

Migration, Inequality and Social Integration: Refugee Children's Experiences in the Greek Reception System

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the serious challenges faced by refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece, both upon their arrival and in reception facilities. Reports of refoulement, violence, and limited access to asylum are compounded by living conditions characterized by isolation, restricted movement, inadequate housing, food, health, and psychosocial care, as well as shortcomings in child protection and interpretation services. Despite progress in school integration, children continue to face delays, transportation problems, educational gaps, and incidents of exclusion and racism. The children's personal accounts vividly reflect intense feelings of fear, loneliness, anxiety, and entrapment, but at the same time highlight their resilience and their desire for education, social participation, and a secure future. Overall, there is a significant gap between institutional commitments to protecting children's rights and the reality experienced by children in the Greek reception system.

Keywords: refugee children, asylum seekers, forced returns, reception facilities, child protection, psychosocial support, health care, education, social inclusion, human rights, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every child, regardless of origin or social status. Foreign minors residing in Greek territory are subject to compulsory education and, minor foreigners studying at all levels of education have unrestricted access to the school and educational community. The integration of immigrant students into regular public education is a conscious choice of the State. For this reason, enrollment in public schools is possible regardless of the legal residence status of the parents (Law 2910/2001). In Greece, the need to integrate refugee, migrant, and asylum-seeking children into the education system has been recognized as a priority, with the aim of promoting social cohesion and strengthening human rights.

The "All Children in Education" (ACE) program, implemented by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in collaboration with UNICEF Greece, is a key initiative in this direction. Since its launch in September 2021, the ACE program has established 44 Study and Creative Activity Centers in various regions of Greece, providing non-formal education to children aged 4 to 17. Its activities include teaching the Greek language, providing support with schoolwork, and familiarizing children with European values and human rights. It is noteworthy that the ACE program has become a model for other European countries (UNICEF, 2024).

At the same time, the report by the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), in collaboration with Save the Children, titled "It's Not Like Real Life: The Daily Lives of Children in Refugee Facilities in Greece," highlights the challenges faced by children living in reception facilities. This study is based on 32 interviews with children, parents, and experts, and documents the difficulties related to access to education, medical care, and psychosocial support (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024). These findings underscore the need for ongoing

support and strengthening of educational programs for refugee and migrant children in Greece, in order to ensure their full integration into society and the realization of their right to education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is part of the broader body of social and cultural research that examines written sources; the research method selected was Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), which combines quantitative and descriptive analysis through the use of Thematic Content Analysis in conjunction with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Intercultural education for social justice supports the scientific investigation of topics, that is, the meticulous examination of sources and the grounding of conclusions and interpretations in research data and findings.

According to Heckmann (2015), integration is the gradual process by which an individual becomes a member of a society and adapts to the living conditions across generations. This perspective emphasizes that integration is not limited to simple adaptation, but includes the active participation of all those involved in all areas of the social, economic and cultural life of the host country and the creation of relationships within the social context (UNHCR, 2014). The integration of immigrants into the host society is a process of two-way adaptation of immigrants and society, through mutual understanding and learning, acquaintance, acceptance and respect for values. The outcomes should take the form of equality of basic rights and obligations, without the obligation of cultural conformity. The basic value and goal of the first dimension, the structural one, is equality rather than inequality. Integration here is understood as equality of access of immigrants and their descendants to various sectors, institutions and organizations of the host society (Chaliapa, 2009).

According to Dimoulas (2006), the processes of integration and inclusion in general describe the processes and the degree of participation of the individual in a social system. Integration is defined as the process of the individual's participation in the public life of the host country and inclusion, respectively, as the individual's participation in activities related to the sphere of private life (Schnapper, 2008). In this context, the integration policy, which adopts the principle of equal treatment of immigrants and national citizens as well as the existence of equal rights and obligations, aims at recognizing and respecting the particularity of immigrants so that they do not lose, as much as possible, elements of their cultural identity and culture. Its point of differentiation from the aforementioned inclusion policy is the recognition of the collective rights of immigrants and their treatment as a special social group with separate demands and separate needs (Evgeniou, 2018).

Intercultural education is a modern educational model, which is radically different from the outdated practices of assimilation and formal recognition of cultural difference, oriented towards the cultivation of values such as empathy, respect, equality and solidarity, and seeks to create a participatory learning environment, where every student, regardless of ethnocultural origin, feels like they belong (Kesidou, 2008). The intercultural approach aims to transform cultural diversity from a potential source of conflict into a tool for enriching the educational process. Through the critical deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices, the strengthening of intercultural skills and the development of an inclusive school culture, social cohesion and well-being are promoted. The general principle that governs the practices of those who support multicultural/intercultural education for social justice is that we use inclusive practices, ensuring that no one is excluded and that all students are included, heard, and empowered.

Teaching within the framework of intercultural education for social justice is an approach and a means to make schools fully inclusive, so that all students have equal educational opportunities (Zachos, 2023). According to Govaris (2011), intercultural education does not refer to a specific, universally accepted model of education, but includes a wide range of theoretical analyses and principles that should govern teaching and learning. Intercultural education constitutes the response of pedagogical science to the reality of multicultural society. It responds to social changes, introduces innovative methods and places child-centered pedagogy at the heart of the educational process. It requires fundamental changes and a restructuring of the educational model, in

order to "open" the school to society and achieve justice, equality, empathy, mutual acceptance, solidarity, intercultural respect and equality of opportunity for all subjects of education (Palaologou, 2011).

