

Challenges and Experiences Regarding Teaching Refugee Students in the Greek State School Classes

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Abstract: The present article is based on a qualitative research focusing on mainstream school classes in Greece, where refugee students are included. More specifically, it investigates how mainstream class teachers handle the fact of having refugee students in their class team: which challenges they meet, which practices they use for language acquisition and inclusion, what they feel or think about teaching to refugee students in the context of the mainstream class. In addition, the study investigated how Covid 19 pandemic affected the way of teaching to refugee students. Both diaries and interviews were used to deeply understand teachers’ experiences. It appears from the data that teachers are willing to facilitate refugee students’ learning and inclusion, but they need more support to overcome the various challenges they face.

Key words: mainstream class, refugee students, challenges, practices, diaries, interviews, Covid 19

1. Introduction

Since 2015, numerous refugees have arrived in Europe. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015), over one million people arrived in Europe in 2015. The war in Syria accounts for the largest number of them. Every year since then, more and more refugees are arriving in this country as it is considered to be a transition point. However, most of them are urged to stay for long, waiting for their papers to be prepared to move on and reunify with their family in another country (Kantzou, Manoli, Mouti & Papadopoulou, 2017). Among refugee people, there are numerous children. Data from UNICEF (2017) show that, in 2016 alone, 63,290 refugee children came to Greece.

In Greece, especially in recent years, the task of including refugee students in the educational process is becoming more and more imperative. Many of them have experienced violence, fear, exploitation, malnutrition or family loss throughout their journey to Europe (Unesco, 2019). This means that many children have not only been deprived from education for a long time (Watkins & Zyck, 2014), but they have also suffered from various traumas during their way coming to the host country. It is crucial that the school becomes a welcoming place for them, a place of safety where they can unlock their potentials and have a successful integration into society (Cummins, 2001). The issue of refugee integration from Syria and the Middle East, which has been at the center of discussions in recent years, initially sought to be resolved in

Greece with the so-called Reception Classes in formal education -ZEP classes- (Michail & Stamou, 2009).

REFUGEE STUDENTS NEEDS

Particular needs of refugee students have not been thoroughly investigated in literature. Most research was concerned with migrant or multicultural educational policies (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Later, when refugee students' education began to gain attention from educational and research communities, refugee students were regarded as a homogeneous group (McBrien, 2005). In other words, refugee students were considered to have the same characteristics and needs, no matter the particular previous experiences they had gone through.

Raising awareness about the refugee students' diverse needs is of great importance in order to approach and respond to them appropriately and let them enjoy their right to education (Arnot & Pinson, 2005). Many refugee children have experienced loss and may have suffered from trauma. Psychological traumas may be expressed as behavioral problems at school (Rutter & Stanton, 2001; Candappa, 2000). In addition, other refugee children find difficulties adjusting to the host country and build a new sense of belonging. The host country's culture is different from what they were used to and they are afraid of becoming victims of racial harassment. (Rutter et al, 2001). As far as their educational needs are concerned, many refugee students have limited educational experience (Rutter et al, 2001). As a result, their age is not equivalent to their cognitive knowledge. Furthermore, when it comes to school, their level of host language acquisition differs significantly, so they have various linguistic needs (Candappa, 2000).

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES

According to Save the Children (2018), most children suffer from psychological traumas which may lead to behavioral issues in class. Also, some of them have been excluded from education for such a long time that now it is much more difficult for them to be included in class once more. Furthermore, all refugee children have difficulties regarding the host country's language acquisition and need extra time for language lessons. Other studies focus on challenges addressed among refugee students specifically in mainstream classes. Watkins Noble and Wong (2018) conducted a qualitative research in Australia, investigating teaching to children with refugee background in the mainstream class from different perspectives. The results show that each one of these children carries different experiences with him/her. So, each case is particular and it is important to find out each student's needs separately. Nevertheless, teachers agree that all students with refugee background need to attend to a short term intensive language acquisition program before their transition to the mainstream class takes place. In addition, according to the majority of the teachers it is very time consuming to develop the required teaching strategies in order for students with refugee background to be included in the mainstream class.

According to other research data (Matthews, 2008), mainstream class teachers declare that it is too hard for refugee students to get along with the others, because of their lower linguistic skills especially in written communication. In many cases, as they report, refugee students feel frustration and disappointment when they cannot succeed in class learning goals. Research has shown that when teachers modify learning goals particularly for refugee students, they may feel punished or excluded from the group (Miller, Mitchel & Brown, 2005). For this reason, it is important that refugee students are encouraged to achieve short term goals which go along with the basic class goals (Matthews, 2008).

