Refugee education in Greece: integration or segregation?

Giorgos Simopoulos and Antonios Alexandridis

The closure of the 'Balkan route' in the spring of 2016 has trapped around 21,000 children in Greece. Although education policies have been devised to integrate these children into the Greek education system, these policies have actually led to some students being segregated.

In March 2016, Greece's Ministry of Education was tasked with formulating a plan for integrating refugee children into the educational system. Three options were proposed:

- to integrate all refugee students into public schools, providing support based on the existing institutional framework for students with migrant backgrounds
- to create Special Educational Structures within the reception centres where refugees live
- to develop a 'bridge system' between the first two options.

One might have expected the Greek authorities to have drawn upon their more than 25 years of experience acquired from integrating migrant students, including the development of supportive mechanisms such as reception classes, and the experience and skills gained by teachers from teaching in multilingual environments. Such experience could have been utilised to support and strengthen integration, inclusion and intercultural interaction. A considerable proportion of educators, solidarity groups and communities of activists recognised this experience and supported the immediate enrolment of all refugee students in public schools, without exception.

However, the Ministry of Education, which has ultimate decision-making power, opted to create a system of afternoon classes within public schools, creating a segregated school for a particular group of students. The school year 2016–17 was designated 'pre-integrational' or 'transitional', and involved the following features:

- the development of preschool education programmes inside reception centres
- the creation of Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFRE) for children living in reception centres;[1] these would operate in nearby primary and secondary schools, with teaching taking place between 14:00 and 18:00, after the end of the regular school day
- the integration of refugee children living in urban locations into the regular morning classes of local schools, with the support of reception classes.

The aim was for students ultimately to progress from RFREs into the reception classes of public schools, either when their families were transferred from reception centres to urban accommodation managed by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, or after the students had completed a year of study in an RFRE.

Challenges in practice

A number of persistent problems, however, became evident in the first year of RFRE implementation. For a population that is by definition on the move, the plan created inflexible structures. For example, teachers (a majority of whom were part-time substitute teachers) were assigned to teach in specific RFREs and so were unable to continue teaching those pupils who were subsequently moved from some reception centres to others with better living conditions.

There were many negative reactions to the planning and operation of RFREs, although for opposing reasons. On one hand, part of the educational community supported the full integration of refugee

students into formal public schools, without exception, highlighting the dangers that they felt would be created by the development of a parallel system. On the other hand, some groups of parents voiced xenophobic attitudes and threatened to occupy schools (some actually did so).

Although RFREs were created to minimise the tensions that would arise if refugee students were integrated into the morning hours programme, nevertheless there were many incidents, some of which were violent. By contrast, refugee students living in urban environments were integrated smoothly into reception classes and into the morning hours programme, largely without major incidents, just as migrant students had been before them. The choice of a segregated school, then, instead of serving to soften xenophobic reactions, led to the schools that hosted RFREs being targeted, and stigmatised the refugee population.

The teachers of the RFREs struggled to create an elementary framework of school normality. The practices of ghettoised life that had been created in the reception centres were mirrored in a school experience that was equally disconnected from normality. Those children integrated into the regular morning programme, however, were able to get involved with school practices – able to cooperate and interact. And although RFREs provided certificates of attendance, formal schools offered students a graduation certificate, which facilitates pupils' progression from one class to the next, as well from primary to secondary education.

RFRE students' educational achievements were very limited: without interaction with the Greek-speaking community their language skills did not develop, thereby reducing the students' motivation and reinforcing the public's vilification of them as merely people 'in transit'. Teachers in schools that hosted both afternoon RFREs and students in the morning programme seem to support the view that children who attended normal classes, even those who did not receive special support, covered and learned more over the same period than those attending the RFREs.

Refugee-friendly or refugee-hostile?

The selection of those schools in which RFREs were to be established was based on a system of informal request and consent which saw some schools identified as likely to be 'refugee-friendly' and others 'refugee-hostile'. The school principals and the Regional Directors for Education (the heads of the regional administrative bodies) were then required to formally agree to the establishment of an RFRE, and submit a proposal for final acceptance by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education. Principals were given the power to indicate when they considered the incoming number of students to be too large for their school to accept – a key flaw of this system of informal consent, which led in the 2016–17 and 2017–18 academic years to waiting lists (sometimes many months long) for refugee students to be appointed a school.

Despite legislation confirming the legality of enrolling students with incomplete documents (regardless of the legal status of their families in Greece), the enrolment of children who lived in areas where they were permitted to attend the morning programme was, in many cases, complicated or not guaranteed. For example, students attending morning classes are supported in reception classes for 15 hours per week; the rest of the time they attend the school's mainstream classes, with the aim of gradually moving towards full integration into mainstream school within one to two years. In practice, however, a considerable number of refugee students only attend reception classes and some schools have decided, despite the fact that they are formally enrolled, to discourage children from attending mainstream classes. This has in many cases effectively transformed these reception classes into a segregated system that resembles the RFREs.

Misconceptions and realities

The development of RFREs was based on a number of misconceptions. The first was that what was being undertaken was somehow unprecedented – that the large number of students was hard to manage, that their integration into the morning programme

would create serious negative reactions, and that these children were a group with entirely different characteristics from those migrants who had previously been integrated into the Greek educational system. The second misconception was the idea that as these students had been out of school for several years (some never having attended at all), they would need at least one 'preparatory' year before they could be integrated into the regular morning programme. And the third was the conviction that these children's families rejected the prospect of integration in Greece, and that being in transit and living in unstable conditions were barriers to their children's integration into school.

Except for the lack of stability in terms of living conditions, and the very real problem of overconcentration of students in some schools in central Athens, none of these misconceptions is well substantiated. The number of refugee students is only a small percentage of the 150,000 immigrant (including refugee) students that have been integrated into public schools since 1995, for whom it was not felt necessary to develop a special educational framework. Thousands of students from Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan have been integrated into Greek schools since 2000, without having a special framework created for their education. Moreover, most of the reception centres (with the exception of the large centres such as Elaionas or Skaramagkas) provided the afternoon RFRE classes with 40–100 students during the 2016–2017 school year, a number which could have easily been absorbed in the morning reception classes run by nearby schools.

Recommendations

In order for this segregation to be reversed, and to address the 'lost generation' of students in refugee host countries, the following minimum requirements must be met:

- RFREs not to be established unless there is no alternative (such as for large reception centres whose student populations cannot be absorbed by local schools) and then only as a short-term solution until these students are transferred to morning schools
- the establishment of greater numbers of morning reception classes, which take place within public school hours and should be supported by teachers and social workers to help pupils integrate (despite an increase in such classes in the 2018–19 school year, significant need remains)
- the provision of institutional support for schools and teachers, through training and access to interpreters who speak children's mother tongues
- the lifting of barriers to the enrolment in upper secondary schools and tertiary education of students who lack documentation, and the adoption of this as a standard policy
- the integration of preschool-aged children into public preschool education
- the assurance of progressive transition for students from reception classes to the regular classrooms.

George Simopoulos[2]
giorgosimopoulos@gmail.com
Postdoctoral researcher in intercultural education, University of Thessaly
http://www.ece.uth.gr/main/

Antonios Alexandridis
antoniosalexandridis86@gmail.com
Doctoral candidate in Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam https://fsw.vu.nl/en/departments/social-and-cultural-anthropology

1. All reception centres in Greece (with the exception of one site in Athens) are located outside urban areas.

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