

Refugee Education Coordinators in the Greek Educational System: Their Role as Mediators in Refugee Camps

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Abstract:

In Greece, the program for the integration of school-aged refugee children in public education has been implemented since 2016. An innovation established by the Greek Ministry of Education to facilitate refugee children's access to public school was the institution of the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC). The research explores the role of RECs regarding involvement of refugee parents. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen RECs positioned in refugee camps in order to acquire the qualitative data required to answer the research questions. The research participants considered that RECs had a determining role in raising refugee parents' awareness on the necessity of their children's schooling, as well as connecting them with their children's school.


Keywords:

Refugee education, refugee education coordinators, inclusive education, refugee and asylum seeker children, newly arrived students, post-migration ecology model

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a large number of refugees crossed the Mediterranean to reach the European coastlines. Many of us remember the images of the refugees who “washed up” on the coastlines of the Aegean islands, and then the caravans of people crossing the mainland on foot, following the so-called Eastern Mediterranean - Western Balkans route. Since the closure of the Balkan route and the ‘legal’ passage to other European countries refugee and asylum-seekers have been urged to stay in Greece. Therefore, the Greek Ministry of Education faced the immense challenge of managing the education of the school-aged refugee population. In March 2016, the Ministry of Education decided to prepare a plan for the integration of refugee and asylum-seeker children into the Greek educational system and shortly in Autumn 2016 established the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) for refugee children residing in the refugee camps. In parallel, the institution of the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC) was established. RECs are permanent teachers of the Ministry of Education and are positioned in each refugee camp in order to facilitate refugee children’s school enrollment and attendance. In essence, RECs are assigned to bring the refugee population in contact with the Greek educational system and act as liaisons among the refugee camps, the school and the educational authorities. The research aspires to explore the way that RECs communicate and collaborate with refugee parents and empower their engagement in their children’s schooling. In particular, how communication and collaboration issues are faced by the RECs and the barriers faced by RECs in achieving effective cooperation with refugee parents. Eventually, to explore how RECs connect the refugee parents with the Greek educational system and inform refugee parents on the necessity of their children’s school enrollment and attendance.

SETTING THE SCENE

Models of refugee education worldwide

The mass arrival of forced migrants and refugees, in combination with rising extreme right nationalist movements has given prominence in the educational debate, in many European countries, to the issue of the educational policies implemented for the integration of newly arrived children. In the context of policies related to refugees, educational practices and barriers faced by refugee children attending school, Koehler & Schneider (2019) interestingly distinguish between the right to education and the obligation to attend school. The fact is that receiving countries should provide quality education and urgently take action in order to enroll refugee and asylum-seeker children to school (Koehler & Schneider, 2019, p.8). Koehler & Schneider (2019) raise the issue very aptly, arguing that the right to education “does not necessarily imply state action” unless refugee families claim for the right, even then, “the state may impose barriers, and there is no guarantee for the quality of the education that is offered” (p.8). On the other hand, the obligation to go to school also

compels states to take action for refugee and asylum-seeker children school attendance, therefore, “in the absence of obligatory school attendance, schools also have the right to reject refugee pupils” (Koehler & Schneider, 2019, p.8). And even when asylum-seeker and refugee children manage to enroll to school, research on education for these children has highlighted a number of inhibitory factors for their educational success (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Block, Cross, Riggs & Gibbs, 2014; Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; McBrien, 2005; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Relevant literature to refugee and migrant education directs attention to three major models adopted by schools intending to integrate newly arrived refugee, asylum seeker and immigrant students. These models are usually met in western receiving countries. The first model reported is the Separate Site model in which newly arrived students are placed in separate premises, namely exclusive schools, for a shorter or a longer period of time (Bunar, 2019; Koehler, 2017; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Short, 2002; Short & Boyson, 2012). The separate site model has been employed in the U.S.A and is addressed to newly-arrived middle and high school students, namely grades 6-12. The newly-arrived students are enrolled in mainstream schools close to their homes but attend separate site programs in separate premises for one year or less (Short, 2002; Short & Boyson, 2012). In Sweden, separate site schools have been established at local level. Such an example is the school for newcomers, aged 13–15, established in 2012 in the city of Malmö (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). Furthermore, in Turkey primary and secondary separate site schools, namely “Temporary education centers” provide a modified Syrian curriculum to Syrian refugee students in the Arabic language. The curriculum was composed by the Syrian Interim Government’s Ministry of Education and the Turkish Ministry of National Education (Crul, 2017; Crul, Lelie, Biner, Bunar, Keskiner, Kokkali, Jens Schneider, & Shuayb, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2015). Additionally, separate site schools, namely “second-shift schools”, operated between 2.00 and 6.30 pm in Lebanon for refugee Syrian students, “a preference to segregate Lebanese from Syrian students for fear that the latter would affect the learning of the former” (Crul, et al., 2019). The policy was questioned by the Syrian families for the quality of education provided and consider “second-shift schools” to be non-formal education (Crul, et al., 2019).