The research conducted by Miller, Windle & Yazdanpanah (2014) in Australia concerned the challenges mainstream class meet when planning a lesson for a refugee student and the strategies they use. According to the findings of this research, there is a gap between how teachers plan activities and the approaches proposed for planning activities by academic research. It seems difficult for teachers to set a plan process addressing their refugee students because there is a wide range of student competence in the same class, they have neither time nor specific materials. Also, the curriculum does not clarify specific language goals for students whose home language is different from the one used at school. So, teachers, feeling pressured by time and workload, may come up with almost automatic daily tasks, which lack cohesion with the previous ones. They may randomly select an activity to do rather from setting specific goals first. Several challenges thus seem to emerge from research while the need for further training and counseling is often reported by the teachers themselves, who seem to be aware of the lack of specialized knowledge and skills among them to teach refugee background students (Biasutti, Concina & Frate, 2019).

HOLISTIC APPROACHES FOR INCLUSION

It is crucial that teachers in mainstream classes be responsible not only for enhancing the students' language skills but also for encouraging their development in various subjects (Nusche, 2019). Approaches which include teachers who are interested in students' progress not only in a narrow linguistic context but also in an inclusion one lead us to a holistic model of refugee students' education in mainstream class. From a holistic point of view, in order to achieve an educational progress for these children, it is important to respond to their social and emotional needs in addition to the linguistic ones (Cerna, 2019). These students need to feel safe at school and build relationships within the school community. Interaction with the teacher and the classmates as well as participation in various school activities enhance their sense of belonging and engage them into school processes (Cerna, 2019). These factors can help them adjust better to the new educational system of the host country and feel motivated to develop their learning skills as well. Holistic approaches combine language support with a welcome environment free of racism and good practices for inclusion (Rutter, 2001).

THE GREEK CONTEXT: REFUGEE EDUCATION AND CHALLENGES

In 2016, the Reception Structures for Refugee Education (DYEP) were established in the context of the Greek formal school education, which integrated all juvenile refugees. (Refugee Action, 2016). DYEP classes take place either during afternoon hours in mainstream schools or in refugee camps whereas ZEP classes take place during morning hours in mainstream schools (Mogli, Kalbeni & Stergiou, 2019). These classes aim to facilitate and encourage refugee students to get familiar with the Greek educational processes (Ziomas, Capella & Konstantinou, 2017). According to the Ministry of Education guidelines, refugee students who have an adequate level of Greek language acquisition should be integrated into mainstream classes (Minendu, 2017). As a result, many refugee students are enrolled in mainstream classes, either for certain hours per week –as long as they also attend courses in a ZEP class- or consistently.

In Greece, several studies in recent years investigated teaching refugee children in various class contexts (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021; Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019; Maligoudi, Tsolakidou & Chiona, 2018). A recent research focused on teachers teaching in reception classes (ZEP) and pointed out both the materials they use and the challenges they meet (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021). As far as the materials and the practices are concerned, teachers report not to have received specific instructions or guidance from the board of education (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021). A certain series of books is proposed for reception classes, among others, which is called *Geia sas*. These books are designed to help students who learn Greek language as a second language and they include basic vocabulary/ phrases classified into various contexts -family, school...- (Centre of Intercultural Education, 2007). Nevertheless, many adaptations are needed to serve various students' needs. Most of them prefer to create their own material (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021). Some of the challenges stated by teachers are the followings: difficulties in communication with students, difficulties to meet various literacy levels in the same class, lack of support from the authorities (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021).

Another study conducted in Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (DIEP) showed that the students' language acquisition progress was limited because there was no interaction with native Greek speakers and refugee students lacked motivation when speaking Greek (Simopoulos et al, 2019).

Just a few studies have been conducted so far concerning teaching refugees in mainstream classes in Greece. Maligoudi et al (2018) investigated mainstream class teachers' views towards bilingualism as a tool to include refugee students and enhance their language skills. Data from their research reveal that even though teachers claim to be supportive towards their refugee students in mainstream class, they do not usually include them in the learning process. Many of them explain that engaging refugee students in teaching practices may hold back the native students' progress. Likewise, the research of Magos and Prenza (2009) shows that the teachers of their sample characterize the immigrant students as a "danger" for the native students, as problems can be created during teaching.

The home language of bilingual students seems to be set aside by many teachers, who consider that the easiest educational integration is inextricably linked to the fastest learning of the target

language (Griva & Stamou, 2014). Many teachers argument is raised on the issue of their social inclusion, which they believe can occur with their assimilation (Michail & Stamou, 2009). According to a study among teachers in Greece and Cyprus (Skourtou, 2002), it seems that teachers are completely unaware of the importance of the first language in acquiring the target language. The teachers of the research focused on the fact that only the target language should be used in the school as opposed to the mother tongue, as they believe that the mother tongue does not help in the acquisition of Greek. Despite attending training seminars, teachers do not easily revise their existing views on the educational inclusion of refugee students (Skourtou, 2002). In addition, many teachers seem to express the view that bilingual students should speak a second language in the family environment to avoid language interference and confusion (Karabenick & Clemens Noda, 2004). According to a study about foreign language teachers' views towards having refugee students in their class (Stathopoulou & Dassi, 2020) the most frequently reported challenges were adapting teaching material to refugee students' needs, language barriers which obstruct communication, refugee students' traumatic previous experiences and their low level of literacy. Also, almost half of the Greek teachers reported that they prepare their own educational material for the refugee students, even though Ministry of Education provides certain material. The use of visual material, the respect students' home language and teachers' positive attitude are mentioned in the research as good strategies for refugee students' inclusion.

