



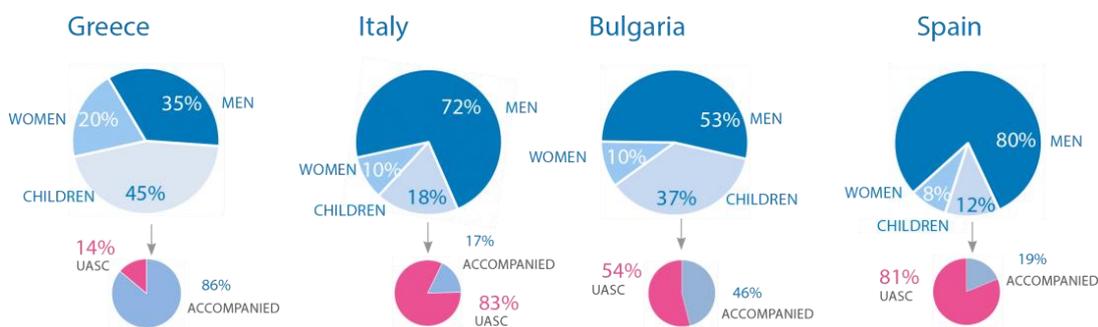
Policy brief: “Integration of migrant children at schools” policy proposals

Introduction

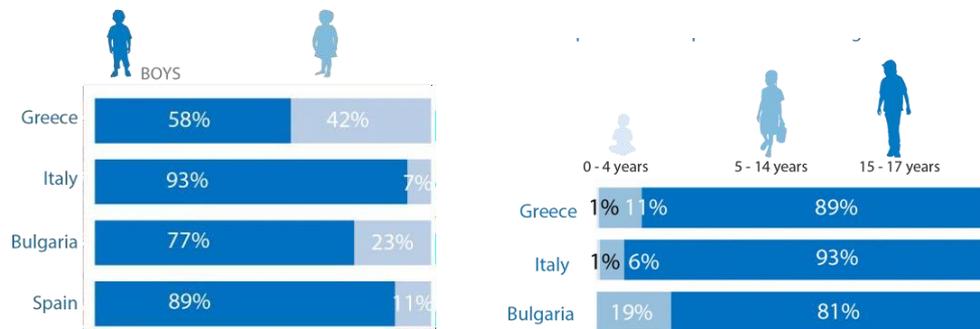
The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “a person who has fled his/her country of nationality (or habitual residence) and who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of a ‘well-founded’ fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group”. In mid-2019 close to 900,000 asylum seekers in the EU are waiting to have their claims processed, according to figures from the Eurostat, with Germany having the largest share of pending requests (44%), followed by Italy (12%). The rejection rate for asylum requests in Europe has almost doubled in three years, from 37% in 2016 to 64% in 2019. In Italy, rejections were at 80%

at the start of 2019, up from 60% the previous year. By the end of 2018, a total of 122,000 people were granted refugee status in EU; 63,000 were given subsidiary protection status; and 33,000 authorization to stay for humanitarian reasons. According to UNICEF, some 30,000 children arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain in 2018. A total of 12,700 (or 42% of the total) were unaccompanied. Some 14,600 children in the same year were resettled to other European countries (mainly UK, France and Sweden). Out of the total number of children who sought international protection in 2018, 70% were registered in just three countries: Germany (78,280), France (24,135) and Greece (21,770) (UNICEF, 2019).