The second model presented in the literature is the Direct Immersion model in which all newly arrived students are placed directly in mainstream classes (Bunar, 2019; Grigt, 2017; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). Support may be provided either in the classroom by a second teacher (Bunar, 2019) or outside the classroom through short extract classes or extracurricular activities (Bunar, 2019; Grigt, 2017). In Sweden support is not provided in all schools, while in others schools support is provided by a teacher who is familiar with students’ mother-tongue or a teacher who is responsible for teaching Swedish as second language (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

The third model encountered in the literature is the separate class or program within-a-school model. In this case, newly arrived students are placed in preparatory classes, also referred to as reception classes, transition classes or immersion classes, if they do not have the language skills to attend mainstream classes (Bunar, 2019; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Koehler, 2017; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Short, 2002; Short & Boyson, 2012). Newly arrived students attend preparatory classes for one, or in some countries up to two years, until they are ready to join mainstream classes (Koehler, 2017). The separate class or program within-a-school model seems to opt in favour of the two other models. In relation to the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission report, published in 2019 in order to identify and record the measures taken by the European education systems to promote the well-being of students with migrant background, 33 education systems have adopted the separate class model out of the 42 European countries whose educational policies have been mapped in the report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Additionally, from school year 1999 to 2000 out of 115 school programs for middle and high school newly arrived students in 29 states of the U.S.A., 89 of the schools adopted the program within-a-school model (Short, 2002). Eventually, in 2011, 38 out of 63 school programs for middle and high school newly arrived students in the U.S.A. adopted the program within-a-school model (Short & Boyson, 2012).

Towards an inclusive model of refugee education

The three models discussed above seem to have an assimilative perspective concerning policies and educational practices aiming to integrate children with a refugee background. All models focus individually on specific aspects such as the rapid learning of the language of the host country and adjustment to the new culture. Education is not only a cognitive investment for the future but also an essential tool for social inclusion and social well-being of refugee and asylum-seeker children (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Schools can provide a space for acculturation (Berry, 1997; 2004). *Acculturation* relates to policies of multiculturalism with an integrative perspective which motivate and support the protection of valuable elements of all cultures and simultaneously assist full participation of all ethno-cultural groups in the evolving establishments of the wider society (Berry, 2005). *Acculturation* refers to the cultural and psychological changes that occur to cultural groups and their members that come into contact, generating changes in both groups, the settled or dominant group as well as the non-dominant group (Berry, 2005).

Furthermore, schools can transform structures, policies, curriculum and pedagogies in order to provide teaching practices that lead to academic achievement (Matthews, 2008). Consequently, matters related to the education of refugee children as school attendance, lack of academic achievement, interrupted schooling or school dropout cannot be approached with an assimilative perspective that focuses on specific aspects of refugee children's needs. These matters can be approached with a holistic perspective that embraces

refugee and asylum-seeker children's multiple learning, social and emotional needs. In relation to the relevant literature to refugee education, policies, educational systems and pedagogical practices that adopt the holistic model and the whole-school approach provide schools the potential to reinforce refugee and asylum-seeker students' social inclusion, well-being and development. The school institutions that embrace the holistic model consider refugee and asylum-seeker students' multiple needs, promote family – school – community collaboration, employ a multi-agency approach, and educate these students with a child-centered approach (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Bunar, 2019; Block, Cross, Riggs & Gibbs, 2014; Cerna, 2019; Mathews, 2008; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development

The Holistic model is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology perspective of human development that can support family - school - community collaboration. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory describes the influence of the environment, or context, on child development and considers human development as a continuous change concerning the way an individual perceives his/her environment and deals with his/her environment. The ecological environment is conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a set of structures that are placed one inside another such as a set of Russian dolls. The developing individual is viewed as a dynamic entity that gradually moves into and transforms the environment in which it inhabits, while engaging in a reciprocal interaction with the environment. The developmental processes is not limited to a single environmental structure but incorporates interconnections between such structures, as well as influences emanating from the larger social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Under this perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979) separates the structures of the environment in accordance to the impact they have on the developing child. These structures are referred by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1986) extended the environmental structures involving in his ecology of human development the chronosystem which supports the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystem. In this case, Bronfenbrenner (1986) incorporates a time and change dimension over the trajectory of life that accounts for changes that take place within the developing individual and also in the environment, hence providing research on human development the potential to analyze the interrelation between these two procedures.

An Ecology Approach to Refugee Education

Based on Bronfenbrenner's theory, a theoretical framework was developed by scholars of refugee and migration studies, termed post-migration ecology, aiming to understand and highlight the number and the interconnection of multilevel factors that affect the development and integration of immigrants and refugees in the receiving countries (Anderson et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2004; Rutter, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's ecology approach

enables researchers to examine different refugee populations through the same lens and perceive how the different ecology systems that overlap and interact influence the refugee children's development (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 4). Post-migration ecology is implemented in the studies of refugee and migration education with the central principle that educational policies and practices should reflect on how students' experiences and perspectives are integrated and regulated by wider social settings at different times, and how these interact and overlap (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

Three key factors are presented in the model that influence the individuals of the different refugee populations. These are pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration factors. These factors are described by Anderson et al. (2004) with a temporal dimension, in relation to Bronfenbrenner's ecological conceptual framework which situates the developing person in his/her ecological context. Correspondingly, pre-migration factors interrelate with refugees' characteristics and experiences that occurred prior to leaving their home country. Trans-migration factors refer to the experiences that came to pass in the transition from home to the receiving country. Eventually, post-migration factors refer to the experiences that occur on arrival in the receiving country. Based on this categorization, Anderson et al. (2004) depict the three phases of refugee children's experiences and present an ecological approach to refugee children's development, captured in the analytical concepts of 'pre-migration ecology', 'trans-migration ecology', and 'post-migration ecology'.

