



Legal and Institutional Characteristics of Refugee Education in Greece: A Sociological Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores intercultural education in Greece, which is institutionally grounded in the operation of intercultural schools and in adaptations of the curriculum to meet the specific educational, social, cultural, and academic needs of students. This approach is reinforced by Law 4415/2016, which emphasizes equality, social inclusion, the elimination of educational inequalities, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. Within this framework, Educational Priority Zones (EPZ) are being developed, featuring Reception Classes and Supplementary Tutoring Sections, with the aim of supporting students with language and learning difficulties. Following the 2015 refugee crisis, Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP), which were established in 2016, aim to provide refugee children with access to formal education, placing particular emphasis on learning the Greek language and their gradual integration into the educational system. The operation of these programs is supported by Refugee Education Coordinators and the relevant educational authorities, while adjustments are made regarding the curriculum, class composition, and the educational needs of the students. Despite the existence of a comprehensive institutional framework, the implementation of intercultural education policy presents significant challenges. The increase in the number of Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) during the 2016–2021 period reflects the Greek education system's effort to meet the growing needs of the refugee population, but the constant administrative changes suggest the absence of stable, long-term planning. At the same time, linguistic and cultural barriers, prejudices, inadequate training, and the need for specialized staff hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. The psychosocial dimension is also of particular importance, as refugee children have experienced loss and displacement, carrying traumatic memories, a fact that necessitates an educational approach that takes into account not only their academic but also their emotional needs.

Keywords: Intercultural education, educational equity, social inclusion, Educational Priority Zones (EPZ), Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP), refugee education, cultural diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The diversification of the composition of the student population in Greek schools, as a consequence of the residence of new populations, led to the necessity of changing and adapting the objectives of the educational system. The increasing numbers of culturally diverse students attending Greek schools lead to the recognition of new educational needs and raise issues concerning the management of cultural diversity and the integration of children into school (Salpigktis, 2021). Particularly after 2015, the Greek authorities and local communities were faced with the challenge of managing the entry and temporary or permanent hosting of a significant number of refugees (Sgoura et al., 2018). The challenge for educational systems is to find ways of equally including all students, regardless of their ethnic, social, cultural background, fostering an intercultural culture in school units.

The establishment of Intercultural Schools and the creation of Educational Priority Zones (EPZ) and Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) were important factors in strengthening the right to access education for all students regardless of linguistic and cultural background. However, in Greece, there is a gap between educational policy (legislation on intercultural education, implementation of programs addressing the educational needs of students from other cultural backgrounds) and actual classroom practice, which is usually oriented towards monocultural and assimilationist practices (Sgoura et al., 2018). Therefore, despite the

legislation, in its implementation the integration provided for by the Greek state for refugee children is not yet sufficiently guaranteed (Fili & Pavlopoulos, 2024).

Following the massive influx of populations, particularly in 2015-2016, and the stranding of tens of thousands of immigrants in Greece, the Ministry of Education developed a plan to integrate refugee children into the Greek educational system by utilizing Educational Priority Zones (ZEP) and establishing Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) in 2016 (Hellenic Republic, 2016a). In the midst of this unprecedented refugee crisis that has marked Greek society since 2015, the Greek state has been faced with the challenge of smoothly integrating into the educational system a very large part of the child refugee population accommodation centers (Maligkoudi & Tsaousidis, 2020). The Reception Classes were linked to the institution of Educational Priority Zones, into which they were integrated from 2010 onwards, forming a vital component of their operation, with the main goal of the equal integration of all students into the Greek educational system and the provision of equal opportunities for all (Hellenic Republic, 2010).

This study highlights a set of factors that hinder the effective implementation of innovative and alternative educational practices for the integration and teaching of students with different ethnocultural backgrounds in Greek schools. This spectrum includes institutional and organizational limitations, weaknesses in the pedagogical approach, dominant social perceptions, as well as the often difficult cooperation between school and students' families. The attendance of refugee children in DYEP and not in public schools clearly constitutes a point of concern for the integration of children into Greek society and the Greek educational system. However, although school is a means of social integration, it is also a powerful mechanism of social exclusion.