At the international level, the protection of human rights without discrimination, the maintenance of peace and the observance of international obligations of states were among the basic principles set by the UN. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaimed fundamental rights of all people, including migrants, emphasizing that all human beings are born free and equal in ("Universal Declaration of Human Rights", 1948). 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 rights ("Convention on the Rights of the Child", 1989).

Taking into account the gaps, deficiencies, and limitations that exist regarding the integration of refugee children in schools, it becomes necessary to evolve nationally defined educational systems and redefine monolingual educational programs in the direction of an intercultural approach with the aim of fair treatment and the active promotion of the educational needs and rights of refugee children (Sgoura et al., 2018). The cultivation of strong bonds between citizens of different cultural backgrounds can be achieved on the basis of cultural and individual equality, social justice and mutual respect, regardless of national origin, mother tongue, religious ideology or other cultural diversity (Salpigktis, 2021).

The "All Children in Education" Program

The non-formal education program "All Children in Education" (All Children in Education – ACE) is an initiative of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in collaboration with UNICEF Greece, and its primary goal is the educational inclusion of refugee, migrant, and asylum-seeking children aged 4 to 17. The program, which began in September 2021, supports access to education for children residing in reception facilities, urban centers, and initial reception points. Its key activities include Greek language instruction, support with schoolwork, and familiarizing children with European values and human rights. To implement the program, 44 Study and Creative Activities Centers have been established, where educational and psychosocial services are provided by specialized educators and volunteers. The organizations SolidarityNow, ARSIS, ELIX, METAdrasi, and DRC, as key partners, contributing to the enhancement of educational access and the integration of children of refugee and migrant origin (UNICEF, 2024).

Statistics

By May 2024, the ACE program had benefited a total of 25,904 children from 75 different countries, including 1,270 children from Ukraine, while 15,040 were actively participating in the program during that same month. At the same time, 70% of the participants were enrolled in formal compulsory education, while 6,261 children were unaccompanied or separated from their families, and more than 284 children with special educational needs were actively participating in the program's activities. The main countries of origin of the beneficiaries were Afghanistan (37%), Iraq (13%), Syria (12%), Somalia (7%), and Ukraine (5%), while the remaining 26% came from other countries. To monitor the students' educational progress, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum developed the ACE Monitoring digital platform, through which beneficiary data is recorded, their participation in educational activities is tracked, and their progress in non-formal education is assessed. The data collected is used to evaluate the program's effectiveness and to design further educational and social inclusion policies. ACE has been recognized as a model of best practice at the European level, contributing to the promotion of inclusive education and the social integration of children with refugee and migrant backgrounds (UNICEF, 2024).

Geographic coverage of the program throughout the country

The "All Children in Education" (ACE) program is implemented at 44 locations throughout Greece, covering both reception facilities run by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and urban centers. Its geographic coverage includes areas of Central Macedonia, such as Thessaloniki, Alexandria, Diavata, Lagkadikia, Nea Kavala, Serres, Vagiochori, Veroia, and Sintiki in Epirus, such as Agia Eleni, Filippiada, and Katsikas as well

as in Central Greece, including Oinofyta, Ritsona, Thermopylae, and Thebes. At the same time, the program is being implemented in Andravida and Pyrgos in Western Greece, in Corinth, Drama, Kavala, and the Evros Border Post, while in Attica it includes Athens, Eleusis, Malakasa, Malakasa II, and Schisto. In the island regions, the program is active in Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesbos, Samos, and Heraklion, Crete, ensuring broad geographic access to its educational activities (Grammenou, 2026).

Arrival flows

During the first half of 2024, arrivals increased significantly compared to the same period in 2023, reaching 18,508, compared to approximately 8,350 arrivals, marking a 122% increase. In May 2024, 3,746 arrivals were recorded, while in June there was a 22% decrease, with arrivals totaling 2,927. As for the population residing in these facilities, a total of 13,088 people were recorded in June 2023, of whom 71% (9,292) resided on the mainland and 29% (3,795) on the islands. Similarly, in June 2024, the total number rose to 18,416 people, with 65% (11,970) residing on the mainland and 35% (6,445) on the islands, indicating an increase in the presence on the islands. At the same time, pending cases at the first and second levels of jurisdiction increased from 17,828 in June 2023 to 20,908 in June 2024, while in May 2024 they had risen to 21,907, subsequently declining by 15%. During the first half of 2024, a total of 48,587 final decisions were issued, of which 41,822 concerned the first instance and 6,765 the second. Finally, total arrivals during the first half of 2024 (18,508) significantly exceeded departures, which numbered 3,321, reflecting the sharp increase in migration and refugee flows during the period under review (Ministry of Migration Asylum, 2026b).

Detailed data

In June 2024, migration flows to the islands of the Eastern Aegean and the Evros region increased by 26% compared to the same month in 2023. Lesbos saw a significant increase in flows starting in June 2023, peaking in September of that year, followed by a gradual decline, reaching 2,927 arrivals in June 2024. Similar fluctuations, though on a smaller scale, were observed on Samos, Chios, Leros, Kos, and Evros. At the same time, the number of asylum seekers transported increased by 142% in June 2024 compared to June 2023, while the number of people staying on the islands rose by 67%. Specifically, on Lesbos, the number of residents increased significantly during the second half of 2023, peaking at 16,139 in December, and then gradually declined to 6,577 in June 2024. Overall, the number of residents increased by 41% year-over-year, from 13,088 in June 2023 to 18,416 in June 2024, of whom 9,813 were housed in facilities and 8,603 in temporary accommodation centers. Regarding the geographic distribution of asylum seekers, the highest percentages of the total population were recorded in the North Aegean (2.77%), followed by the South Aegean (0.70%), Central Greece and Epirus (0.47%).