Legal framework in Greece

Greece, like the rest of Europe, has brought the issue of the refugee crisis into the foreground since 2015, with an evident inhibition. Until spring 2016 Greece was mainly a transit country, namely refugees that entered the country were recorded and in a shorter or longer period of time continued their journey to Central European countries. However, since the closure of the Balkan route and the 'legal' passage to other European countries refugee and asylum-seekers are urged to stay in Greece waiting to be permitted to move on, mainly to reunite with family members in other European countries (Simopoulos & Magos, 2018). Due to this situation, large influxes of refugees have arrived since 2016 and have been resettled in Greece, therefore Greek authorities and local communities are facing the immense challenge of managing the reception and hosting of these people. Among these refugees thousands are children originating mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 2017). During 2016 approximately 21.000 children were in temporary accommodation sites, urban areas, and reception and identification centers in Greece (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 2017). These numbers are constantly growing and the accommodated children from 21.000 in December 2017 reached 23.500 in June 2018, 27.000 in December 2018 and 32.000 in June 2019 (UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM, 2018a; 2018b; 2019). Among these children the Ministry of Education estimated that during school year 2017-

2018 the number of school aged refugee children (4-15 years old) was 12.000 – 14.000 (Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs [MoE], 2018).

Under these circumstances, Greece provided refugee children the opportunity of schooling, since literacy development is an essential element for their educational success, social participation and settlement (Mathews, 2008). In addition, directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, under which the fundamental right for refugee and asylum-seeker children to access the public education system is provided, was adopted by the Greek Government as a Member State of the EU in 2018 with the Law under No 4540 (Official Government Gazette [OGG], No. 91, 2018a). In Greece, integration into the education system takes place up to three months from the date of completion of the identification of the minor irrespective of their legal status (OGG, No. 91, 2018a). In practice however, the actual time ranges from three months to six months from the time of entry into the country and enrollment in school (Crul et al., 2019). Furthermore, Article 2(3) under Law No. 1566, directs that attendance is compulsory in kindergarten, primary school and secondary school, while anyone who has custody of a minor and fails to register or supervise her/his studies shall be punished (OGG, No. 167, 1985). However, this is seldom applied to vulnerable populations such as refugees (Crul et al., 2019).

Refugee Education in Greece

In March 2016, the Ministry of Education decided to prepare a plan for the integration of refugee and asylum-seeker children into the Greek educational system (MoE, 2017). In particular, the Scientific Committee in support of refugee children was assigned to formulate and submit effective and realistic proposals on the issue (MoE, 2017). According to Simopoulos & Magos (2018) the kind of educational policies that should be proposed for the integration of the refugee children in Greek formal education was a dilemma for the Scientific Committee. On the one hand, existing institutional and legal framework explicitly provided access to public compulsory education for minors of third countries nationals regardless of their residence status in Greece as well as their school enrollment with incomplete supporting documents. On the other hand, the dominant domestic debate on the reception of the refugee populations and especially on the issue of providing access to formal education to refugee children had divided opinions (MoE, 2017). In regard to this matter, Stergiou & Simopoulos (2019) argue that public debate was divided, on the one hand, in a rhetoric of ‘illegal migrants’, ‘invaders’, ‘closed reception centers’, ‘expulsion’ and, on the other, in the advocacy of human rights and solidarity.

Greek educational institutions and authorities had prior experience in integrating migrants into mainstream education structures since the fall of the Eastern European communist bloc in 1989 encountering the massive immigration wave mainly from Albania and other Balkan countries. In the case of the refugee crisis and the education of the refugee children, the Scientific Committee of the Ministry of Education stated that it was an

extremely demanding project and was designed under pressure of time. Even more, the project was implemented on a heterogeneous refugee population, under unstable conditions in respect to the conditions and place of residence, and the number of the population (MoE, 2017). The monitoring of the policies and practices in respect to refugee education and support to the Scientific Committee was assigned to the Working Group on the Management, Coordination and Monitoring of Refugee Education which was formed in summer 2016 and continued on providing support and monitoring after it was promoted to an Independent Department in 2018 (MoE, 2017; OGG, No.31. 2018c).

The ministry of Education decided that school year 2016-2017 would be a 'pre-integration' year for the children residing in the refugee camps, in order to ensure their smooth transition into school regularity (IEP, 2016). Additionally, the Ministry of Education introduced the education policies for the integration of refugee children, valid until today, that is: the development of pre-school education programs within the camps; the establishment of Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) for refugee children residing in the camps; and the inclusion of refugee children in the mainstream schools, with the support of reception classes, for the refugee children who live in urban areas, as shown in table 1 (IEP, 2016; MoE, 2017).

Table 1

Type of schools that refugee children attend

Type of schools	Place of residence
DYEP (Kindergarten)	Refugee camps
DYEP (Primary school and Gymnasium)	Refugee camps
Mainstream schools - Reception Classes	Urban areas (outside refugee camps)

The Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP) are, in particular, preparatory classes for refugee children residing in refugee camps. DYEP, namely kindergartens, addressed to refugee children aged 4-5 years old are established in the refugee camp. DYEP addressed to refugee children aged 6-12 years old (Primary school) and 13-15 years old (Gymnasium), are established in primary and secondary education schools bordering to refugee camps and function after the mainstream school's schedule in an afternoon shift (OGG, No.3502, 2016). The reception classes or Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP) were introduced in the Greek education system in 1996 (OGG, No. 124, 1996, article 35). Reception classes provide effective and participatory education to repatriated immigrant and foreign students. After the assessment of student's needs the curriculum is tailored to serve their integration into the Greek educational system (OGG, No. 1789, 1999).