The multiculturalism of modern societies makes the role of the teacher particularly difficult and demanding, requiring educators to respond to the social, cultural and ethnic differences of students (Sgoura et al., 2018). The lack of systematic training of teachers, the overloading of classes with a large number of students, the complexity of educational needs and the absence of organized institutional support mechanisms (such as interpreters, psychologists, social workers) make it difficult to effectively implement the principles of intercultural education for the integration and inclusion of students with different ethno-cultural backgrounds. The countries hosting the refugees and immigrants attempt to integrate them smoothly into society, at least in terms of the educational process, by adopting educational models, as they are shaped by the approaches of theorists, who express different positions on the management of cultural diversity (Koukou, 2023). First, the conceptual definition of the forms of integration is analyzed and then the role of education as a basic mechanism for social integration and intercultural coexistence is highlighted. The social inequalities and discrimination that immigrants are often called upon to face make their integration through education difficult. The lack of adequate support policies can lead to educational exclusion and lower performance for students with an immigrant background, which affects the overall process of social integration negatively (Guo & Hébert, 2014).

Reception and integration structures are a key pillar of educational policy for the integration of students with a migrant and refugee background into the Greek education system. Despite institutional interventions and the development of integration policies, their practical implementation often highlights difficulties related to linguistic, social, economic and institutional factors, which directly affect the educational path of students and, by extension, the overall process of social integration. Through the analysis of the practices implemented in Greece, the study examines three interrelated questions: a) how the legal and institutional framework for refugee education in Greece developed during the period 2016–2021 b) to what extent did the educational structures created during this period facilitate the integration of refugee children into regular education and c) which institutional, educational and social challenges limited the effective implementation of the right to education in order to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between educational policy, institutional organization and the social integration of refugee children in the Greek educational system.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodology

To serve the purposes of this research, the qualitative method was chosen as the most appropriate. Theoretical frameworks provide the basis for the systematic interpretation of the empirical data, as they emerge from the

research process. The analysis focuses on the legal, institutional and educational framework developed for the education of refugee children in Greece, with a particular emphasis on the period between 2016 and 2021. This period was chosen because it represents a critical phase in the development of refugee education policy following the increased refugee flows to Greece after 2015 and the subsequent creation and expansion of specialized educational structures. The research material consists mainly of national legislation, ministerial decisions, institutional documents and relevant policy provisions concerning intercultural education, Educational Priority Zones (EPZ), Reception Classes and Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP). Particular attention is paid to the legislative provisions that regulated the establishment, organization, staffing and operation of these structures. Furthermore, the study draws on Greek and international scientific literature dealing with refugee education, intercultural education, educational inclusion, social inclusion, teachers' attitudes and the challenges related to the education of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. An in-depth investigation of the subject requires a thorough study of the bibliography, since the research field may be relatively recent, however, the relevant literature allows for its further study. Qualitative research does not deal with statistical analyses and correlations are impossible to understand through numerical data alone. What is considered necessary is the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon with qualitative characteristics, as the reading of this material shaped the range of research questions.

The integration of immigrants and refugees into the Greek educational system is a key priority of educational policy, especially in recent decades, when Greece has become a host country for significant immigration and refugee flows. The institutional framework for the education of immigrants and refugees in Greece is based on a set of national and European regulations, which ensure the right of all children to education, regardless of nationality or legal status (Papachristou, 2026). In the third section, the main theories and policies for the integration of immigrant students in Greece are presented, with references to the applicable legislation at international and European level, and finally the policies for the integration of immigrants into the Greek educational system as well as the models for managing diversity are analyzed. The institution of education is a central pillar of the process of integration of immigrants. More specifically, the educational process is a basic mechanism for transmitting knowledge, values and skills, while at the same time functioning as a space for socialization and shaping personal identity (Guo & Hébert, 2014). Educational policy must focus on providing a quality school, but also free, universal access to it, as well as on a policy that will respect ethnic, economic, social, cultural and other differences (Koukou, 2023).

Analytical Framework: Social Integration, Educational Inclusion, and Intercultural Education

The primary task of education is currently to prepare students to become citizens of a multicultural society, who will respect linguistic and cultural diversity and at the same time maintain their cultural identity (Sgoura et al., 2018). School is a place where all children learn to coexist, communicate, exchange ideas and emotions, a space in which they socialize and develop. The integration, and subsequently the inclusion, of all students, regardless of gender, nationality, racial background, sexual orientation, or disability, requires the elimination of stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes that hinder the equal participation of all students in learning, education, and life itself. In this context, the school, as a microcosm of the wider society, takes on a leading role in strengthening the social capital of the school community. Through intercultural cooperation activities, the active participation of the families of foreign students in collective bodies, as well as the interconnection with the local community, institutions and organizations, the school creates and strengthens social networks that promote mutual understanding, acceptance of diversity and social cohesion. Furthermore, parental participation in school activities and collaboration with the school enhance the sense of belonging and social integration of students (Salinas, 2013).