Studies among teachers working in formal education contexts show that the teachers believe they are not sufficiently prepared to address the needs of refugee students as they lack the knowledge and skills necessary in order to implement inclusive practices for the academic and psychological support of these students (Mogli et al., 2020). This lack of intercultural awareness and competence of teachers is shown as an additional challenge for them so as to deal with native children's prejudices against immigrant and refugee children at school (Mogli et al., 2020; Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019). According to Gkaintartzi et al. (2019) study of postgraduate students who were also professional teachers, they tend hesitate to include their students' linguistic repertoires in their classroom in a systematic way in their everyday teaching practices,

NARRATIVES AND DIARIES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Narrative research is used in studies of educational rehearsal and experience, primarily since teachers, are narrators who separately and communally chief storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative research is the study of how human beings understand the world, and narrative researchers assemble these stories and write narratives of knowledge (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Considering the fact that people are natural story-tellers, it is easy for them to share a story. They tend to say the truth and they usually give an analytic description of what they experienced. That means more data for the researcher to analyze. In addition, through their voices or their words, hidden meanings are gathered, which helps to get a better understanding of a phenomenon (Butina, 2015).

Teachers’ insights of their own classroom experiences and the way they are reproduced upon and understood constitute a noteworthy factor in the development and re-arranging of teachers’ primary principles about teaching and learning. «*Diaries are instances of teacher narratives which can contribute to constructing professional knowledge, as they record and interpret teachers’ stories in a systematic fashion and are contextualized within the teacher’s working environment*» (Bryman, 2004, pp. 32). In terms of diary information gathering, regularly verified entries provided a chance to perceive the participants’ principles and track them as closely as possible to when and how they arisen.

2. The study

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present research was conducted in the context of the postgraduate program "Language Education for Refugees and Migrants" offered by the Hellenic Open Univeristy, throughout the academic years 2020-2021. It aims to understand how teachers reflect on their experience in a mainstream class of Greek state schools, which includes refugee children as well in its student population. In specific the research questions were:

Which challenges do teachers face?

Which practices do they use for language acquisition?

Which practices do they use for the refugee student’s inclusion?

What do they think or feel towards teaching to refugee students?

In which ways did Covid 19 influence their teaching towards refugee students?

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study are mainstream primary school class teachers in Greece. Six teachers-one woman and five men- took part in the research. They all work in public primary schools in urban areas in Greece (Three of them are located in Katerini -Kirilos, Themis , Nasos- , two of them work in Athens -Ermioni, Iakovos-and Pavlos works in Iraklio). They are mainstream class teachers who teach in 5th or 6th grade class in this school year. All participants work at different schools with each other and almost all of them have one refugee student in their mainstream class. A convenience sampling method was used, as teachers who were easily accessible were selected (Sedgwick, 2013). The table below includes each teacher’s profile. Pennames are used instead of their real ones.

Table 1: Teachers' profile

Teachers' profile						
	Ermioni	Kirilios	Pavlos	Iakovos	Themis	Nasos
Genre	F	M	M	M	M	M
Age	54	36	31	59	53	53
Work experience	32	14	7	31	21	21
Upper level of education	Bachelor degree	Master's degree	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree
Specialization in multicultural education	12-hours seminar	-	-	-	-	40-hours seminar
Specialization in refugee education	-	Master in refugee education	-	-	-	-

RESEARCH TOOLS

Two different research tools are used in this survey to collect narrative data of the participants' stories. The first one is the diary: a tool that a teacher can use to verbalize and structure his/her inner thoughts and feelings. Keeping diary in the class allows the teacher to write down contemporaneous facts that may be forgotten if not written immediately. As a result, through diaries, the researcher gains data not easily accessible (Debreli, 2011). Also, it promotes the teachers' reflections as they become more aware of their role in the class (Gabrys, 2012). After the phase of keeping diaries, interviews followed. Diaries' data had already been analyzed in a tentative level and various issues had come up to be elaborated during the interview. The follow-up interviews offered the chance to question about what lies behind the participants' narratives -where they did not mention the reasons why they believed something- and to approve of what they had written in order to accomplish a reliable clarification of their narratives (Patton, 2002).

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The teachers in this present survey were required to keep a diary for three weeks –from the 2nd of November to the 20th of November- and write down their experiences concerning the teaching of the refugee student in their mainstream class. During the phase of writing diaries – after the second week had been completed- schools were closed because of the measures to control the transmission of Covid 19 pandemic reasons. The teachers continued teaching their classes through the online learning platform WebEx. So, they also continued keeping diary during their first week of online teaching.