Eventually, the school year 2016-2017 some 3.800 refugee students were enrolled in public schools (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019), the number of enrollments reached 8.017 in the school year 2017-2018 (MoE, 2018), while in the school year 2018-2019 the number of

refugee students attending public schools increased to 12.867 (MoE, 2019). However, despite the significant efforts made throughout this period, Stergiou & Simopoulos (2019) highlight that a significant, although decreasing, proportion of refugee students has been excluded from public education, either in the first phase or until today. In a like manner, the Greek Council for Refugees (2018) recommended that the rate of refugee children that attend school should increase, while additional action is required on the Aegean islands, since access to education remains problematic for refugee children, especially on the Eastern Aegean islands.

Refugee Education Coordinators (REC)

In parallel with the establishment of the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (DYEP), the institution of the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC) was established. RECs are permanent teachers of the Ministry of Education holding a doctoral or master's degree or certified training in the area of intercultural education or human rights. In other cases, RECs have working experience in intercultural schools, reception classes, Greek language courses abroad or voluntary participation in educational activities for refugees (OGG, No. 102, 2018b, Article 78).

RECs are positioned in each refugee camp in order to cooperate and report to the educational authorities and to collaborate with representatives of other Ministries, and International organizations existing in the host structures (OGG, No. 3502, 2016). Moreover, RECs are assigned to propose measures for the functional qualification of the DYEP and provide for matters relating to the implementation of the educational policy of the Ministry of Education (OGG, No. 3502, 2016). In 2018, under law No. 4547 the duties and responsibilities of RECs are more clearly defined and are separated in two sectors: the consulting - educational sector and the administrative – societal – in-service education sector (OGG, No. 102, 2018b). In table 2 some of the duties RECs have are described.

Table 2

Refugee education coordinators' duties

RECs' duties	
Inform those accommodated in the refugee camp on the necessity of education as a basic instrument of social inclusion	Supervise and coordinate the departure and return of refugee students to and from the refugee camps, to and from DYEP
Compile lists with identification data of the refugee children that will enroll in DYEP	Inform refugee parents or custodians or guardians on school attendance issues
Update the lists of the enrolled refugee students in DYEP in cooperation with the school principals	Resolve issues related to refugee students' school attendance

In essence, RECs are assigned to act as liaisons among the refugee camps, the school and the educational authorities. They are designated to the refugee camps and are called upon to play a new and very demanding role, namely to escape the boundary of the school community in order to encounter school children located in camps, bring the refugee population in contact with the Greek educational system and create bridges between the school, the refugee family and the community. At the same time, RECs were the only officials of the Ministry of Education who had hands on experience of the life in within the refugee camps, the difficult hygiene conditions, the poor shelter and the hardship (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). In some cases, RECs did not have an office in the camp, not even a working place with access to toilet and clean water. The Scientific Committee of the Ministry of Education highlights the determining contribution of the RECs to the inclusion process (MoE, 2017). Additionally, the Scientific Committee highlighted that RECs' duties included: the explanation of the operational conditions of the Greek school to refugee parents; regular contact with refugee parents; communication with teachers of the DYEP; the coordination of NGOs; as well as finding practical solutions to improve the functioning of the refugee camps on educational issues (MoE, 2017). Moreover, Crul et al., (2019) consider RECs as a key figure in the DYEP and state that "their responsibility is major, as they are the persons to whom the refugee parents entrust their children to go to school, and in most cases, they are the only persons representing the school with whom these parents have some relationship" (p. 18). Furthermore, Stergiou & Simopoulos (2019) consider the institution of the REC as a 'good practice' in linking the school with the refugee community in the camps. Moreover, Aroni (2018) states that RECs served as educators, counselors, in-service trainers, social workers, psychologists, friends, and parents, in order to emphasize RECs important role in the education process of refugee children.

RESEARCH

In Greece, the program for the integration of school-aged refugee children in public education has been implemented since 2016. The institution of the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC) was an innovation established by the Greek Ministry of Education to facilitate refugee children's access to public school. The research explores the role that RECs have regarding involvement of refugee parents. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with RECs in order to enlighten the effectiveness of their role in relation:

- to the communication and collaborative processes with the parents of children with refugee background;
- the task to inform refugees in the camps on the necessity of education as a basic instrument of social inclusion;
- to supervise and coordinate the actions necessary for the smooth departure and return of students to and from the refugee camps, to and from the DYEP;
- the duty to inform parents or custodians or guardians on issues related to students' school attendance.

Research question

The following research question was answered:

In what ways do Refugee Education Coordinators communicate and collaborate with refugee parents' empowering them in order to engage them in their children's schooling?

Research participants

Speaking of the research participants, snowball sampling was employed in order to involve RECs in the research (Creswell, 2012). Seventy six RECs, who were positioned in the institution of the Refugee Educational Coordinator school year 2019-2020, were requested via e-mail to participate in the research. The intention was to proceed to fifteen interviews. Finally, fourteen RECs participated in the research, representing 18.5% of RECs. Furthermore, up to school year 2019-2020, two research participants had four year experience, six research participants had three year experience, two research participants had two year experience, and four research participants one year experience in the institution of the Refugee Educational Coordinator, as shown in Table 3. As far as teaching experience in formal education is concerned, four research participants had 12-15 years of teaching experience, seven had 16-20 years, two had 21-23 years, and one research participant had over 30 years of teaching experience, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Refugee education coordinators' working experience

Working experiences	REC
<i>Institution of Refugee Education Coordinator</i>	
4 years	2
3 years	6
2 years	2
1 year	4
<i>Teaching</i>	
12-15 years	4
16-20 years	7
21-23 years	2
30+ years	1

Moreover, one research participant holds a doctoral degree, two are doctoral candidates in the area of intercultural education and nine hold a master degree, of which three master degrees are relevant to intercultural education, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Refugee Education Coordinators' further studies

Further studies	REC
Doctoral degree	1
Doctoral candidate	2
Master degree	9

In addition, three research participants have certified training in the area of intercultural education. Moreover, one research participant had working experience in intercultural schools, one in reception classes, two in providing Greek language courses abroad, and five research participants had voluntary participation in educational activities for refugees. No research participant had knowledge of any language spoken by the refugee population. Finally, as can be perceived by the description concerning the research participants and the detailed tables, they had enhanced teaching experience and academic qualifications.