Educational inclusion is not limited to the physical presence of students in school, but includes their active participation in the learning process, the development of skills and the achievement of educational outcomes that are comparable to those of students in the host country (Guo & Hébert, 2014). Ensuring equal access for students with different ethnocultural backgrounds to quality and inclusive teaching methods, combined with their school performance, are decisive indicators for the evaluation of their educational progress and their successful integration into the school and wider social environment (Kesidou, 2008). Legislation can provide incentives for the regularization of immigrants and their employment, but it cannot achieve their substantive integration into

society and the economy on its own. The integration of immigrants is a matter of specialized policy measures but at the same time of broader social sensitivity (Chaliapa, 2009).

The constant movement of populations around the world directly affects children, who follow their families, carrying traumatic experiences, often including the disruption or deprivation of their right to education. Even after settling in a more stable host environment, the integration of migrant children into the school environment faces significant challenges, which are largely determined by the educational and migration policies of the host country. In the case of Greece, the mapping of the influx of migrants, and in particular students with different ethnocultural backgrounds, encounters significant difficulties both in terms of data collection and at the research level, which affects the comprehensive understanding of their needs and challenges in the educational context. These difficulties are mainly found in the lack of sufficient and reliable statistical data, which is due both to the heterogeneity of the migrant population and to the presence of a large number of migrants without legal documents, making their official registration and the subsequent overall assessment of the extent of the phenomenon particularly complicated (Emke-Pouloupoulou, 2007).

The issue that seems to be of particular importance is that concerning the identification of students with migrant and refugee backgrounds who have disabilities due to differences in culture, as well as the obstacles that arise due to the different language, alongside their psychological burden. The mental trauma, educational gaps and language difficulties of refugee and migrant students hinder their integration and overall academic performance. (Koukou, Mina 2023). International migrant integration policies are primarily called upon to address long-standing challenges. For example, limited knowledge of the host country's language is a major obstacle to both the educational process and the socialization of students in the school environment. At the same time, social inequalities, such as limited access to institutions, can affect the smooth integration of students into the school environment. Another important parameter is the potential traumatic experience of students during their international movement, which can affect their cognitive ability. Therefore, the equally important role of psychosocial support in the educational process emerges (Papachristou, 2026).

Intercultural education aims to promote educational programs that take into account more than one language and culture (Aikman, 1999). In other words, through the different cultures that may coexist in educational settings, an effort is made against the assimilationist tendencies of a state towards the minority. According to Essinger (1990), cultural and social particularities must not only be preserved but also interact and become interdependent aiming to create a society that respects its members equally. Intercultural education differs from multicultural education in that it does not simply accept the fact of the coexistence of people with different national and cultural backgrounds in the field of education, but focuses on issues related to continuous training, the development of educational curricula, as well as addressing racist phenomena and prejudice among children belonging to the majority (Angelides et al., 2003).

Inclusion means implementing a radical series of changes through which schools themselves are restructured in order to reduce barriers to learning and participation for all students, so that they are able to embrace diversity and meet the needs of all children (Ainscow, 1995). According to Unesco (2009), "Inclusion is viewed as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a shared vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children" (pp. 8–9).

As documented by the sociological theorists of education, Bernstein and Bourdieu, social and economic inequalities, cultural and racial particularities, external and internal heterogeneities are reproduced within the school environment, to play their role in the broader social context (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). These inequalities, particularly pronounced in our days, due to the multicultural reality, the health crisis and the rapid socio-economic changes we are experiencing, intensify the social exclusion of vulnerable individuals and populations. Social exclusion is described as the lack of economic resources and, mainly, the inability to access rights (social, cultural, political, educational) and obligations in organizations and communities of society (Georgitsa, 2017). Exclusions and inequalities in education fuel social exclusion (Slee et al., 2019). Therefore, the modern school must prepare and provide children with all the necessary equipment

required to become equal citizens of a multicultural society and to be able to respond to its demands and conditions (Argyriadis, 2015). The school has always been and is a recipient of students with multiple identities, students who belong to different religious, ethnic, racial, social and cultural communities. This is also its role, to socialize future citizens in a multicultural environment, teaching them to coexist harmoniously (Prelorentzou, 2011).