During the first half of 2024, a total of 29,789 applications for international protection were recorded, a figure that represented an increase compared to previous years, although the total number of applications has fluctuated significantly over time. The majority of applicants came from Asia (22,394), followed by Africa (6,012) and Europe (999). The main countries of origin were Afghanistan (27.4%), Syria (21.5%), Egypt (9.6%), Turkey (6.7%), and Palestine (4.2%). In terms of age, 25% of applicants were minors, 55% were in the 18–34 age group, and 20% were in the 35–64 age group, while 74% were men and 26% were women. Unaccompanied minors constitute a distinct category, with 3,323 asylum applications recorded for them during the period from June 2023 to June 2024. The main countries of origin were Egypt (29.7%), Syria (20%), Somalia (15.5%), Afghanistan (13.6%), and Iraq (7.2%).

During the first half of 2024, a total of 20,470 positive decisions granting international protection were issued at the first and second instances, of which 20,252 concerned refugee status and 218 concerned subsidiary protection. Most positive decisions concerned nationals of Afghanistan (43%) and Syria (26%), who together accounted for 68% of the decisions. The majority of positive decisions concerned individuals aged 18–34 (52%) and men (66%). For unaccompanied minors, 608 positive decisions were issued, of which 595 concerned refugee status and 8 concerned subsidiary protection. Eighty-three percent of the decisions concerned the 14–17 age group, while the decisions primarily concerned boys, who accounted for 79% of the total. These figures reflect the intensity and volatility of refugee and migrant flows in Greece, as well as the

significant presence of minors—and particularly unaccompanied minors—in the international protection system (Ministry of Migration Asylum, 2026b).

Arrivals of Migrants and Refugees

Arrivals of migrants and refugees in Greece surged to a five-year high in 2024, with more than 57,300 people entering the country in the first 11 months of the year. More than 13,000 children arrived in Greece by sea this year, an increase of about 50% compared to last year. The new report, presented by Save the Children and the Greek Council for Refugees, highlights the harsh reality faced by children in Greece's refugee facilities, including the loss of childhood due to systemic neglect. The number of children arriving in Greece more than doubled in 2024, when migration to Greece reached a five-year high, with children in remote refugee facilities reporting alarming conditions, including a lack of protection services, poor-quality food, and even cockroaches inside the facilities, according to Save the Children. Greece, a gateway to Europe for people arriving from the Middle East and Africa, saw the number of migrants and refugees increase by 35% in the first 11 months of 2024, reaching 57,363—the highest number since 2019, according to an analysis of data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Among them, more than 13,000 children arrived by sea, a 50% increase compared to last year. The number of unaccompanied children also doubled, reaching 3,000, compared to 1,490 in 2023.

However, for many migrant and refugee children, the dangerous journey to Greece ends in appalling conditions in remote refugee facilities, despite the obligation of the European Union and the Greek authorities to ensure that these facilities are safe places where children can grow up while awaiting a decision on their asylum claims (Ministry of Migration Asylum, 2026b).

Report: “It Doesn’t Feel Like Real Life”: The Daily Lives of Children in Refugee Facilities in Greece

The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), in collaboration with Save the Children, published the report “It’s Not Like Real Life: The Daily Lives of Children in Refugee Facilities in Greece,” which highlights the living conditions and challenges faced by children in refugee reception facilities. Through 32 interviews with children, caregivers, and experts, the study documents significant barriers to minors’ access to education, health care, psychosocial support, and opportunities for play and socialization. During the first half of 2024, more than 6,400 refugee and migrant children arrived in Greece—a figure four times higher than during the same period in 2023—and 86% of them were under the age of 15. Many of these children come from conflict-affected countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, and, after undertaking dangerous journeys, end up in reception facilities that are often isolated and restrictive. Despite the existence of national and European frameworks for the protection of children’s rights, the report highlights structural weaknesses that limit the fulfillment of minors’ basic needs and hinder their meaningful educational and social integration into Greek society (Govaris, 2011).

Summary of the Report

The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), in collaboration with Save the Children, examined the experiences of children who have been living with their families for a long time in ten reception centers for asylum seekers in mainland Greece. The study was based on 32 in-depth interviews with children, parents, and experts, including representatives of government agencies, and, although it is not representative of all refugee and migrant minors in Greece, it highlights important aspects of their daily lives through their personal accounts. In 2023, children accounted for 25% of applications for international protection in Europe, while in Greece, during the first half of 2024, more than 6,400 child arrivals were recorded, a figure four times higher than in the corresponding period of 2023, with 86% of them being children under the age of 15. Many of them come from countries affected by armed conflicts, such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, and, after perilous journeys, end up in restrictive and often isolated reception settings. The study points out that, despite the European and national institutional frameworks for the protection of minors, significant systemic weaknesses persist in the reception and accommodation of families with children. The geographical isolation of these facilities hinders children’s access to education, health care, psychosocial support, and opportunities for play

and socialization while the lack of adequate integration measures exacerbates their social exclusion and vulnerability (Zachos, 2023).