Interviews

The Skype and the Facebook Messenger platform were utilized for conducting the semi-structured interviews with the research participants. The two platforms enabled communication with the research participants via a synchronous connection - voice and video - in any place in a time efficient manner and in a friendly and safe research environment. The Skype and the Facebook Messenger platform eliminated the obstruction of distance, on the one hand, and, on the other, diminished the risk of the participants in the research being affected by the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), due to the present worldwide pandemic. Permission was obtained from research participants in order for the interviews to be recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed in order for data to be collected and analyzed.

As far as semi-structured interviews are concerned, qualitative data was retrieved through open-ended questions following our line of inquiry in a conversational manner. Our intention was to acquire the qualitative data required to answer the research questions and at the same time unveil the personal experiences of the research participants. In our research, the semi-structured interviews with the Refugee Education Coordinators focused on revealing the modus operandi of their role. As Bell (2005) argues "one major advantage of the interview is its adaptability" (p. 157). In this case, semi structured interviews enabled us as researchers to follow up research participants' ideas, to examine research participants' responses and investigate their motives and feelings (Bell, 2005). Additionally, semi-structured interviews allowed research participants to elaborate on the topic more flexibly (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Validity and Reliability of the Research

A procedure for establishing validity in a qualitative research is to provide thick and rich description of the research setting, the participants, and the themes (Creswell & Miller, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell & Miller (2007), when vivid detail is provided by researchers the readers are assisted to “understand that the account is credible” and make decisions “about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts” (p. 129). In our research, with the intention to ensure validity, description of the setting and the participants was provided. Furthermore, detailed description of the research findings was provided with sufficient evidence presented in the form of quotes from the conducted interviews. Moreover, in the presentation and analysis of the findings, research participants’ views and experiences were juxtaposed with the legislation and data from archival records. Moreover, a focus on forming “unique impressions and understandings of events rather than to generalize the findings”, was a measure to secure validity (Kolb, 2012, p. 85). Generalization was enhanced by carefully examining the extent to which the findings are applied to other cases (Kolb, 2012).

Finally, maximum variation in the research sample is a strategy described by Merriam & Tisdell (2016) to enhance validity. Maximum variation in the sample, whether it concerns the sites selected for the research or the research participants, “allows for the possibility of a wider range of applications by readers” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). In addition, it enables researchers to document diversity and to identify important common patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In our research, the research participants were positioned in refugee camps located in western, eastern (including the Aegean Islands), northern and southern Greece, namely from eight different Regions, providing a variation of experiences concerning the situations faced in the refugee camps. The Skype and the Facebook Messenger platform provided us with the advantage to reach respondents in various locations across Greece. An advantage acknowledged by many researchers which argued that Skype and Messenger for interviews allowed these studies to reach respondents in diverse locations (Brown 2018; Lo Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Pszczółkowska, 2020).

Concerning reliability of the research, in qualitative interviews this issue relates to the establishment of rapport with the interviewees. “Rapport is ... about trust – enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you” (King & Horrocks 2010, p. 48). Despite the fact that building rapport over Skype is challenging (Cater, 2011), Deakin and Wakefield (2013) stated that “Skype interviewees were more responsive and rapport was built quicker than in a number of face-to-face interviews” (p.8). In our research the Skype and the Facebook Messenger platform enabled the establishment of rapport with the research participants.

Qualitative Research

With the intention to perceive and interpret the meanings that educational policies, practices and research participants ascribe to the role of Refugee Education Coordinators, a qualitative design was implemented in our research. In relation to Creswell's (2014) argument that individuals interpret the world and generate meanings, our aspiration was through semi-structured interviews to reveal hidden meanings and clarify research participants' complex views. Moreover, in our effort to perceive the experience of the RECs, qualitative design provided a comprehensive understanding of the meaning that participants attribute to the researched phenomenon. Qualitative research has a political and transformative dimension, gives voice to the researched populations and influences social policy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), by deliberately utilizing data description, explanation and interpretation (Williams, 2007). Moreover, qualitative research can present the direct consequences of specific programs on the researched populations and isolate the restraints that act against "policy changes in such settings" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 22). Interviews were transcribed and written down, the researcher read them through thoroughly and coded the REC's responses according to the content of their words (Creswell, 2012).

RESULTS

Problems Encountered By Refugee Education Coordinators in the Communication and Collaboration Process With Refugee Parents

The difficulty in communication with the refugee parents due to language barriers was stressed by all research participants. The lack of translators and inadequate understanding were difficulties faced by the RECs. The RECs managed to communicate with the refugee parents with the assistance of translators provided by NGOs, if they were available or if the provision of a translator from the NGOs was scheduled. In addition, communication was achieved with translated instructions in the languages of the refugee parents, with other common spoken languages by the RECs and the refugee parents, as well as with refugee children which were their parents' translators.