International, European and Greek Legal Framework

The Right of Refugee Children to Education

International organizations (UN, UNESCO, EU) have established frameworks that enshrine education as a fundamental, universal human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) proclaim the right of all children (and therefore also children with a migrant and refugee background) to participate equally in a quality, free, public education that respects diversity and does not discriminate on any grounds - gender, nationality, origin, disability or political beliefs (Christie & Sidhu, 2002). The education of refugee children is, on the basis of equality of opportunity, their inalienable right, according to Article 28.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1990), and the Greek state has the obligation to provide for this in a coordinated manner, despite any financial and administrative difficulties (Koiliari, 2015). The global community today recognizes more than ever that in addition to providing shelter, food and medical care to refugee children, there is also a great responsibility for their integration into education. Many, in fact, consider education as the only effective way of integrating refugee children into host countries and as the most valuable means for building a fairer society (Sgoura et al., 2018).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN – 1948) expresses the will of nations for freedom, equality, justice, and dignity. The very first article of the Declaration emphasizes that all human beings are born free and “shall enjoy their rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind, such as sex, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, property, or any other status” (Nideltsou, 2016). A decade later, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) states in its first principle that all children have the same rights regardless of race, sex, color, language, religion, national or social origin, political beliefs, or social or family background.

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which recognized the universal right of all children to education, regardless of nationality, origin, or legal status. Three years later, in 1992, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities established an important institutional framework for the protection of the rights of minority groups. These two international instruments set out essential principles that promote equality, social inclusion, and the prevention of discrimination at a global level.

The European Union is gradually recognizing the cultural and linguistic diversity within it, calling on its member states to engage in intercultural dialogue, to respect the diversity of cultures, to develop a positive climate towards diversity and acceptance of what is different, to promote cultural dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding. The basic principles of the European Union are respect for the individual, cooperation between peoples and the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity, which are based on the principle of unity in diversity. The European Union designs and implements appropriate policies in order to avoid both assimilation and social exclusion of individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds (Kymlicka, 2007).

The Development of the Greek Legal Framework for Intercultural and Refugee Education

In the early 1980s, Greece first implemented an educational policy concerning Intercultural Education. The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs at the time instituted measures in order to address the educational needs of individuals of different social, cultural and religious backgrounds. By ministerial decision, the institution of Reception Classes and Tutoring Departments for the children of repatriates was introduced into the Greek educational system. The new institution was legislated in 1983 (Hellenic Republic, 1983, Law 1404/83) and was subsequently amended by Law 1894/90. Ministerial Decision F2/378/G1/1124/8-12-1994



regulates the operation of the programs and provides for the recruitment of teachers who will teach the language and culture to the children of immigrants.

Subsequently, Law 1566/1985 established the basic structure of the educational system, stipulating that the purpose of primary and secondary education is to contribute to the all-round, harmonious and balanced development of the intellectual and physical powers of students, so that, regardless of gender and origin, they have the opportunity to develop into complete personalities and live creatively (Article 1). At the same time, it was established that attendance is compulsory in primary school and lower secondary school, provided that the student has not exceeded the age of 16, while this education is provided by the state free of charge (Article 2).

Later, Law 2413/1996 introduced the intercultural dimension for the first time institutionally, setting as its objective the organization and operation of primary and secondary education school units for the provision of education to young people with educational, social, cultural or linguistic specificities (Article 34). It was also defined that in order for a school to be classified as intercultural, the percentage of students who display the above characteristics must approach 45% of the total number of students (Article 35), while at the same time the operation of the Institute for Expatriate Education and Intercultural Studies (I.P.O.D.E.) was provided for with the aim of coordinating the smooth educational and social integration of students (Article 5).

Following the refugee crisis, Law 4415/2016 redefined the framework, stipulating that Intercultural Education concerns the building of relationships between different cultural groups with the aim of eliminating inequalities and social exclusion (Article 20). With the same law, existing intercultural schools are transformed and henceforth operate as Experimental Schools of Intercultural Education (Article 22), while refugee education was institutionalized with the creation of Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP), where the organization, operation, coordination and program of education are determined (Article 38).

Subsequently, the Code of Migration and Social Integration (Law 5038/2023) guaranteed universal access, stipulating that minor third-country nationals residing in Greek territory are subject to compulsory school attendance, just like nationals, and have unrestricted access to the activities of the school or educational community. The law explicitly provides that children of third-country nationals may also be enrolled in public schools with incomplete documentation when they are protected as beneficiaries of international protection, have submitted an application or even if their legal residence in Greek territory has not been regulated (Article 18).

Finally, the recent Asylum Code (Law 5307/2026) ensured that minor applicants and minor dependents of applicants during their stay in the country are integrated into primary and secondary education units of the Greek public education system, strictly defining that integration into formal education takes place as soon as possible and at the latest within two (2) months from the date of submission of the application for international protection (Article 30).

