



## SUPPORTING EMOTIONALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY THE REFUGEE CHILDREN IN GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOL

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### Abstract

*As Greece is a big draw for refugees the latest years, it is called to deal with a massive wave of refugees, which has never known before. The new reality, which comes from the enormous population transfer, demands school adjustment as well as the creation of new educational intervention from school teachers, so that the little refugees can be psychologically supported in order to cope with the new challenges and difficulties they have to face. The intercultural education promotes respect towards other nation's cultures by approaching any cultural difference equally and positively. School teachers play such an important role for an efficient educational support offering intercultural communication, emotional safety, and psychological support to little refugees, so that they won't, by no means, be cut off from the community.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural education, intercultural respect, school, refugees, psychological support*

### Introduction

The ever-increasing influx of refugees in Greece, due to the easy entry into the country (Michael, 2010), has made the need to change education to intercultural education greater, as the influx of refugee streams has yielded a multilingual and multicultural dimension (Kassimis & Kassimi, 2004). Due to the heterogeneity observed, it is possible that there may be fear of the unknown, the different and discriminations, and tensions may arise. In this context, it is a necessity to take into account the refugee student population and their particular needs (Damanakis, 2000). It is also necessary to ensure that all children of refugee origin are admitted to primary school as soon as possible, in order to give them the opportunity for education and integration into society. Although school is a means of social integration, it also functions as a mechanism of social exclusion (Chatzinikolaou, 2015). Intercultural education gives the opportunity for different cultural groups to actively participate in society within an environment of commonly accepted values, practices, and procedures (Gotovos, 2002). The teacher is called upon to harmonize and enhance interaction and cooperation between students from different cultural backgrounds and native students, not only within the classroom but also within the school environment in general (Govaris, 2004). Thus, the Greek school is gradually becoming multicultural as a result of changes in

society (Govaris, 2005), supporting and empowering refugee children emotionally and psychologically, integrating them into the society they are called upon to grow up in. To support students with different cultural backgrounds, the teacher is required to learn to respect the different needs of refugee children, in order to combat social inequalities through educational activities (Emin & Oeuvarard, 2006), as well as to take into account children's pre-existing knowledge and abilities, adopting a constructive model to support their learning (Piaget, 1983).

### 1. Cultural diversity and intercultural education

Diversity refers to the differentiation of a social group from the dominant population and is defined as "the set of traditions, norms, experiences, ideas, and values that differ from nation to nation, between ethnic groups and people speaking different languages" (Gotovos, 2003).

Nowadays, precisely because of the increasing number of refugees, there is an accelerating increase in diversity in all its forms, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural. The latter form is perhaps the most complex since it refers to codes of values and attitudes to life. Through cultural diversity, differentiating characteristics of individuals, such as colour, language, religion, can potentially become elements of exclusion and



social marginalisation from the dominant population (Gefou - Madianou, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to promote and improve links between people of different socio-cultural origins (Leeman & Reid, 2006), so that through the interaction between the multiculturally heterogeneous members that make up society, the smooth integration of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can take place (Damanakis, 2000). As far as the institution of the school is concerned, intercultural education is called upon to manage this heterogeneity by treating it not as a deficit but as a difference, offering many benefits to the educational community (Emke-Poulopoulou, 2007). In addition, intercultural education can be an opportunity to reverse inequalities, taking into account linguistic diversity, communication difficulties, giving attention to other languages and cultures in order to activate students' critical thinking with the purpose to prepare them for a multicultural society (Anagnostopoulou, 2001). This approach through the implementation of educational activities promotes an education with equal opportunities for all and a life full of skills (Paleologou - Gikopoulou, 2005). It is expected that equality of educational opportunities for minority populations will bring about equality at all levels, therefore leading to the removal of social inequalities and avoiding the marginalisation of minorities (Damanakis, 2000). Due to that fact, teachers are called upon to respectfully manage the cultural diversity of the student population (Vergioti, 2010), preparing children for a society of diversity through intercultural education, which seeks to consolidate their cultural identity and promotes the learning of their mother language (Hoff, 1995).

In conclusion, the use of intercultural education is considered necessary, because it aims at the coexistence of people from different cultural backgrounds, as well as at the preservation of the cultural identity of all students, respecting their particularities. As a result, xenophobia, suspicion, fear, anger, and a sense of threat are avoided, as it achieved the peaceful coexistence of different people, forming a bridge of communication between them (Benekos, 2007).