Barriers in the Establishment of an Effective Cooperation with Refugee Parents

In the first place, as mentioned by the research participants, a wide a range of factors were obstacles in the establishment of an effective cooperation with the refugee parents concerning refugee children's school enrollment and attendance, such as: culture differences between the refugee families and the Greek culture; the prioritization of other needs from refugee parents in relation to the education of their children; refugee families' absence of a school routine for a long time; refugee children's limited or no schooling; refugee parents' limited or no schooling; refugee parents' prospect of relocating to another country; refugee parents' perceptions of the content, the aims and the functioning of education; socio-

demographic features of refugee parents; refugee parents' concerns about their children; and refugee families' lack of stability. Regarding these issues, a research participant argued:

"I think it's important to understand, to know some things about the culture of these people, so you can communicate, and to be able to understand their reaction".

Equally important, a research participant, referring to socio-demographic features related to refugee parents and restrictions and prohibitions imposed by religions, stated:

"The population now living in our camp are people from deprived areas with a very low standard of living, Kurds who have lived only in the mountains and various people like that with whom communication is sometimes even unachievable, that is, it is not possible to communicate at all with them ... and we encounter cases where a parent who sees something that is not in line with his religion unquestioningly means that the girl stops school".

Additionally, a research participant argued on the issue of refugee parents' involvement in their children's schooling in relation to parents' prospect of relocating to another country:

"Don't think that parents want to come to school very often, I believe that that they feel that they are temporarily in the country".

Furthermore, a research participant stressed that in order to bring refugee families back to school routine:

"at the beginning of the year I placed the bus provided by the International Organization for Migration to transport students to school in the middle of the camp and the horn of the bus woke up the children and their families".

Moreover, research participants highlighted the issue related to refugee parents' perceptions of the content and aims of the education provided and the functioning of the educational system. In relation to this issue, a research participant argued:

"Also don't forget here we have another educational ethos and another educational climate and not so authoritarian and teacher-centered, this often created difficulties in communication, i.e. the teacher is the one, the only one, the authority that must somehow impose on students, what is right and moral, etc., this is not the case here, and it took some time for them to adapt to it, that is, parents cannot have such demands from the teacher"

By the same token, a second participant stated:

"The parents also had a different mentality, that is, what did the child do? Did he damage something at school, then bit him, they told me to hit him".

In relation to the above, a research participant argued:

"Some parents of primary school children, enrolled in DYEP, state that a lot of time is spent on painting and handicrafts and they do not progress in Greek".

Eventually, a research participant characteristically described the issue of the different perception on the part of refugee parents regarding the education provided, as well as parents and children's limited or no schooling:

“What we have seen from the first moment is that most of them have a different impression of what education is, that is, most of them are second-generation Afghans who have lived most of their lives in Iran where most have not been able to go to school and they had access to Religious schools which teach the Qur'an more and less language and mathematics, this is mainly the education they have in mind, as I have realized, it is very much a very open context”.

Finally, a research participant stressed the issue of students interrupted schooling as a factor influencing cooperation between the refugee family and the REC as follows:

“Then I had to proceed on meetings with parents to let them know what kind of education we offer, they had to be fully informed about what DYEP was, who would teach them, what he would teach them, what we would achieve, it was the most basic, most children had not been to school for two years”.

The Establishment of a Relationship of Trust Between Refugee Education Coordinators and Refugee Parents

Twelve out of fourteen research participants stated that in order for RECs to achieve cooperation with refugee parents, a relationship of trust had to be established between RECs and parents. On the matter, a research participant mentioned that personal relationships developed with refugee families' facilitated communication and collaboration. In addition, a research participant stated:

“The only thing that saves the situation is that parents have absolute trust in us, in both RECs, for their children”.

Eventually, a research participant characteristically described the issue:

“Yes, this is very important, they feel confident, yes, they have known me for two years and it was what I had to gain their trust, that was the goal I had to achieve, that they trusted me and fortunately I succeeded”.

Ten out of fourteen RECs commented that the relationship of trust achieved between them and the refugee parents facilitated their role to bring refugee families in contact with the Greek education system. Correspondingly, a research participant clearly described the process:

“Establishing our own presence there and building our own relationship is like building the school's relationship with parents, so the more they accept us as personalities and what we do or don't do, the more they accept the Greek school mentality, the western school that for them is foreign but they gradually accept it, that is, it is our role in essence to be with them in such

a way that this new reality has to balance and it was not always easy ... I want to tell you that RECs were people who had to communicate two worlds that in many cases had different starting points for many issues related to children's school attendance".

In a like manner, a second research participant highlighted:

"We are trying to become a bridge of communication between parents and children and the Greek education system".

Finally, a research participant mentioned:

"My role is to mediate, like a bridge between home and school, there is constant direct feedback".

The role of the Refugee Education Coordinators to connect the refugee parents with the Greek Educational System

Refugee Educators Coordinator's role in informing refugee parents on the necessity of their children's school enrollment and attendance

The role that RECs had in connecting the refugee family with the Greek education system implied that they also had an important role in informing refugee parents on the necessity of their children's school enrollment and attendance. In this case, as mentioned by twelve research participants, meetings were organized with refugee parents at the refugee camps at the beginning of the school year but also during the school year where awareness was raised on the necessity of their children's schooling. In addition, a research participant mentioned:

"We also brought parents into contact with other social support services, parent schools, and social workers".

Furthermore, more than half of the research participants mentioned that they brought refugee parents in contact with the psychologist or the social worker in the refugee camp, in order to sensitize refugee parents on the necessity for their children's schooling. Eventually, three research participants mentioned that they cooperated with school principals and teachers in order to inform refugee parents on the necessity of their children's school enrollment and attendance.