The diary was semi-structured and based on the structure Avgitidou (2011) used in her own research grounded in educational field, too. The guidelines given to the teachers are the following:

Teachers' diary:

A. Learning progress

- Which is his/her learning progress?
- Has he/she participated in the learning procedure today?
- What have I done to help him/her today? Which are the results?
- What have I done successfully and what not?
- What could I have done differently?
- Do I need some help (from school, parents...)?

B. Relations with others

- How has his/her day been today in relation to the other classmates?
- Has something particular happened today?
- What have I done? Which are the results?
- What have I done successfully and what not?
- What could I have done differently?
- Do I need some help (from school, parents...)?

C. Thoughts and feelings

- How I have I felt concerning the refugee student today?
- Which are my thoughts on his learning progress?
- Which are my thoughts on my way of teaching?

Keeping a diary requires the submission of our soul, our thoughts and our feelings. Feel free to write down all of your thoughts.

DATA ANALYSIS

After having collected narrative data from both diaries and interviews, methodological triangulation followed. It is a process that combines data collected using two or more different tools (Denzin, 1970). The triangulation method enables cross-checking, enhances confirmation and increases the validity of the research (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). Data were analyzed through narrative thematic analysis. This kind of analysis focuses on the narratives’ content and includes five different stages: organizing collected data, finding basic meanings, coding, creating specific categories based on the data collected and, finally, interpretation of this data (Butina, 2015).

3. Results

Starting with the refugee students’ profile, the following table shows the diversity of their educational experiences and their behavioral characteristics, according to what teachers said concerning them.

Table 2: Students profile

Refugee students’ profile						
	Fatme	Kisan	Moxamet	Ilai	Aysa	Sahi
Gender	F	M	M	M	F	F
Age	11	10	12	12	10	12
Country of origin	Syria	Irak	Syria	Syria	Irak	Irak
Continuous education provided before	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Not sure
Years in Greece	2	2	2	3	2	2
Taking language lessons in reception classes (zep class)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Table 3. Refugee students’ profile: behavior at school

Fatme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kind • Willing to learn • Gets easily insulted and turns upon herself • She narrates the difficulties she has been through when coming to Greece in an unsentimental way. • She has girl friends in class but she stays out of the team games during school breaks.
Kisan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uninterested in learning • Interested only in talking about his religion • He shows dispassion when getting injured unlike other kids of his age. • He plays with all his classmates during school breaks.
Moxamet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiet • Gets easily insulted and turns upon himself • Afraid of being considered ridiculous when speaking in Greek • Most times, he hesitates to join team games during school breaks.
Ilai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He feels safe at school. • Willing to learn at school but not study his homework • He gets easily insulted and feels unappreciated. • He enjoys his classmates’ company during school breaks.
Aysa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kind • She keeps distance from her classmates during school breaks. She prefers socializing with her relatives.
Sahi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kind and respectful • Willing to learn • Feeling uncomfortable when standing close to boys because of her culture

All of the students are aged from 10 to 12 years old and they come from either Syria or Irak. For the most of them this is their second year in Greece. Only for Ilai this is the third one. Continuous education has not been provided to all before coming to Greece. Also, not all of them take extra language lessons in zep class this year. Much heterogeneity can be deduced among the students’ behavior. According to their teachers, some of them get more easily insulted than others. Many of them avoid team games during school breaks either because they feel insecure about their language skills or for cultural reasons, which demand girls and boys to play separately.

Today Sahi feels more comfortable in class because the two Iraqi boys did not come to school. (Nasos, 3/11, diary)

As Nasos reports, Sahi’s family does not approve of the fact that she collaborates with boys at school. He also says that Sahi feels more comfortable in class during the days that the two classmates from Irak do not come at school.