Overview of Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers in Greece

The operational units of the Reception and Identification Service (YPYT) include three main types of facilities: Reception and Identification Centers (KYT), Closed Controlled Facilities (KED), and Controlled Facilities for the Temporary Accommodation of Asylum Seekers (EDPFA). The RICs serve as the first line of reception and operate at eight locations across the country, with the primary mission of registering and identifying new arrivals, conducting medical examinations, assessing vulnerability, and informing them of their rights and obligations. During the first half of 2024, 428 children were registered at mainland Reception and Identification Centers and 5,026 at island Reception and Identification Centers and the Fylakio Reception and Identification Center. A restriction on movement of up to 25 days is also enforced in the Reception and Identification Centers, a practice that can, in effect, lead to conditions of de facto detention (Govaris, 2011). The KEDs operate exclusively on the islands of the Eastern Aegean and are closed, strictly controlled first-reception facilities with a total capacity of 12,746 beds. At the end of 2023, they housed 16,099 people, a number that exceeded their official capacity, while as of October 2024, 334 unaccompanied children were being housed there in specially designated safety zones. These facilities are characterized by restricted freedom of movement, strict surveillance, and difficulties in accessing basic services, such as health care, education, child protection, and psychosocial support. The EDPFAA operate exclusively in mainland Greece and serve as the second line of reception, providing temporary—but often long-term—accommodation to applicants for international protection and their families. A total of 24 facilities are in operation, with an operational capacity of 18,429 beds; as of the end of 2023, they were housing 13,635 people, including vulnerable groups. Like the KEDs, the EDPFAs are characterized by increased surveillance and are often located in remote areas with limited access to urban centers and transportation. The operation of the three types of facilities, therefore, differ in terms of their role and geographic location, but a common characteristic is the limited access of residents—and especially children—to basic services and opportunities for social and educational integration (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Key Findings

The children's accounts reveal strong feelings of isolation, anxiety, and social exclusion, which are exacerbated by the geographical distance from reception facilities and inadequate transportation links to urban centers. Limited access to education, health care, mental health services, and child protection services further burden their daily lives, while shortages of medical and specialized staff, interpreters, and basic resources make it difficult to meet their needs. At the same time, problems with nutrition and living conditions have been reported, such as poor-quality food, dampness, mold, insects, and inadequate sanitary facilities. Significant are also the shortages of interpreters, which limit families' access to information and their participation in asylum procedures and in accessing basic services. Although there have been some improvements in access to education, the integration of children remains problematic due to delays in placement in reception classes, transportation difficulties, social isolation, and incidents of discrimination. Finally, the lack of suitable spaces and activities for children, combined with legal uncertainty and conditions that often resemble a detention environment, intensifies feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and insecurity and negatively affects their mental well-being and their social and educational integration (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving reception conditions for children and families seeking asylum requires a gradual transition from the model of isolated camps to urban housing solutions, which provide a safer and more stable environment, as demonstrated by the experience of the ESTIA program. At the same time, specific reception conditions must be implemented in accordance with Greek and European legislation, with an emphasis on upgrading infrastructure and ensuring unimpeded access for children to health care, formal education, psychosocial support, and safe play areas, as well as ensuring adequate food, transportation, and appropriate, child-centered

infrastructure. Another key prerequisite is early educational and social integration, which should begin upon the family's arrival through the immediate enrollment of children in school, learning the host language, and strengthening parental and community involvement. Finally, the implementation of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum should be based on the protection of children's rights and the development of long-term integration policies that promote the well-being, social participation, and smooth integration of children into society (Zachos, 2023).

Brief Review

Since 2015, the system for receiving asylum seekers in Greece has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from overcrowded facilities to more controlled and guarded facilities. The refugee and migration crisis of 2015, combined with the EU–Turkey agreement in 2016 and the closure of borders in the Western Balkans, led to the creation of temporary camps in mainland Greece and fundamentally reshaped reception policy. Subsequently, these facilities were institutionalized as “Temporary Reception and Accommodation Facilities” and, starting in 2023, as Controlled Temporary Accommodation Facilities for Asylum Seekers (CTAAFAS). With the conclusion of the EU-Turkey Agreement of March 18, 2016, the policy of relocation to other EU member states or return to Turkey began to be implemented. It should be noted that the right to seek asylum is often violated due to the pressure caused by the large number of applicants and the limited capacity of these closed controlled facilities (Kasimati & Panagiotopoulou, 2018). With the International Organization for Migration (IOM) stepping back from management in early 2023, the Reception and Identification Service (YPYT) assumed exclusive oversight of the 24 facilities, which house approximately 16,911 people. Despite the significant contribution of European funding to the development of the system, reception policies continue to emphasize border control and deterrence, with consequences for the rights and living conditions of asylum seekers. Furthermore, the relocation of facilities to remote areas and the closure of centers located near urban centers, such as Skaramagas and Eleonas, have limited residents' access to services and broader social life (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Reception Conditions for Vulnerable Persons Seeking International Protection

During reception and identification procedures, vulnerable asylum seekers—and children in particular—are entitled to special reception conditions that ensure a decent standard of living, protect their physical and mental health, and provide access to emergency medical care and psychosocial support. The Reception and Identification Service (YPYT) is the competent authority for managing reception, while the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (TAME) contributes to the financing of the system. Following the completion of the ESTIA housing program in 2022, reception facilities continue to be the primary form of housing for asylum seekers, while linking financial assistance to residence in these facilities reinforces their confinement and dependence on them. At the same time, limited transparency regarding the characteristics of residents and the reduced presence of NGOs in the facilities make it difficult to accurately assess needs and design appropriate interventions. Overall, despite the institutional framework for the protection of vulnerable groups, the reception system continues to be characterized by increased state control, limited autonomy for asylum seekers, and shortcomings in transparency and the assessment of their needs (Govaris, 2011).