The RECs that participated in the research stated that various issues were raised concerning the meetings with refugee parents, such as: gender issues, namely to explain to refugee parents why girls should go to school; to explain to refugee parents that they are legally obliged to send their children to school and since the state facilitates refugee children's school enrollment they are obliged to respond positively; issues about the children's and family's future prospects; to explain the difference between formal education provided by the state and non formal education provided by NGOs; to explain to refugee

parents that school is a compulsory routine for children; and to explain to refugee parents that school involves the cognitive skills, as well as children's integration and socialization.

At the same time, research participants stated that some refugee populations that had decided to stay in Greece or had other reasons aimed at their children's school enrollment. To demonstrate, to the question if RECs had to inform and sensitize refugee parents about their children's school enrollment, a research participant replied:

"Not everyone, especially Afghans who had decided from the beginning that they would stay in Greece".

In addition, a research participant stated:

"Some families as soon as they come to the camp they come and knock on my door ... they come themselves to enroll their children in school".

Refugee Education Coordinator's role in informing refugee parents about the opus operandi of the school and academic issues

Finally, eleven out of fourteen research participants stated that RECs had an additional role in informing refugee parents about the opus operandi of the school and academic issues. For this purpose, RECs organized meetings with refugee parents, in some cases school principals were also invited to these meetings, to inform refugee parents on issues such as: the departure and return of refugee students to and from the refugee camps, to and from the DYEP and other schools; the obligations and duties the students have; school absence; school grades; and children's academic prospects.

The role of the Refugee Education Coordinators to connect refugee parents with their children's school and engage refugee parents in their children's schooling

Thirteen out of fourteen RECs mentioned that refugee parents had infrequent or no communication with their children's school and teachers. Research participants attributed this to language barriers which render communication between refugee parents and children's teachers in the majority of the cases impossible, while in most cases no means of transportation were available to refugee parents in order to visit their children's school. Additionally, on occasions where refugee parents met with their children's teachers, RECs had arranged for interpreters to be present at the meeting and in the event that the meetings were held at schools, RECs organized the transportation of refugee parents. Concerning the school meetings that were organized, in most cases the teachers visited the refugee camp, in three cases refugee parents met with their children's teachers at school, while in four cases no contact between refugee parents and teachers was achieved. In addition, five research participants stated that in some cases refugee parents visited their children's school individually or accompanied by the REC.

Seven research participants considered their role in bringing together the refugee parents with their children's teachers in the refugee camp very important. Correspondingly, a research participant stated:

"It plays a role in the effort that a teacher will make to communicate and work with these people that he needs to understand where these people come from, how they live, to put themselves in the shoes of these people".

Equally important, six RECs stressed that refugee parents appreciated the organization of school meetings since no other communication was achieved with their children's school and teachers:

"It is something we do and it has its effects and the parents want it very much and among other things we show them some pictures from their children's studies, it is the only way to bring them in contact with the school environment and we have tears there, emotions, and anything else you can imagine, because it's something that makes them very happy. For these people and their children, school is the only normalcy in their lives, there is nothing else that is normal".

In addition, a research participant stated on the same issue:

"Every time the teachers visit the camp, the parents get excited. I inform them from the previous day about what time they will come and where we will meet. They are ready, well-groomed, well-dressed, waiting for them with great joy and longing and showing them appreciation and respect and usually the teachers come and show them photos from their children's projects at school and come with photos to see what their children are doing at school".

Furthermore, research participants that managed to organize school meetings at schools emphasized the importance of bringing parents to school. Referring to this matter, a research participant stated:

"When children start school we always organize a meeting at school in order for the parents to be acquainted with the principal and their children's teachers. At school they are welcomed, they are treated and visit the school premises. In other words, there is a climate of trust and parents are excited about it and show a lot of confidence in me and in the school".

Refugee Education Coordinator's mediating role in connecting refugee parents with their children's school for everyday matters

Moreover, research participants stated that RECs are a connecting link between refugee parents and their children's school for everyday matters that arise. In this case, REC are in frequent contact with the refugee parents and the teachers in order to mediate for a variety of matters, such as: behavior issues that arise concerning refugee children; to inform teachers on refugee parents' concerns about their children's schooling; to inform parent's on their children's school performance; to inform refugee parents on issues concerning the functioning of the school; to inform refugee parents on issues of their children's school adjustment and in many cases to mediate between the parents and the social services in the camp to resolve them; as well as other cases of emergencies that arise. Concerning the role of the REC to connect the refugee parents with the school, a research participant stated:

“We are essentially the representatives in some way the representatives for the parents of all the schools which their children attend ... in my opinion, we are an important link between the refugee community of our students and, in fact, the schools, and when we say schools, we also mean teachers and school principals and other educational authorities”.

In addition, a research participant argued on the matter:

“So we played a mediating role by defending refugees at school, the refugee parents, namely the refugee community we were the refugee community in school”.

By the same token, a research participant mentioned:

“We are the people who have direct communication and contact with the community, with the refugee community, with the children’s parents and without us honestly, absolutely nothing could work, because our mediation would be missing, which unites, brings everyone that is involved in contact, one way or another”.