Intercultural Education: Its Goals and Methods

As part of efforts to strengthen intercultural education, Article 24 of Law 4415/2016 places particular emphasis on staffing and supporting the Experimental Schools for Intercultural Education. Teaching positions are established by joint decision of the Ministries of Education and Finance, while the selection criteria and transfer procedures are determined by the Ministry of Education. Educational efforts are supported by specialized professional staff, such as school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and specialists in intercultural education, who contribute to informing and training the school community on issues of cultural diversity, bilingualism, and the teaching of Greek as a second language. At the same time, plans call for the creation of a special committee of scholars and officials from the Ministry of Education, tasked with collecting and disseminating educational materials and best practices from Greece and abroad. Support measures include specialized teaching methods, social benefits for students and families, counseling services to foster school-family collaboration, as well as educational activities outside the formal school setting, such as summer schools and camps. There are also plans to produce educational materials in the languages of the major immigrant communities to facilitate school integration and ensure equal learning opportunities. The administration of the Experimental Schools for Intercultural Education is governed by the procedures applicable to public schools, in accordance with Law 3966/2011, while administrative oversight is exercised by the relevant Directorates of

Education. There is a specific provision regarding the education of refugees, as Article 38 of Law 4415/2016 establishes reception structures for their integration into the school system and provides for the determination of the organization, operation, coordination, and educational program by joint ministerial decision. These facilities are staffed through the secondment or assignment of permanent teachers and the hiring of substitute teachers, with funding from the State Budget, the Public Investment Program, or European funds, such as the NSRF. Overall, the institutional framework aims to ensure organized and high-quality educational support, equal access to learning, and the smooth integration of students of migrant and refugee background into the Greek education system (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023).

Educational Priority Zones (EPZ)

By Ministerial Decision No. 131024/Δ1/August 8, 2016 (Government Gazette 2687 B/August 29, 2016) Educational Priority Zones (EPZ) were established, with the aim of supporting students facing language and educational difficulties and facilitating their smooth integration into the Greek educational system. Three basic structures operate within the framework of the EPZ: SPI Reception Classes (SPI RCs), SPI Supplementary Tutorial Sections (SPI STS), and Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP). These structures are established following an assessment of the educational needs of schools; however, during the 2016–2017 school year, Reception School Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) were established directly by ministerial decision due to the urgent need to educate refugee children. According to Article 3 of Law 3966/2011, ZEP Reception Classes are intended for students such as Roma, foreign nationals, repatriates, refugees, and other vulnerable social groups who lack sufficient knowledge of the Greek language. They are classified as Type I and Type II. Type I is intended for students with little or no knowledge of Greek and provides intensive language instruction, while students also take certain courses in the regular classroom. The program typically lasts one school year, with the possibility of extension. TY II is intended for students with moderate knowledge of Greek who have difficulty keeping up with the regular curriculum and provides language support either within the general classroom with a second teacher or outside of it. Enrollment may last up to three school years, while reintegration into the general classroom may occur earlier, following an evaluation by the teachers and the School Counselor.

The ZEP Supplementary Tutoring Classes are intended for students who did not attend a ZEP Transition Class or, even though they did, continue to face language difficulties. They operate outside regular school hours, with 3 to 8 students and up to 10 hours of supportive instruction per week, tailored to their learning needs. Similarly, DYEP ZEP are aimed exclusively at refugee children residing in reception facilities, with the primary goal of teaching Greek as a second language and preparing them for integration into the regular school program. DYEP classes have 10 to 20 students, and when they are integrated into schools outside of reception centers, they generally operate in the afternoon from 2:00 PM to 6:00 PM. In elementary school programs, the curriculum includes, among other subjects, 6 hours of Greek Language, 4 hours of English, 3 hours of Mathematics, 3 hours of Physical Education, 2 hours of ICT, and 2 hours of Aesthetic Education.

Before students are enrolled in the ZEP programs, their level of Greek proficiency is assessed through diagnostic tests, and written consent from a parent or guardian is required. The Teachers' Association, in collaboration with the School Counselor, determines the program of operation and monitors the students' progress, with the option to reassess their language proficiency during the school year. ZEP classes are formed with at least 9 students, and the evaluation of their progress is a key factor in ensuring a smooth transition for students into regular classes. Supervision and pedagogical guidance of the TY and the Specialized ZEP classes fall under the responsibility of School Counselors, who support teachers, organize professional development activities, and monitor the implementation of educational programs. For the DYEP, the Ministry of Education and the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) are responsible for designing the educational program and appropriate teaching materials, while School Counselors collaborate with the Refugee Education Coordinators (REC) to provide academic and pedagogical guidance to teachers. RECs play a central role in the operation of the DYEP; they are appointed at each reception center and are responsible for coordinating educational policy, informing refugees about the importance of education, registering students, coordinating with relevant governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and assessing educational needs. Their term of office lasts one school year.