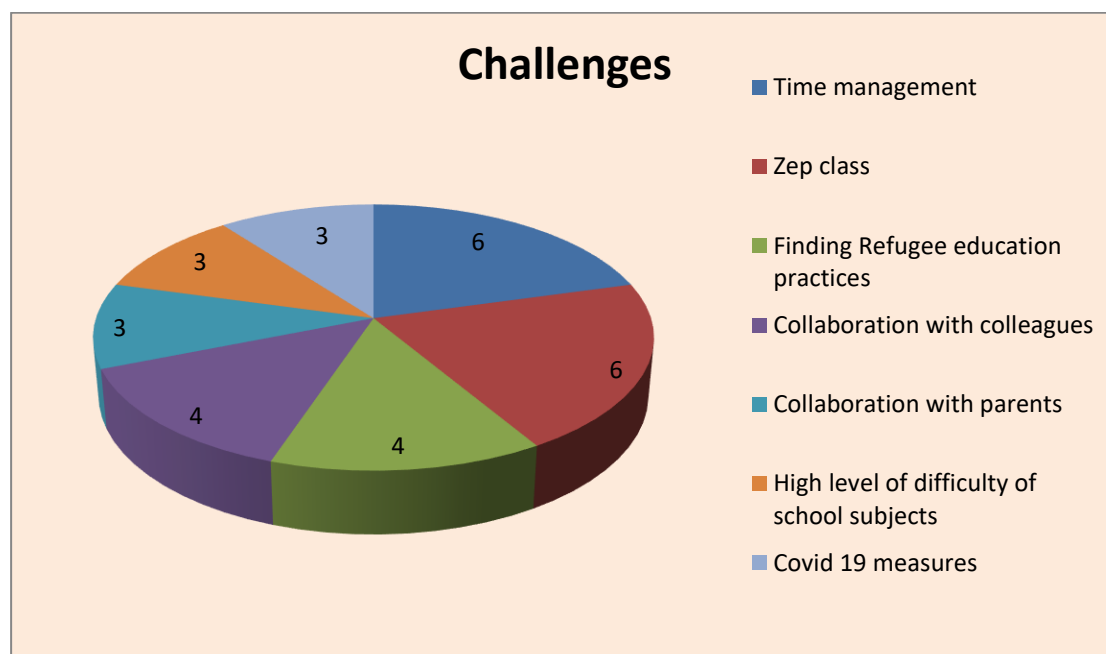
Today Fatme narrated to all of us what she had lived in her country before coming to Greece. What impressed me the most was her self-composure during her narration. How can a child deal with such experiences? I am not sure if Fatme needs more of a teacher or of a psychologist to support her in this phase. (Ermioni, 11/11, diary)

It becomes obvious that cultural characteristics can provoke challenges in a mainstream class. Also, it is of great importance that schools provide effective interventions to help refugee students recover from a previous trauma they experienced and ameliorate their social and learning behavior (National child traumatic stress network, 2005; Steele, 2002).

CHALLENGES

Various challenges that teachers are faced with emerge from the research data , as shown in the following diagram.

Table 3: teachers’ challenges



As it is shown, all of them face issues in managing time. They do not have enough time in order to give further explanations to their refugee students so that they can better understand the content of lesson. The teachers report that they feel very sorry for this situation.

The teacher has already got too many duties in a mainstream class and the time is very limited. (Kirilos, 9/11, diary)

I am suffering whenever I feel I do not have the time to help her, even though I really want to. (Nasos/interview)

Also, all of them agree that taking language lessons in a zep class can support students' language learning.

Attending to zep class is necessary. Especially in upper grade classes, it is very difficult for a mainstream class teacher to teach individually basic language skills to the refugee student. He needs support from a zep teacher (Kirilos/interview)

Another challenge reported concerns special practices for refugee education. Four teachers declaim that they experiment with their practices in order to find ways to help refugee students productively. These teachers also seem to rely on their experience and instinct.

I have not been specialized in refugee education. So I use practices that I feel right through my experience as a teacher. This does not mean that they are the most appropriate ones... Quality seminars are necessary so as not to adopt experimental teaching towards refugee students.” (Iakovos/interview)

Five of the teachers believe that training seminars concerning refugee education could be really useful in order to gain better skills and ameliorate their teaching. Nevertheless, none of them has been enrolled in such a seminar so far for different reasons: either because they are disappointed with the quality that seminars offer or because they want the seminars to be better organized by the State. One of them has not felt the need to search for one until this year.

Collaboration between teachers is considered as another important challenge mentioned by four participants.

I think that some of the other teachers who teach in my class feel anxious when it comes to teaching a refugee student. They do not know how to approach him or adjust their lesson based on him...once a colleague was very strict to Kisan and the student mistakenly supposed that this was happening because he is not Greek. He is more sensitive... I need to mention again that Kisan has been benefited from the great collaboration that I have with the special education teacher in my class. (Iakovos/interview)

Communication among teachers seems to be necessary in order to define the refugee students’ educational needs and understand their emotional state. Also, collaboration among can work productively by sharing useful strategies to approach refugee students.

As far as collaboration with the parents is concerned, none of the teachers has managed to succeed it. Three of them report is as a serious issue, as seen in the exreact below.

I cannot communicate with Fatme’s parents because they do not speak Greek. It is a problem. It is too difficult... I tried to speak with her mother. We could not understand each other. (Ermioni/interview)

The parents’ role is crucial in their children’s educational progress (Park & McHugh, 2014). School administration, social workers and psychologists could form teams to work collaboratively on ways to engage parents in their children’s learning development and progress at school. Regarding the fact that three out of six teachers declare the lack of communication with parents as an obstacle, mostly due to language barrier, it can be implied that mainstream class teachers need to become aware of practices to faciliate home-school partnerships especially with immigrant and refugee parents.