## 2. Difficulties of adaptation of refugee children in Greek school

The right to education, an undeniable and vital right for the development of every child (Advocate for Children, 2018), is also the right of every refugee child in the Greek territory. However, these children experience difficulties in adapting to their new environment. The main difficulty of adaptation is the instability of the refugee population, as they are forced to constantly change their place of residence, as many refugee families have not chosen Greece as their permanent place of residence but hope to continue their journey in other parts of Europe (Tomara, 2017), while those who remain in the country are often forced to move within the country. The difficulty in communication and the inability to understand and use the Greek language by refugee children can greatly affect their performance, since it creates problems both in attending the lessons of the class they belong to and in their smooth integration in the school context so that they are

considered as weak students due to their total or partial ignorance of the language of the host country (Kessidou, 2008). The difficulty of language communication on the part of parents and their lack of contact with the school is another barrier to the adaptation of refugee children. Communication and cooperation with foreign parents contributes to students' success at school (Cummins, 2005) and fosters trust building (Androussou et al., 2001).

Also, deep-rooted stereotypes lead to the phenomenon of "xenophobia" (Michalopoulou, 2010), the unpleasant memories the refugee children carry with them and are unable to manage (Konstantinidis et al., 2013), as well as psychological traumas lead to low concentration and high dropout rates (Tomara, 2017).

An important problem on the part of teachers is the lack of intercultural competence and preparation in managing the cultural and linguistic capital of refugee children in the classroom (Balamanidou & Pozoukidis, 2010), as well as the lack of training and in-service training of teachers, given that their specific characteristics require differentiated management and teaching strategies (Hamilton & Moore, 2004).

Finally, a major problem is the Curriculum, which needs to be restructured and constantly renewed in order to provide opportunities both for the development of language and communication skills and for the familiarization of students with multilingualism and cultural diversity, aiming to ensure conditions for social justice, equality and respect for cultural and linguistic differences.

## 3. The crucial role of the teacher in the social integration of refugee children

Refugee children grew up in extremely adverse conditions, were on the road away from their familiar environment, experienced traumatic events both in their country of origin and during their movement to our country, stressing their physical and mental health (Pantazis, 2015). The above elements represent one of their greatest peculiarities, which also define them as students. Intercultural education is the form of education that is called upon to manage and deal with problems that arise in the multicultural school. Research by Keating & Ellis, (2007), identified schools as strong systems for providing mental health and care services to refugee children, as education is considered to contribute to the protection of children's healthy psychosocial development and social cohesion (Education in Emergencies, 2018).

The role of the teacher focuses on respecting cultural diversity, getting rid of stereotypes and prejudices (Damanakis, 1997), (Govaris, 2001), and reflects the important responsibility for shaping the future society (E.C., 2006). Two crucial concepts are intercultural competence and intercultural readiness, which the teacher must possess. The first refers to "all theoretical, scientific, research and teaching knowledge that the teacher has concerning cultures, languages, living conditions, etc. of people from other countries" (Georgogiannis, 2010) and the second refers to "the

teacher's ability to meet the special requirements imposed by the composition of the student population in a classroom in which students with different linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics from Greek students attend" (Kossyvaki, n.d.). Therefore, the teacher performs the role of organizer and leader of group activities, without excluding any student from any activity, with the ultimate goal of creating an environment of communication, coordinating and encouraging the students (Georgogiannis, 2000). He has a guiding and supportive role, as it discovers the needs of students and bases the learning process on them, highlighting the existence, values, and respect for diversity (Manou, 2013). According to Huffman & Speer (2000), children's development is achieved in an environment where there is an emotional connection. When children feel that they are in a supportive environment they can successfully respond to the learning process and achieve personal goals. Teachers have the ability to influence students positively or negatively (Askouni, 2003). The positive approach to cultural diversity in primary school requires the creation of a learning environment, where the main goal of intercultural teaching is to reshape the social relations of all students (Govaris & Manousou, 2015).

Thus, it becomes clear that the role of the teacher in intercultural education is a difficult and quite demanding task, which builds the identity and cognitive acquisition of refugee and indigenous children, providing them with the appropriate stimulation to develop social relations based on tolerance, respect for diversity, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence, creating integrated and healthy psycho-emotional personalities of socially integrated future citizens.

#### 4. In place of epilogue

As the presence of refugees in Greek society has created a "cultural diversity" (Fista, 2012), and since a large part of the refugee population hosted by our country consists of children, teachers are called upon to aim at breaking down the perception that "as long as there are different cultures, can't exist equality among them" (Emerson, 2011). The school as well as the teachers, taking into account the educational needs of the student population coming from different socio-cultural environments and with strong heterogeneity, overcoming any difficulties of their integration, strengthening mutual respect and acceptance of their diversity, put into practice the goals of intercultural education, preparing refugee children as citizens of an equal multicultural society, where phenomena of social pathogenesis, conflicts, xenophobia, violence do no longer constitute an obstacle to their integration.

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