Selection criteria include, among other things, experience in intercultural educational settings, a master's or doctoral degree in intercultural education, or volunteer participation in refugee education initiatives.

Overall, the ZEP programs constitute a system of language and educational support, which is tailored to students' language proficiency levels and specific needs. Their common goal is to teach the Greek language, address educational inequalities, and, ultimately, ensure the smooth integration of students into regular classrooms and the Greek educational system (Chatzina & Mouti, 2022).

Operational Structures for the 2016–2021 School Year

During the 2016–2021 period, the refugee education system in Greece was characterized by constant reorganization, with frequent amendments to ministerial decisions and changes to the schools hosting the Reception Structures for Refugee Education (DYEP). This shift reflects, on the one hand, the need for immediate adaptation to increased refugee flows and, on the other hand, the lack of stable, long-term strategic planning. The constant changes created problems in the operation of schools and forced teachers, students, and families to continually adapt to new circumstances. During the same school year, Ministerial Decision No. 166646/GD4/7-10-2016 (Government Gazette 3237/B) designated 26 schools to operate as DYEP centers, 13 in primary education and 13 in secondary education, distributed across six geographic regions and primarily located near refugee reception centers. The initial decision was amended repeatedly during the same school year, with schools being added and removed, a fact that demonstrates the dynamic and evolving nature of the organization of the DYEP. The network of DYEP expanded in subsequent school years. For the 2017–2018 school year, they were scheduled to operate in 28 regions across Attica, Central Greece, Thessaly, Central and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, and Epirus. For the 2018–2019 school year, the DYEP were expanded to 47 regions, now including areas on the Aegean islands, such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Rhodes, Kos, and Leros. This expansion was directly linked to the need to meet the educational needs of refugee children in areas where reception facilities were operating. During the 2020–2021 school year, pursuant to Ministerial Decision No. 107230/Δ1/19-8-2020 (Government Gazette 3605/B), the DYEP were organized on an even larger scale, as provisions were made for their operation in 94 school units and 35 kindergarten branches throughout the country. Their geographic coverage included, among others, Attica, Central Greece, Central and Western Macedonia, the Peloponnese, Western Greece, and the Aegean Islands.

The gradual increase in the number of Special Education and Training Centers (DYEP) during the period under review is primarily linked to the growing need for the educational integration of refugee children, particularly in areas where reception centers were operating. However, the constant revision of decisions and the frequent changes in school assignments demonstrate that the state largely pursued a piecemeal and adaptive policy, oriented more toward managing immediate needs than toward implementing a stable and coherent plan. It is also important to note that the operation of the Special Education and Training Units (DYEP) did not entail a direct burden on the state budget, as existing school infrastructure and teaching staff were utilized, with funding also supported by European resources. Consequently, the development of the DYEP during the 2016–2021 period reflects a dual reality: on the one hand, the necessary expansion of educational protection and support for refugee children and, on the other, the shortcomings of the Greek education system in establishing a stable, long-term, and organizationally coherent framework for their education (Maligkoudi & Tsaousidis, 2020).

Establishment, Facilities, and Operation of the D.Y.E.P.

Ministerial Decision No. 180647/GD4/October 27, 2016 (Government Gazette 3502/B) establishes the framework for the establishment and operation of the Refugee Education Reception Centers (DYEP), with the aim of providing access to formal education for the children of third-country nationals residing in reception centers or facilities. DYEP facilities generally operate within school buildings under the Regional Directorates of Education, in areas where reception facilities are located, though they may also operate as school branches within the centers, depending on the students' ages and the available educational infrastructure. For children ages 4–5, kindergarten branches are provided, while for children 6–12 and 13–15 years old, elementary and middle school branches may operate within the reception centers when attendance at regular schools is not possible. Each DYEP class consists of 10 to 20 students, with the possibility of deviation upon decision by the Regional Director of Education and recommendation by the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC). Overall



supervision of the facilities—from their establishment through the implementation of the educational program—is carried out by the relevant management and monitoring team of the Ministry of Education.

