Migrant children's integration and education in Europe
Approaches, methodologies and policies
Barcelona, October 24th-25th 2019

Refugee Hospitality Center in Athens as a case study: Good (and Not-So-Good) Practices

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Keywords: keyword1, keyword 2, keyword3, keyword4, keyword5

Abstract

This case study examines the conditions and practices, as produced and/ or reproduced at Skaramagkas Refugee Hospitality Center near Athens; the most numerous refugee hospitality center in mainland Greece with over 2,500 inhabitants. Emphasis is given to accommodation conditions, as well as access to safe transport, as these are important to integration of all ages into the local social setting. The inhabitants of RHC come from different countries, bear different cultures and speak different heritage languages. Their coexistence in the same RHC creates a demanding socio-cultural and linguistic mosaic which becomes even more complex during their everyday encounters at school and neighborhood.

Consequently, the role of Refugee Education Coordinators, teachers seconded by the Ministry of Education at camp, is considered a particularly successful practice, acting as the link between the local educational community and the refugee community. The system of gradual integration of refugee children in local state mainstream schools is presented, starting from refugee-only afternoon classes in local schools to full participation in morning mainstream schools. The role of IOM in transferring students to schools through specially hired buses, with Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish speaking escorts is examined as an outstanding practice, significantly helping students in starting and continuing state schooling. The establishment and functioning of kindergarten-at-camp is also discussed as well as the role of educational excursions and visits. On a less positive note, parental involvement and interaction has been problematic and indicative of the fact that although children's education in the state system is the main avenue of refugee families' social integration, its effect does not seem to permeate to older ages. Areas of further need for research are identified, such as the role socio-economic background, of work prospects, of family fragmentation in other countries, of trauma and psycho-emotional

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health etc.

The ultimate aim is to broaden our scope and apply the results of our study in larger establishments in order to counteract those factors that usually lead refugee and asylum seeking children to a feeling of lost and frustration, help them gain a sense of belongingness, and assist them to a passage in a pluralist citizenship. Thus, support to their linguistic practices, understanding of their linguistic landscapes, empowerment of their identities, assessment of their needs could provide a bridge that would allow for RHC's inhabitants to reach out at the main stream educational system in confidence of their successful participation which would ensure them a sense of safety, belongingness and social inclusion, too.

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