Children's Experiences on the Journey to Greece

Children seeking asylum in Greece come mainly from Syria (28%), Afghanistan (20%), and Egypt (10%), followed by children from Turkey, Palestine, Pakistan, and Iraq. During the first nine months of 2024, 11,730 asylum applications were filed by children, of which 2,480 involved unaccompanied minors and 9,250 involved children accompanied by their families, while 7,429 were under the age of 13. Many children had previously spent a long time in Turkey, facing deteriorating living conditions, insecurity, and mounting pressures—a situation that led many families to embark on dangerous journeys to Europe in search of safety, stability, and access to education. At the same time, the lack of detailed data on children residing in Temporary Reception Centers for Asylum Seekers makes it difficult to fully assess their needs. Particularly alarming are

reports of violence and mistreatment during their journey, as many children are exposed to physical abuse, threats, blackmail, and humiliation by border authorities and smugglers, while incidents of refoulement at the Greek-Turkish border have also been documented (Zachos, 2023).

Waiting

Prolonged waiting is a key feature of daily life for refugees in Reception and Identification Centers, as the process of reviewing an asylum application takes an average of 9–12 months and, due to the possibility of resubmission, this can result in a stay of more than 18 months without a clear timeline for departure. This prolonged stay, combined with new arrivals, exacerbates overcrowding and living conditions in the facilities, while also having significant social and psychological impacts on refugees. From a sociological perspective, waiting is not considered a neutral process but can function as a mechanism for exercising power, as the person waiting is in a position of dependence on the institutions that determine the timing and terms of the process. Although delays are officially attributed to the complexity of procedures, understaffing, and bureaucratic difficulties, the prolonged wait perpetuates relationships of inequality and subordination, placing refugees at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the institutions that control the course and duration of the asylum process (Kourahanis, 2021).

Children at Risk: Systematic Refoulement in Greece

Refoulement is one of the most serious and well-documented practices in Greece's migration management framework, as migrants and asylum seekers are reportedly prevented from entering the country or are returned to Turkey without access to the asylum process or an assessment of their protection needs. At the same time, there have been reports of forced removals from within the country, including through abductions and unlawful deportations, while some testimonies describe the violent transport of people in lifeboats toward Turkish territorial waters, posing serious risks to their lives. For example, from March 2022 to October 2024, the Greek Council for Refugees filed 85 applications for interim measures with the European Court of Human Rights seeking humanitarian assistance and access to the asylum procedure, all of which were granted. Despite these interventions, reports of forced returns and disappearances continue to be documented, posing particularly serious risks to asylum seekers and, in particular, to children (Zachos, 2023).

Case Study: The Story of Samuel

The case of 13-year-old Samuel from the Democratic Republic of the Congo highlights the many challenges refugee children face during their journey and while staying in Greece. Samuel lives with his family at the Ritsona reception center, having previously stayed at centers in Rhodes and Kos. The family faced detention and a lack of access to education in Turkey, and during their attempts to enter Greece, they experienced—according to his testimony—violent interceptions and mistreatment. Even after arriving in Greece, Samuel feels insecure due to incidents of violence within the shelter, which limits his freedom and daily life. At the same time, although he attends school and has developed positive relationships with teachers and peers, he has experienced instances of racist behavior. Soccer plays a particularly important role in his social integration, as it has allowed him to feel accepted and recognized by his peers. His testimony thus highlights the connection between safety, education, social acceptance, and participation, as well as the difficulties that refugee children continue to face in their daily lives (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Trapped in Isolation: The Lives of Children in Remote Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers

The long-term stay of children in EDPFAA facilities, combined with strict controls on their release, creates conditions that often resemble a detention environment and intensify feelings of confinement and anxiety. At the same time, the geographical isolation of most facilities and inadequate transportation links significantly limits children's and their families' access to schools, health care, asylum services, psychosocial support, and social integration activities. Funding issues and unreliable bus schedules exacerbate the situation, while in some cases residents are forced to walk long and dangerous distances or are unable to use buses due to overcrowding and limited schedules. The lack of transportation directly affects both children's educational

attendance and access to health services, as well as families' participation in asylum procedures. For example, a 2021–2022 survey by the National Center for Social Policy (ESP) showed that 50% of residents in inland facilities faced difficulties accessing basic services, while 60% reported limited opportunities to participate in Greek society. Remote facilities have also been deemed unsuitable for long-term stay by international organizations, and many do not comply with EUAA guidelines, which stipulate that facilities must ensure easy and safe access to schools, health services, public and social services, legal assistance, and recreational activities (Govaris, 2011).

The specific rights of children regarding reception are not being fulfilled. “We brought you here to give you food and a place to stay; don’t ask for anything else.”