Three teachers report the high level of difficulty of school subjects as a challenge. Ambivalence is raised among the participants concerning which is the most appropriate approach to employ in order to integrate refugee students to a certain level in a mainstream class. On the one hand, they cannot usually cope with the language requirements of the subjects in a high level class in primary school.

I think it is a crime that this student is in a high grade class...The books address children whose native language is Greek. (Nasos/interview)

On the other hand, students are benefited when they are placed in classes of the same age and build friendly relations with children of the same age.

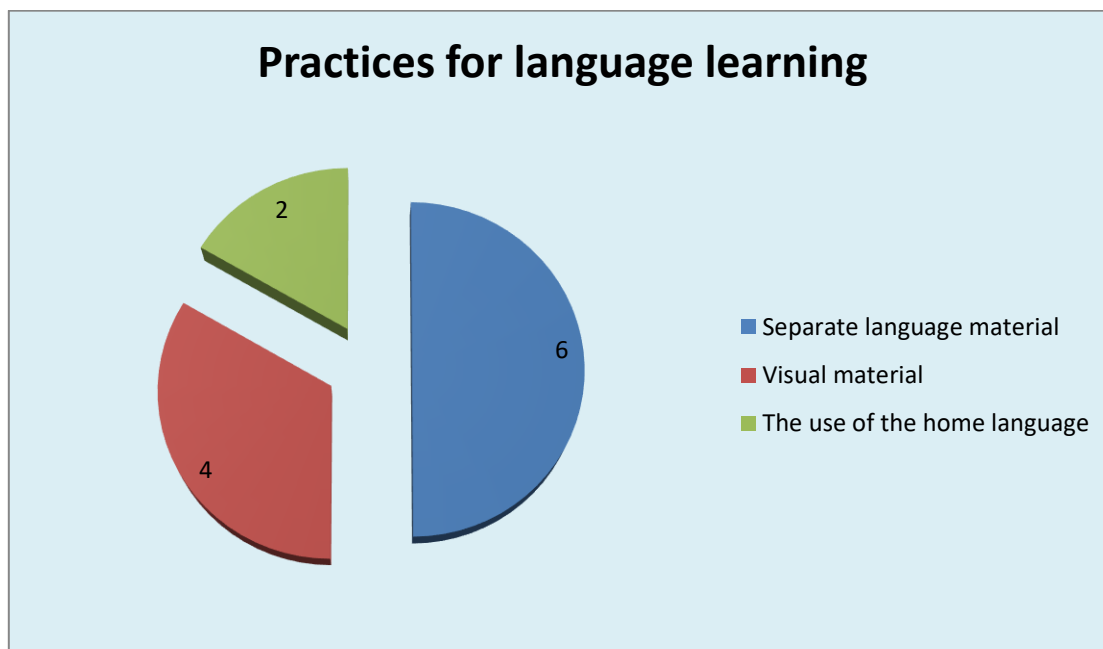
I thing that refugee students need to socialize with students of their age. They feel more comfortable with them” (Kirilos/interview)

As far as the teaching in the mainstream class is concerned –before schools closed- Kirilos, Pavlos and Nasos reported that Covid-19 measures made communication with the refugee students more difficult: either the students could not understand and apply the Covid 19 precautions or it was difficult to teach them without coming closer to them. Wearing a mask also prevented the refugee students from understanding clearly what the teachers explained to them.

PRACTICES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

The following table shows the practices that teachers use for the refugee students’ language learning.

Table 4: Practices for language learning



All teachers use separate language material for their refugee student. Most of them use material from lower grade classes to help students in the language acquisition. This material includes simple, small texts with basic vocabulary or low level grammar exercises. Ermioni uses the books *Geia sas* which are proposed for zep classes.

It is quite noticeable the fact that teachers use extracurricular books or written exercises in a notebook to help their refugee students. Neither of them uses the internet to find educational material. Perhaps manual writing and paperwork is more familiar to them. According to a research conducted by Bishop et al (2005), although teachers agree that the internet is useful for finding supporting ideas and get trained, they actually use to in a very limited degree.

Using visual kind of material either printed or digital is also a very common practice. Teachers find images in relation to the lesson they teach in order to be more understandable or use images when they teach vocabulary to refugee students. They also show images or videos via their computer.

I use computer in history lessons to show maps and timelines. Aysa shows interest and she pays attention to the lesson. She has understood what we are talking about because of the visual support. (Themis, 12/11, diary)

Themis and Kirilos reported that they encourage their refugee students to use their home language in class. Themis encouraged Aysa to use her home language in order to note down the meaning of a Greek word and remember the meaning

Kirilos supports the use of the home language for other kind of pedagogical reasons, as it is shown from the next extract.