The Demography of Those Arriving Including accompanied, unaccompanied and separated children (January-December 2018)



Gender and age breakdown of accompanied, unaccompanied and separated children by country (January-December 2018)



Source: UNICEF, 2019

Education for refugees is defined by UNICEF (2019, 5) as “the surest road to recovering a sense of purpose and dignity after the trauma of displacement”. Lama Fakih, an Amnesty International officer, concurs: “When you talk about a person’s ability to care for himself and his family and have a fulfilling life, obviously the opportunities are very limited without an elementary education” (quoted in Knefer, 2015). Education indeed empowers people, facilitating entry into the labour market, which is an indispensable step in the path of ending dependency on others and attain economic self-sufficiency. It also protects minors from child labour; it acts as a safety net against recruitment in criminal groups and engagement in illegal activities; and it makes less likely that young girls would forcibly enter in early marriage. In the case of refugee children, inclusion in education is also a crucial mechanism that facilitates adjustment to the new environment and a source of hope for the future. The importance of children education is also acknowledged by refugee parents. According to a recent survey, one out of three Syrian refugee parents and caregivers residing in Greece chose Europe as destination in order to provide quality education to their children (Save the Children, 2018, p. 5).

Notwithstanding that the right to quality education is a fundamental right, refugee enrollment in education is very low around the

world. According to official statistics, only 3.7 million out of 7.1 million school-age refugees attend classes. In particular, while 91% of all children in the world attend primary school, refugee enrolment in primary education stands at 63%. With respect to high schools, the enrolment rate of refugees falls at 24%, whereas the corresponding rate of global population is 84%. Hence, two out of three refugee children attending primary school do not enroll in high school. And as far as tertiary education is concerned, a mere 3% of refugees is registered in higher education programmes in contrast to 37% of the global population (UNICEF, 2019: 5-6).

Education for Integration

Schools are best positioned to meet the psychological and social needs of children affected by war or displacement, especially through programmes that provide them with avenues to express their emotions and receive support. However, the education of refugee children poses unique challenges. First, their population is frequently heterogeneous, both ethnically/culturally and in terms of experiences in their homeland and during migration. Secondly, the gap between school and family is wide. And thirdly, and “despite many small-scale innovative projects, little is known, either in theory or in practice, about the types of activity

that may work best for children from different backgrounds” (Rousseau 2005, p. 181).

Refugee children respond to diverse life experiences and new environment in unique ways. Likewise, teachers need to be prepared to respond to these children specific needs. Given the language barrier, arts can play a significant role in helping children cope with trauma and integrate in host societies. It is crucial to understand the diversity of students. There is no ‘one’ type of refugee child in host-country schools. Some are quiet and reserved, and never act inappropriately. Others, manifest psychological problems. They are hyperactive, or exhibit aggressive behavior. Some children appear frightened and distant, while others look depressed, frequently starting crying for no obvious reason. According to Save the Children (2018, 13), 75% of its teachers identify the psychological health of refugee children to be a significant issue of concern. However, studies have shown that refugee children are generally very respectful towards teachers and other children.

Traumatic experiences and emotional stress seriously affect refugee children attitudes. For example, “hoarding behaviors” are not uncommon for refugee children with books, clothing or food. In most cases teachers do not know what a child has been through. Also, parents often choose not to share their traumatic experiences.

A number of school programmes try to address the specific needs of refugee children in schools. These programmes focus on three main areas: “the adjustment of the school to the needs of refugee children through professional development, the improvement of the relationship between the school and the home, and the development of classroom or after-school programmes intended for the children themselves” (Rousseau & Guzder 2008, p. 536).

Professional development needs the cooperation of educators. Nevertheless, although some

teachers become passionate advocates of refugee children and may work outside their strict academic role to support refugee families, others (usually the majority) “are quite reluctant to take refugee-specific characteristics into consideration” (Rousseau & Guzder 2008, p. 537). The quality of the home–school relationship is another challenging area where it is crucial to build a shared understanding of situations.