The lack of adequate child protection and mental health services in these facilities is a serious problem. Most children do not know where to turn in case of danger, and following the transfer of management of the facilities to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in 2023, there has been a reduction in services such as case management and psychosocial support. The lack of specialized staff and clear referral procedures leaves many child protection cases without effective intervention. Access to mental health care is also inadequate. A 17-year-old boy from Afghanistan describes the psychological strain he experienced after his asylum application was rejected and notes that he had no one to talk to about his anxiety and distress, not even on Lesbos. At the same time, an NGO representative notes that only an initial needs assessment is conducted, without targeted psychological support, while an official from the Ministry of Migration Policy admits that there is not enough specialized staff to identify and diagnose psychological problems. This situation jeopardizes both the immediate and long-term well-being of the children. There are also serious shortages of interpreters, which limit families' access to asylum, health care, and other services. The suspension of METAdrasi's services in May 2024, due to payment delays, left significant gaps, while in 2023 some facilities went without interpreters for up to three months. As a result, children and families were unable to attend asylum interviews or communicate effectively with health services. Healthcare also remains limited, with a very high ratio of residents to healthcare professionals. In Ritsona, there are approximately 255 people per healthcare worker, while in Serres and Polykastro, the ratio is about 200 to one. One child described the situation: “After 2:00 p.m., there’s no doctor, just a nurse... we had to call an ambulance.” Another child from Ritsona had to wait three years to schedule a follow-up appointment after surgery, while a child in Serres describes how, when a hospital visit is needed, “you either pay for a taxi or walk for hours.” The mother of a child with autism also stated that after Terre des Hommes left, she felt “stuck,” as she didn’t know where to turn for specialized help. Changes to the asylum system can even affect basic health needs. A mother in Diavata describes how, after her family’s asylum application was rejected, her child was unable to receive the vaccination required for school enrollment and “to this day, unfortunately, remains unvaccinated.” Despite the launch of the “Hippocrates” program in 2024, experts point out that the services provided have not yet reached the level of previous programs (Zachos, 2023). Meal service is also particularly problematic. Despite the required quality controls, there are complaints about expired or unsuitable food. A 14-year-old girl from Afghanistan says: “The food is so bad that it often ends up in the trash.” A child in Ritsona reports that the food causes allergies, while a caregiver in Sintiki notes that the younger children “have no appetite for this food.” However, conditions at the Schisto facility appear to be better, with a caregiver reporting that water, milk for the children, bread, and food are provided, and that “for the most part, it hasn’t expired.” One child from Katsika even suggests that basic ingredients be provided so that families can cook for themselves. These inequalities are also evident in the testimonies of two children from Central Macedonia, who bitterly remarked: “Animals are treated better than we are.” The suspension of financial assistance in the summer of 2024 exacerbated food insecurity. One mother argues that even when parents’ applications are rejected, assistance for children should not be cut off. Another mother describes how she was forced to trade her child’s milk for food, which led to her arrest and a fine of 1,000 euros. Lefteris Papagiannakis links food insecurity to a broader policy of deterrence, in which the deprivation of basic needs serves as a message: “Don’t come here.”

Finally, housing conditions often remain inadequate. Although moving from island facilities to those on the mainland offers some relief, problems persist, such as shared bathrooms and kitchens, poor maintenance, cockroaches, mold, and electrical hazards. For example, a caregiver in Sintiki describes having to walk 10 minutes to use the restroom, while in the shared kitchen, “men had priority.” Overall, the testimonies reveal a

system in which deficiencies in protection, mental and physical health, interpretation services, food, and housing directly affect the safety, health, dignity, and well-being of children (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Barriers to Children's Right to Inclusive Education

Access to education for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece has improved, with 84% attending school in 2023 however, significant barriers remain. Delays in enrollment, a shortage of teachers and specialized training, transportation difficulties, and problems with the necessary documentation hinder smooth school integration. However, it is a dominant assumption that the integration of immigrants into public schools has led primarily to educational inequality, both due to the lack of infrastructure in Greek schools and due to specific cultural and communication problems (Mantzanas, 2014). Immigration integration policies at the international level are primarily called upon to face timeless challenges. For example, limited knowledge of the host language is a key obstacle both in the educational process and in 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. An important parameter is also the possible traumatic experience of students during their migration journey, which can affect their cognitive ability. Therefore, the equally important role of psychosocial support in the educational process emerges. In the described context, the perceptions and teaching practices of teachers seem to play an important role in addressing the challenges and more generally in the modernization of educational policies. In the case of Greece as a country hosting immigrants, the main priority should be the teaching of the Greek language to students with an immigrant background. In a secondary stage, the appropriate training of teachers in the context of modern teaching models (teaching method, intercultural education), can shape a framework for the integration of immigrants in response to the demands of the modern international community (Papachristou, 2026).

These difficulties are exacerbated by poor living conditions in the facilities, uncertainty regarding asylum, and limited access to services. A major factor hindering the school integration of refugee students is the frequent relocation of these students and their families. In particular, for refugee families, Greece is usually not their final destination, and their stay in the country is temporary. As a result, refugee families may show less interest in integrating into Greek society, enrolling their children in the Greek educational system, or learning the host language. In fact, in many cases, children from families with a refugee background are not enrolled in school, or even if they are, they do not attend classes, because they are waiting to be transferred to another European country (Koukou, 2023). A typical example is the case of Zina and Mari from the Polykastro Kilkis Reception and Accommodation Center, who managed to enroll their children in school just three weeks after their arrival, in contrast to other families who faced significant delays. In Schisto, a mother reported that her children were unable to attend school due to problems with their documents and the lack of an AMKA (Social Security Number), a situation that even affected their required vaccinations. Transportation to school is a particularly significant obstacle, especially for children living in remote areas. Younger children are usually transported by private buses, while teenagers over the age of 15 rely on public transportation, which is often inadequate or nonexistent. Many parents report that transportation is suspended or does not resume, resulting in limited school attendance (Govaris, 2011). At the same time, the school experience is not always inclusive. A mother of an 8-year-old girl from Diavata describes how her daughter “feels that they love her, but they don’t want to play with her,” highlighting the emotional toll of social exclusion. An official from the Ministry of Education characterized the situation as a form of “hidden systemic violence,” while a UNICEF expert argued that many children are in classrooms where they are treated more out of charity than through meaningful educational inclusion. Testimonies from caregivers also reveal experiences of racism, such as the statement: “They told us not to ask for too much. You’re not the same as the rest of them.” Despite the difficulties, extracurricular activities serve as an important means of integration. School field trips are described by a Ministry of Education official as “a breath of fresh air, a chance to get away,” while the children report that through these trips they come into contact with Greek peers and feel more accepted. However, the cost of the field trips is often a barrier. Similarly, community centers operating near the facilities—primarily through NGOs—offer language classes, workshops, and other forms of informal education. In Ritsona and Katsika, for example, soccer gives children the opportunity to play, socialize, and experience a sense of normalcy. The ACE program also played an important role, connecting families with the formal education

system and boosting school attendance. Its conclusion in July 2024 was considered a significant loss for the children. The need for such interventions becomes particularly evident as children grow older and the obstacles they face increase.