Operating hours vary depending on the type of Special Education Unit (SEU): kindergarten annexes operate from 8:20 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., elementary and middle school annexes within reception centers operate from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., while DYEP housed in regular school buildings operate primarily in the afternoon, from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The schedule may be adjusted to local needs, without changing its total duration. The educational program varies by grade level and places special emphasis on learning the Greek language. In elementary school, the weekly schedule includes 6 hours of Greek, 4 hours of English, 3 hours of math, 3 hours of physical education, 2 hours of ICT, and 2 hours of arts education, while in middle school, it includes 6 hours of Greek, 4 hours of English, 4 hours of Math, 2 hours of Physical Education, 2 hours of Computer Science, and 2 hours of Culture and Activities. Kindergarten annexes follow the mandatory curriculum of the Unified Full-Day Kindergarten Model. The operation of the DYEP is based on the framework of public primary and secondary education, with special provisions for the needs of refugee children. The school principals are responsible for assigning teachers, collaborating with school counselors and the Special Education Support Teams (SEST), establishing a three-member support team, as well as informing and raising awareness within the school community and ensuring the necessary infrastructure is in place. At the same time, the DYEP operations manager, working full-time, is responsible for the administrative and day-to-day operations of the facility, such as managing “myschool,” maintaining the school log, monitoring the class schedule, ensuring the safe arrival and departure of students, and organizing events. When there is no permanent staff, a substitute teacher is hired.

Overall, the institutional framework of the DYEP seeks to ensure organized access for refugee children to formal education, with a tailored schedule and curriculum for each age group and a particular emphasis on learning the Greek language. At the same time, their operation relies on collaboration between school administrations, teachers, school counselors, and the Special Education Program (SEP), with the goal of the students’ educational and gradual social integration (Maligkoudi & Tsaousidis, 2020).

Refugee Education Coordinators (RECs) and the relevant school counselors responsible for pedagogical matters at schools under the Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education (DYEP)

The timetable for Refugee Education Reception Centers (DYEP) varies depending on the grade level and the center’s location. Kindergarten annexes follow the curriculum of the Standard Full-Day Kindergarten Program, while elementary and middle school annexes within reception centers operate in the mornings, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., with four 45-minute class periods. When the DYEP are housed in regular school buildings, they operate in the afternoons, from 2:00 PM to 6:00 P. The curriculum places special emphasis on Greek Language, with 6 hours per week in both elementary and middle school. The elementary school curriculum also includes English (4), Mathematics (3), Physical Education (3), ICT (2), and Aesthetic Education (2), while in middle school, the curriculum includes English (4), Mathematics (4), Physical Education (2), Computer Science (2), and Culture and Activities (2). The operation of the DYEP is based on the public education framework, with specific adaptations to the needs of refugee children. The school principals are responsible for the smooth operation of the facilities, the assignment of teachers, the enrollment and monitoring of students, collaboration with the relevant agencies, and ensuring the necessary infrastructure is in place. At the same time, a three-member support team is formed to select suitable facilities and monitor the educational process. A teacher is appointed as the DYEP operations manager, with responsibilities that include maintaining the curriculum and school textbooks, ensuring the safe arrival and departure of students, and organizing activities (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023).

Refugee Education Coordinators (REC) play a central role in coordinating refugee education, with at least one assigned to each reception center and more where needed. Preference is given to tenured teachers with experience or expertise in intercultural education or participation in refugee education programs; however, in the absence of suitable candidates, substitute teachers may be assigned. Their term of service is one year and includes professional development. The responsibilities of SEPs are particularly broad: they inform and motivate families regarding the importance of education, register students, coordinate cooperation between government and nongovernmental organizations, assist with the transportation and safe arrival of children at school, and intervene in school-related issues. They therefore serve as a key link between refugee families, schools, and the



relevant educational authorities. Equally important is the role of the School Counselor, who bears pedagogical responsibility for schools hosting DYEP students. In collaboration with the School Support Specialists (SEP), principals, and teachers, they help develop the class schedule and organize and group classes, taking into account the students' age, language proficiency, and specific learning needs. At the same time, they support and train teachers, participate in the planning of educational, cultural, and athletic activities, and monitor the operation of the Special Education and Training Centers (DYEP).

Finally, the School Counselor and the SEPs participate in identifying problems, evaluating, and preparing the annual report on the operation of the DYEP, submitting proposals to the Ministry of Education and the IEP for improving the educational process. Thus, the operational system of the DYEP is based on collaboration between administrative and educational bodies, with the aim of adapting education to the specific linguistic, learning, and social needs of refugee children (Fili & Pavlopoulos, 2024).