I wanted to make him feel that school is a place where we can exchange language characteristics...I remembered Kisan to write for me some Arabic words and explain their meaning because I wanted to learn how to read Arabic words. (Kirilos, 3/11, diary)

The fact that he encourages the use of the home language in class matches with his view towards a refugee student’s inclusion. Kirilos is the only one of the teachers who has a master in Refugee Education, as it is shown from the teachers’ profile table presented before. It can be deduced that his further specialization towards this field has influenced his attitudes along with the practices he use for refugee students.

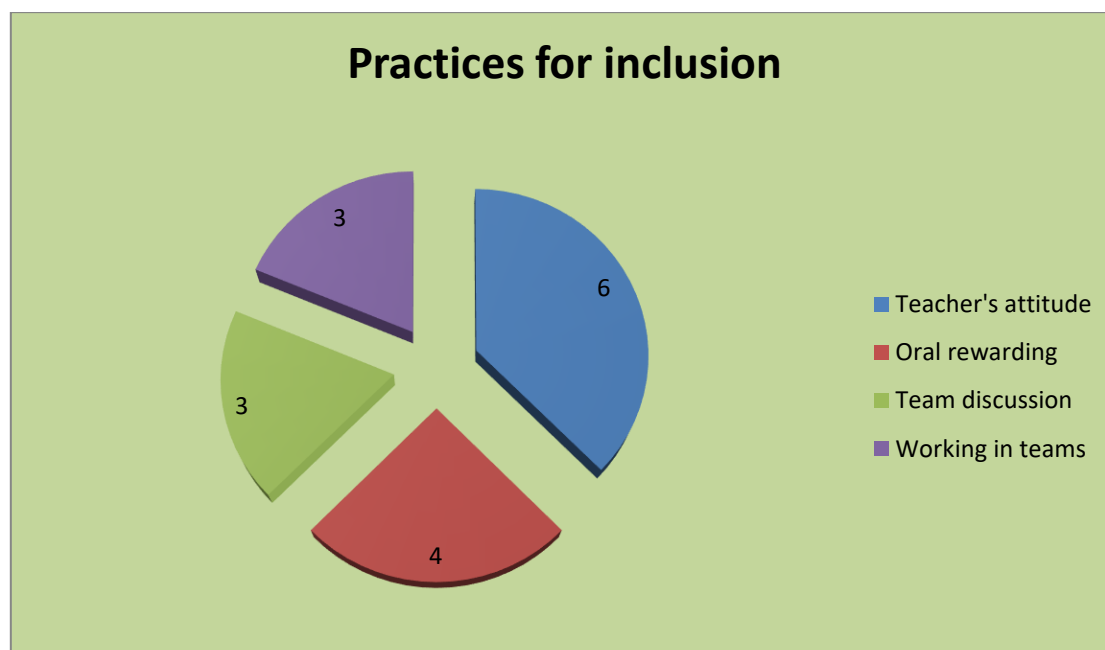
I support the idea of inclusion and not this one of assimilation. Refugee students bring their own experiences and culture when coming in class. It is an opportunity for everyone to exchange experiences, perspectives and broaden our horizons. (Kirilos/interview)

The research data agree with the corresponding ones of the research conducted by Maligoudi et al (2018), according to which, most mainstream class teachers do not use refugee students’ home language into learning procedure.

PRACTICES FOR INCLUSION

Except for the language acquisition practices, the teachers use various practices to engage refugee students in the class team. The following diagram depicts the practices used for inclusion in the mainstream class.

Table 5 : Practices for inclusion



All teachers agree that a teacher’s attitude is crucial in order to succeed in the inclusion of the refugee student. The way they treat them and the way they accept them in the class serves as a guide for the students.

There are 19 students in my class. I am the teacher of all these students, not just of the rest 18 ones.’(Pavlos/interview)

Four of them encourage oral rewards when refugee students participate actively in the learning procedure. The refugee students are overwhelmed with positive feelings when being rewarded for their learning progress. They feel happy and proud. This kind of feelings may work as motivation for more engagement into school.

Only Kirilos and Ermioni reported that they make use of certain theoretical subjects and cultural issues –history, social and civil science, religious education- to incite team discussions and help the refugee students join them. They talk about respecting different religions and cultural characteristics. They also discuss about democracy or refugee matters. In this way, refugee students have the opportunity to share their experiences if they want to or talk about their culture in terms of a respectful context.

Fatme wears a headscarf. At the beginning of the year, this seemed strange to her classmates. Some of them laughed at her. Then all the class had a discussion and I talked to them about the history of the headscarf and the reasons why some people choose to wear it. Since that day, students stopped commenting on Fatme’s headscarf. The students always listen to their teacher. If the teacher accepts well a refugee student, so will they. (Ermioni/interview)

Ermioni talked to the class about a cultural and religion characteristic: wearing a headscarf. Rather than reprimanding the students that laughed at her headscarf, she preferred to explain to them and offer a deep understanding of what a headscarf means to some people. She managed to make students respect Fatme’s choice, as they did not laugh at her again.