Finally, the testimonies show that the resilience of children and families is a key factor in school attendance. Attending school serves as a stabilizing factor for the entire family, while younger children often adapt through play and relationships with peers. During adolescence, however, adaptation becomes more difficult and “play is lost.” As a UNICEF expert notes, it takes “a great deal of courage, a great deal of mental fortitude, and a great deal of resilience” for children to keep going. One child’s testimony is particularly telling: “I don’t really like school, but I go every day. I want to go so I can become someone.” This statement captures the children’s desire to use education as a means of stability, inclusion, and building a better future (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

The Well-Being of Children in Asylum Seeker Reception Facilities

Conditions in reception facilities have serious consequences for children’s mental and emotional well-being. The majority report feelings of loneliness, sadness, anxiety, stress, apathy, and sleep disturbances. The environment of these facilities—with barbed wire, limited access to the city, and features reminiscent of detention—reinforces feelings of confinement and despair. Typical are the children’s views that “the camp is not a good place to grow up” and that “children don’t have a good time here.” Experts also observe frustration, anger, rage, and signs of resignation (Govaris, 2011). At the same time, the phenomenon of “parenting” is observed, in which children take on responsibilities that normally belong to their parents. Because they often have a better command of the language or are able to handle everyday transactions, they serve as a “compass” for their families and even provide protection for their parents. This reversal of roles can place excessive pressure on children, affect their mental and emotional development, and rob them of part of their childhood. These facilities are also characterized by a lack of suitable spaces and organized activities for children. Psychosocial and recreational activities are limited or nonexistent, while most facilities in the interior lack multidisciplinary teams, safe playgrounds, and truly child-friendly spaces. Even when sports or play areas are available, the equipment may be inadequate, damaged, or unsafe, and age restrictions exclude many children (Zachos, 2023). The lack of activities places a particularly heavy burden on younger children and their caregivers. A telling example is the testimony of a mother of a child with a developmental disorder, who describes how she remains alone with her child at home, since the child does not speak and has no friends to play with. This experience highlights both the social isolation of these children and the additional burden placed on their parents.

Finally, play is a fundamental need and right of the child, not merely a form of entertainment. It contributes to learning and development, reduces stress, and acts as a protective factor against the long-term psychological effects of living in stressful environments. Therefore, the absence of safe play areas and organized activities in these facilities is a significant factor that negatively affects children’s development, mental health, and resilience (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Case Study: Amira's Story

The testimony of Amira, a 16-year-old from Afghanistan, highlights the impact of life in reception centers on children’s safety, mental health, education, and daily lives. She lives with her family in a small container at the Katsika facility and feels extremely insecure following the attack on her 10-year-old brother. Although the shelter’s security was notified, the family had to call the police on their own, and after another attack, her brother needed an ambulance because no doctor was available. She says that after the incident, she couldn’t sleep because of the stress. Staying at the facility is gradually eroding her sense of freedom. Amira describes life at the camp as “suffocating,” noting that as long as one remains there, one feels that “not free” and that “it doesn’t feel like real life.” The constant checks of asylum cards upon entry and exit reinforce this sense of confinement. At the same time, restrictions on activities particularly affect the younger children. Her 10-year-old brother, following a change in the rules at the Hamal Community Center, can no longer participate in activities and spends most of his time at the camp, on his cell phone, or occasionally playing soccer. In contrast,

the Hamal Community Center is a safe and familiar place for Amira, which she characteristically describes as “like my home”. Her education was temporarily interrupted after her arrival in Greece while she waited to enroll in school, illustrating how reception procedures can disrupt children’s schooling. The psychological consequences are particularly acute among younger children. Amira is worried about her brother, who has few friends, feels lonely, and—despite seeing a psychologist—has had only a brief session with no meaningful follow-up. His anxiety also manifests physically, as he “bites his nails.” She believes that, unlike her older siblings who can better understand what they’ve been through, her younger brother is struggling to cope with the traumatic journey and the attack on the shelter and, like any child, “wants a normal life like other children.”

Finally, Amira highlights the uncertainty of her stay and the problem of integration. Her statement, “You don’t know how long you’ll stay here. You just wait and wait,” captures the prolonged waiting that characterizes life in the shelters. At the same time, she points out that even after being recognized as refugees, the lack of knowledge of the Greek language and difficulties in accessing employment create new obstacles. Despite the hardships, Amira remains hopeful about the future, as she dreams of continuing her studies, attending university, and playing volleyball. Her story thus encapsulates the contrast between the insecurity, restrictions, and uncertainty of the present and children’s desire for education, a sense of normalcy, and a better future (Chouzouraki & Dewulf, 2024).

