the educational system are suggested to be brought to the forefront, and the expression of their opinions is encouraged. These opinions should be taken into account in decision-making and strategic planning. Considering all the above elements, the use of practices that contribute to the cultivation of acceptance of diversity and the removal of any prejudices within the entire student body is recommended. Additionally, educators should ensure the existence of ethnic differences and emphasize the promotion of ethnic diversity.

With a focus on the smooth adaptation of refugee students to the Greek reality, respecting their cultural becoming and emphasizing the need for interaction with Greek students, the Greek educational system, along with other European countries, can foster a new culture of acceptance and respect for diversity.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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