Educational programmes for refugee children

In the last years, some very promising refugee children-specific classroom programmes have been developed in several European countries. These programmes focus on both the elementary and high school education and rely on a combination of verbal and non-verbal techniques. Many prioritize or include play and artistic expression activities. It can be argued that creative expression activities have come to be regarded as an important way of working with migrant/refugee children, especially those that have experienced conflict. These activities are widely considered to allow them to come to terms with trauma and re-establish social ties broken by repression and loss. Artistic activities are also used to promote the refugee/migrant children’s advocacy and they are considered beneficial for the improvement of their confidence and self-esteem and the transmission to them of problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Many projects and programmes focus on working in groups that are considered to improve refugee children communication and social skills learning them to follow (group) rules. Refugee and migrant children frequently learn quickly the host country’s language through playful and artistic activities since the latter are a less demanding context in contrast to regular classes.

Proposed Policy Options

Contrary to other humanitarian needs (e.g. shelter and sanitation), schooling is an underfinanced, often neglected priority that receives only 2% of global humanitarian assistance (Jack, 2018). It additionally suffers from the inconsistent and short-term donor attention. Thus, the integration of refugee children in the mainstream educational system of the host country should be a priority.

Translators or interpreters are essential when a refugee child joins a classroom. Verbal communication enables teachers to learn more about the child as well as to establish a relationship. Unfortunately, in most cases such services are unavailable as they cost too much for any government to assume. Schools should be encouraged to seek other students who speak both the student's native language as well as the language of instruction and distribute them in classes with refugee students. Local, national or international non-governmental organizations may be able to provide interpreting or translating services free of charge. These organizations may also offer targeted psychological support to refugee children (Save the Children, 2018).

The Ministries of Education, regional and local educational authorities and the school administrations should follow meaningful policies for grading and testing refugee students' academic achievements. They should also provide "peer group and pair learning experiences for teaching and tutoring refugee children.

Summer Schools, After-School Programs, Weekend Clubs, or Community Projects can be established that are geared towards helping refugee children adjust to the academic requirements" (Szente et al 2006, p. 18).

Public authorities should acknowledge the professional skills and qualifications of refugee teachers and strive to bring them inside the classrooms as teachers of refugee children or as teaching assistants (Save the Children 2018, 39). They should also take note of the complexity of the task to educate refugee children when considering the size of classrooms and the moral and material support provided to the assigned teaching staff.

Collaborations of schools with Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organizations and local refugee resettlement centers, but also museum and art exhibitions, should be strongly encouraged. The people in the host country may learn a lot about the culture and experiences of refugee children and hopefully give their support to those children's attempt to find their way in their new neighborhoods and schools.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of refugee children are entering our schools. Sharing information about the unique needs of refugee children and their families is very important for both policy-makers and teachers. Refugee children in schools represent a very heterogeneous group, both ethnically/culturally and in terms of migratory experience, and it is not easy to address their diverse psychosocial and educational needs with generalized guidelines that work always in different ages and settings.

The language barrier is the most important challenge and artistic expression is crucial in overcoming it. Artistic activities do not only complement formal education but are also a crucial step in developing language skills and an important avenue in promoting integration. However, schools in refugee-receiving countries

face widely different social and institutional realities and therefore the extensive local adaptations that are needed make programme-transferability challenging.

Classroom and after-class artistic activities addressing the overall adjustment of refugee children to the host society and their well-being are very important but at the same time they should be flexible and relevant to the specific characteristics of educational systems and the diverse needs of refugee populations. They should support the refugee children in assimilating past and present experiences by presenting these as learning opportunities, facilitating emotional expression, promoting the development of relationships among native and refugee children as well as among children and adults.

This Report is based on the following sources:

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The ArtsTogether program aims to develop and test educational material, based on artistic activities and collaborative approaches, with aiming to equip teachers and stakeholders with the essential tools to address diversity, mutual understanding, respect among themselves and improving the educational performance of students coming from migrant and refugee families.

Although migrant children’ access to education is universally guaranteed by the European Union, this does not automatically equate to their access to customized education, given their specific needs associated with the socio - economic problems and language challenges they face. In addition, social and ethnic segregation at school is a serious obstacle to the access of migrant children to quality education.

More information on the project page

www.artstogether.eu