Children: The Impact of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

It should be emphasized that although the detention of minors is illegal, the Ombudsman’s (2014) investigation report on the Amygdaleza Detention Center as well as Spyropoulou (2016) highlights cases of administrative detention of children who were clearly minors and who lacked legal documents and were either registered as adults or as minors, but remained there due to a lack of accommodation (Sgoura et al., 2018). At the same time, however, many restrictive and prohibitive conditions are provided for the exercise of these rights (Chaliapa, 2009), without being able to distinguish between them and provide the necessary and statutory assistance and legal guidance for refugees, an element that also perpetuates the violations of these rights (Evgeniou, 2018). At this point, a pre-detention phase takes place before the transfer of individuals to a reception center, either a First Reception Centre or, in some cases, a police station.

During this stage, some or all of the prescribed procedures are carried out, including the verification of personal information, identification, and photography, in preparation for the individual’s transfer to the reception center. These procedures may also involve other members of the individual’s family. Since family members may have accompanied the individual from the outset, they may also be photographed and fingerprinted. Some immigrants provide complete and accurate personal information, and the entire registration procedure is subsequently followed, including the taking of photographs and fingerprints. Others, however, provide only their name, which may be either genuine or false, depending on the personal decision of the respondent at that particular moment (Evgeniou, 2018).

The perception that international migration is a threat to the security of countries is partly related to concerns about international criminal activities that exploit the illegal movement of people, as well as recent terrorism. Therefore, there are three important issues related to the migration policy of a host country: a) Border control in the nation-state and the establishment of rules regarding entry and exit, b) national security and c) the issue of the integration of migrants, including the granting of political rights. The most important factors that influence the process of settlement and integration of migrants in a host society are: the political system of the host country, the social networks of migrants, the specific characteristics of migrants and the conditions in which migration takes place (Chaliapa, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

The continuous movements of populations around the world directly affect children, who follow their families, carrying traumatic experiences, often including the interruption or deprivation of their right to education. Despite ensuring access to education and developing integration structures, students with a migrant background continue to face significant difficulties, such as language barriers, learning inequalities and limited

support. The above factors, as characteristically stated, negatively affect educational outcomes and limit the effectiveness of policies (Papachristou, 2026). The change of cultural environment, limited proficiency in the host language and living in a country as a minority, create a challenging environment in the effort to adapt and integrate immigrant minors in the host country. Acculturation stress does not subside, and is considered to be associated with increased levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, feelings of marginalization and tendencies towards isolation (Christofi, 2015).

Since 1995, through the signing of various international and European conventions between the Member States of the European Union, a comprehensive legal and institutional framework has been established for the management of migration and the protection of the rights of migrants and refugees. This development culminated in 2020 with the proposal of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to establish a more effective, fair and coherent system for the management of asylum, migration, integration, and borders (European Commission, 2020).

At the institutional level, international organizations (such as UNESCO and the OECD) formulate guidelines that encourage states to develop inclusive education systems. More specifically, through international agreements, reports and programs, principles such as universal access to education, equal opportunities and the protection of the rights of migrant and refugee children are promoted (Pagliarello, 2020). The above policies are based on the principle of equal opportunities and aim to ensure access to quality education for all children, regardless of origin. According to the international literature, education is considered a key mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and preventing social exclusion, particularly for students with a migrant background (Faas et al., 2014).

The “Stegi” program is a precursor to the current and more advanced “STEGI PLUS”, which aims to welcome and integrate asylum seekers into Greek society and has as its main characteristic the differentiation from the rules governing the operation of conventional reception centers, as asylum seekers are accommodated in separate autonomous spaces under the supervision of the competent authorities, always without living together in the infrastructure of a reception center (Evgeniou, 2018).

In 2019, the “HELIOS” program was developed, and has been implemented since July of the same year and which seeks to ensure the housing of newcomers to Greece and the teaching of Greek so that they can integrate into Greek society quickly and effectively. It also aims to develop the skills and knowledge of each individual and to strengthen or improve them and help them become active members of the Greek workforce (Ministry of Migration Asylum, 2026a).

At the same time, the need for state support is emphasized not only for students with different ethnocultural backgrounds but also for their families, with access to work, healthcare and language training for parents, which indirectly strengthens the school integration of children. Family participation emerges as a crucial factor, with proposals for supporting parents in learning the Greek language, so as to strengthen language culture in the family environment as well. It is obvious that any effort to collaborate with parents has language communication as a core prerequisite through language. Language determines the relationship of parents with the school and can act as a major barrier. The teaching of Greek has significantly helped in improving relations with immigrant parents, as it has largely solved the problem of their inability to communicate due to lack of language proficiency (Charavitsidis, 2009).

The introduction of teaching the language, culture and history of immigrant communities that have a significant presence in a city or region of the country, both immigrant and native-born students, simultaneously promotes the integration of the entire immigrant family as their connection with the school and the immigrant community itself is facilitated. This naturally requires a public school properly equipped with the necessary means to accept and teach the language and culture not only of the host country but also of the countries of origin. The absence of multiculturalism in the educational system is tantamount to an ignorance of history or geography (Modgil, 1986). It is therefore an imperative need and obligation of the state to foster effective socialization and establish a truly democratic society. Given that democracy has self-protection mechanisms, educational means and state mechanisms should be devised for all minority groups, in order not only to place

them in the broader society, but also to help them adapt to social norms, maintaining their autonomy and their cultural identity. In education, it is imperative to make structural changes that aim at the full inclusion and full integration of foreign children in school classes. The goal of integration, moreover, is to foster reciprocal interactions among individuals and in relation to the broader structure of society (Mantzanas, 2014).

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