Another practice that three of the teachers use is working in teams. More specifically, refugee students take on a certain task that they need to carry out. So, they feel useful while productively practicing in team work at the same time.

Today in class, students were separated into groups of four and their task was to create an advertising poster. Mohamet was included in one of the groups. The other members of this group explained everything about the project to him and asked him if he wants to draw the advertising product on a poster and cut some images to do a collage. He was very happy to be an active part of the team. He cut the images and he showed them to the others to get feedback. The members of the team rewarded them and encouraged him to continue. (Pavlos, 4/11, diary)

DISTANCE LEARNING AND CHALLENGES

The Greek government in order to address the effects of the pandemic, decided on the 13th November the suspension of face to face education (for the second time) and put into operation distance teaching and learning in all schools in the country. Distance learning was structured around three axes, 1) synchronous teaching 2) asynchronous and 3) education television. For the inclusion of all students in the process, it was decided to provide free access from mobile networks to digital platforms for distance education. Various difficulties had arisen concerning the participation of refugee students in this kind of learning. Two common difficulties that the teachers faced were the lack of communication with the refugee students’ parents and the lack of suitable equipment for distance learning. Finally, only two of the six refugee students managed to join the WebEx platform through which all synchronous distance learning was implemented and participate in e-learning. The table below presents some information relating to each case during distance learning.

Table 6 : Participation in distance learning

	Ermioni	Kirilos	Iakovos	Pavlos	Themis	Nasos
Student’s participation	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Reason	Lack of equipment	Lack of communication with parents	The student was not willing – other responsibilities at home	Lack of communication with parents	Cooperation among a professional NGO interpreter and the zep teacher	Cooperation among a professional NGO interpreter and the zep teacher
Zep teacher involved	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

It can be seen that when zep teachers and other specialists were involved, there were better possibilities for refugee students to participate actively in distance learning. Mainstream class teachers were required to inform all parents of their class and prepare their online teaching which is something new for them. They may feel overwhelmed and cannot insist on looking for refugee students’ parents and inform them on their own. They seem to have needed help. Professional interpreters could facilitate collaboration concerning school issues, as long as hiring support teachers for every school where refugee students are enrolled.

4. Discussion

The results of this study show the heterogeneity of refugee students since every refugee student in a mainstream class constitutes a unique case. We cannot address refugee students as they form part of a group with the same characteristics. A profound understanding of their complex backgrounds and their needs is necessary in order to design an effective plan of intervention and support (Block et al, 2014).

It can be concluded that the issue of refugee education in mainstream class needs to be better supported and organized. Refugee students cannot work with the same books and materials that the others students have in the class, because of their different needs. The same issue is reported in other studies, such as Gkaintartzi et al (2021) and Matthews (2008). As two of our participants mention, school books are not yet adjusted to other students except the native ones.

In the research of Biasutti et al (2019) teachers also asked for more targeted materials, such as multi-language books. As shown by Miller et al (2014), the fact that the curriculum does not set specific language goals for students whose home language differs from the one taught at school combined with the factors of time pressure may lead teachers to adopt randomly activities for refugee students without setting goals in advance. It may be necessary that the school books and curriculums be revised in order to include refugee students in a structured and organized way.

Although teachers seem willing to help refugee students, they are not supported to an adequate level to do so. The state could facilitate teachers’ work by revising school books, offering rich and appropriate educational material hiring professionals for support, such as assistant teachers, psychologists, interpreters and mediators. This kind of facilitations would relieve them from stress and time management difficulties. Seminars addressed exactly to their needs can prove themselves very useful, as seen in other studies (Gkaintartzi et al, 2021). Mainstream class teachers is necessary to be better qualified about how to define and address refugee students’ needs and how to design a lesson plan using appropriate practices for a mainstream class. The importance of using the refugees’ home languages, translanguaging (Garcia, 2019) and other ways they can integrate this approach into their teaching should also be emphasized

Future research into the field of how teachers get informed or become aware of educational sources could provide us with a better understanding. Despite the fact that the Greek Institute of Educational Policy’s website¹ includes guidelines for teachers, proposing appropriate approaches and activities to be employed in a mainstream class, it seems that teachers do not search there for supporting material. These findings agree to a point with the other findings (Stathopoulou et al, 2020) according to which, almost half of the Greek participants –the higher percentage- answered that they prefer creating their own material. So, providing more qualitative educational material or facilitate them to get access to it could may support their teaching.

Another issue for further investigation may be the way that the teaching materials meet the needs of the contemporary mainstream classes, which may include different students’ profiles concerning languages, culture, identity, learning needs. Is a space provided for all to be embraced in a mainstream class? All in all, it appears that teachers need support and training, which shows continuity, and addresses practical issues about dealing with diversity in class, as well as educational material, which they are aware of and feel confident to use in class.

¹ <http://iep.edu.gr/el/component/k2/content/50-ekpaidefsi-prosfygon>

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