Governing the Operation of Intercultural Schools

The principles of intercultural education are based on promoting equality, social inclusion, respect for cultural diversity, and combating educational inequalities. According to Law 2413/1996, its purpose is to provide education to young people with educational, social, cultural, or academic special needs. Intercultural Education Schools follow the curriculum of the corresponding public schools, which is, however, adapted to the linguistic, cultural, social, and educational needs of students with different cultural or immigrant backgrounds. Their primary objectives are to provide equal educational opportunities, eliminate inequalities, foster respect, mutual acceptance, and cooperation, and harness cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of richness and creativity. At the same time, the program aims to foster a positive attitude toward learning among students and to develop intercultural awareness within the local community (Crul et al., 2019). In accordance with Articles 34 and 35 of Law 2413/1996, provisions are made for the establishment of new schools or the conversion of existing public schools into Intercultural Education Schools. Their curricula may, by decision of the Minister, be adapted to the specific needs of students through a specialized curriculum, additional or alternative courses, reduced class sizes, and, where applicable, reduced teaching hours for teachers. Thus, intercultural education is not an entirely different educational system, but rather an adaptation of the public school system to cultural and linguistic diversity, with the goal of ensuring equal participation, inclusion, and a meaningful education for all students (Fili & Pavlopoulos, 2024).

Education of Refugee Children: Challenges and Psychological Requirements for Their Social Integration

The educational and training materials for the education of refugee children were developed as part of Action 4, "Training Activities to Support the Education of Refugee Children." Of particular interest is the book "The Footprints", which is used in first grade and aims to create appropriate conditions for communication in the classroom and to provide students with their first systematic exposure to the written word. However, certain activities in the book, such as drawing one's home, family, and friends, raise concerns when directed at children with a refugee background. Many of these children have experienced war, loss, destruction, or the death of loved ones, meaning that such activities can dredge up painful memories and traumatic experiences.

A seemingly simple reference to "home" or "family" can therefore have a different and particularly emotionally charged meaning for a child who has been forced to leave their country and loved ones behind. Consequently, the educational process for refugee children must be designed with particular sensitivity, taking into account not only their language and learning needs but also the psychological and emotional impacts of their traumatic experiences. Their education and social integration require a safe and supportive environment, in which educational activities will not exacerbate their trauma but will contribute to their smooth adjustment, communication, and integration (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

A critical assessment highlights significant tensions, contradictions, and practical questions regarding the implementation and effectiveness of educational policy. First, while the legislation recognizes the importance of equal inclusion and the elimination of exclusion, the substantive implementation of the prescribed measures is

not always ensured. The reference to the creation of Experimental Schools for Intercultural Education, which aim for innovation and collaboration with universities, reflects institutional ambition, but the implementation of these initiatives often runs into obstacles due to a lack of resources, specially trained teaching staff, and systematic evaluation. The transformation of intercultural schools into experimental schools does not always meet the needs of the students themselves, and there is a risk that they will become detached from the mainstream of public education and function as “islands” of differentiation. Moreover, although there is talk of mainstream schools serving as settings for inclusive education, in practice the coexistence of native-born students and refugee or immigrant children presents obstacles: language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and social alienation—often reinforced by prejudice or racist attitudes—undermine the goal of integration. The existence of specialized support structures is crucial; however, their effectiveness depends largely on the availability of specialized staff, ongoing professional development, and meaningful collaboration with students’ families. Furthermore, while respect for cultural identity is promoted as a principle of intercultural education, its practical application remains unclear. Preserving cultural identity is not a given; it requires a framework that strengthens children’s native language and culture without being confined to folkloric approaches. In this regard, educational materials and the curriculum appear to be lagging behind, often reproducing monocultural perspectives and mechanisms of assimilation. In addition, provisions for teacher training and the involvement of academic institutions, though crucial, are often treated as mere formal compliance with legislative requirements rather than as an ongoing reflective process that transforms everyday school practice. We must ask whether teachers feel adequately prepared and supported to address such a demanding and complex educational context.

In summary, the education of refugee children in Greece from 2016 to 2021 has been characterized by a coherent but often inadequately implemented institutional framework that covers the organizational, instructional, and social dimensions of integration. The challenge lies not only in institutional provisions but primarily in the practical implementation of an inclusive and truly intercultural education capable of supporting refugee children not only as students, but also as psychosocially vulnerable individuals undergoing a process of rehabilitation and resocialization. As scholars and educators, it is our duty not to limit ourselves to the superficial dimension of a phenomenon, but to explore its deeper meaning and the consequences it may have for children’s psychology.

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