Refugee Education Coordinator’s role on eliminating refugee parents reactions and fears on the issue of mixed gender schools

Finally, a particular issue faced by RECs was doubts and fears that refugee parents had on the issue of mixed schools, namely male and female students in the same school. The issue was raised by five research participants. In relation to the issue a research participant mentioned:

“The other matter is mixed gender schools for the first time, girls and boys all together, parents were not used to it and children and especially teenagers were not used to it either, children were very eager to be together, at school they played and flirted, it was the first time that children were with children of the opposite gender without parental control. The parents at the same time expressed their concerns, all this was very hard, ... to give a headline, we had to encourage parents of teenager students to adapt in the new situation of greater freedom, autonomy and less control and not discrimination between girls and boys at school”.

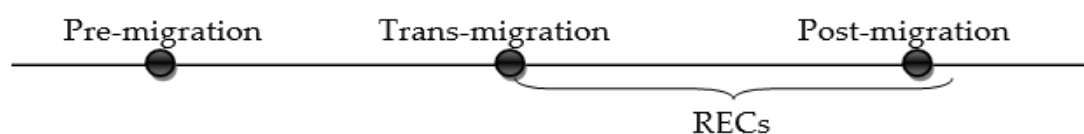
DISCUSSION

As the research findings demonstrated, RECs had a role in informing refugee parents on the necessity of their children’s school enrollment and attendance, connecting refugee parents with their children’s school and in the long run engaging refugee parents in their children’s schooling. Reflecting on the theoretical framework, these finding are also confirmed by the Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children of the Ministry of Education. As an illustrative example, the Scientific Committee reported that good practices carried out by RECs are: establishment of refugee parents’ associations; organization of meetings at school, as well as at the refugee camp between the refugee parents and their children’s teachers; the provision of information to teachers about refugee parents’ concerns and anxieties (MoE, 2017, p. 63). In respect to the REC’s role to empower refugee parents in order to engage them in their children’s schooling, first thing to remember is that refugee parents had infrequent or no communication with their children’s school and teachers. A

common view with Crul et al., (2019), that state in most cases RECs “are the only persons representing the school with whom these parents have some relationship” (p. 18). Secondly, a wide range of pre-migration factors, mentioned in the research findings, such as culture differences, religious prohibitions, socio-demographic features etc. interrelated with refugee parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling or even providing for their children’s schooling, had to be faced by the RECs. Thirdly, as previously discussed, relevant literature on the context of holistic approaches systematically emphasizes the importance of linking school with students’ parents. Eventually, reflecting on the theoretical background of the research and interrelating Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology perspective of human development with the concepts of pre-, trans-, and post-migration ecology, refugee families were in a trans-migration phase, while REC’s assisted there transition into the post-migration context, as shown in figure 1. Important to realize, the trans-migration phase is associated with barriers imposed by state policies and practices that postpone refugee children’s participation in mainstream schooling, as discussed in the theoretical framework. Additionally, as the model of post-migration ecology indicates, the trans-migration phase is linked to trans-migration factors that interrelate with the refugee families’ accomplishment of the task to successfully adapt to the new environment, as well as with post-migration factors that relate to the refugee child, the refugee parents, the community, the school and the support services.

Figure 1

Refugee families’ journey and RECs’ assistance

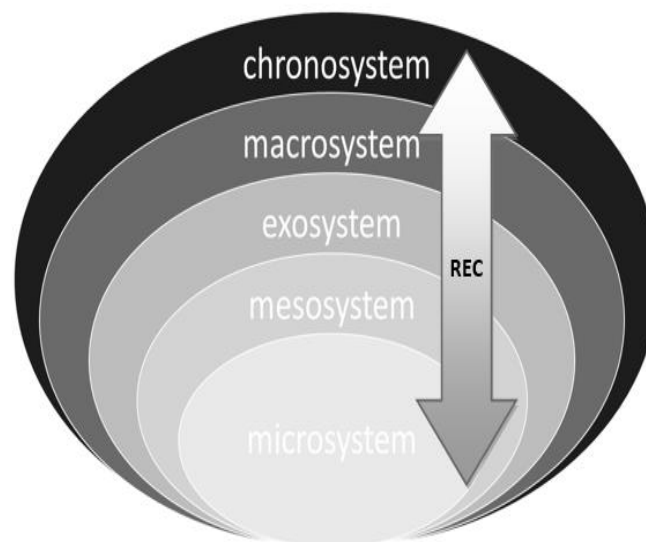


The innovation of the Ministry of Education, in relation to the Greek education reality, to position RECs in the refugee camps assisted the establishment of a relationship of trust between the parents of the refugee students and the RECs. A finding also confirmed by Crul et al., (2019) who state that RECs “are the persons to whom the refugee parents entrust their children to go to school” (p. 18). In either case, a relationship of trust that ‘bridged’ refugee parents with the framework of the Greek educational system and overall facilitated refugee children’s school attendance. RECs essentially mediated to connect culturally and structurally diverse refugee families with the Greek school culture. In essence, RECs undertook a challenging task that required, a reciprocal process on an exploratory acquaintance with the principles and the expectations, as well as an identification of the differences between the school and the refugee family, and finally a negotiation of an approach, between the school and the refugee family, for the benefit of the refugee children. A process defined by Stergiou & Simopoulos (2019) as a ‘policy of adjustment’ undertaken by schools that embrace the holistic approach.

Concerning RECs' contribution to the refugee family, as shown in figure 2, in relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) Ecology Model of Human Development, they are positioned in the refugee camp, and therefore they interrelate with the refugee family's mesosystem. Considering the diverse and unstable situation of the refugee family and their experiences prior to leaving their home country, namely pre-migration factors, their experiences that came to pass in the transition from home to the receiving country, namely trans-migration factors, and their experiences that occurred on arrival in the receiving country, namely post-migration factors, RECs also assumed a role in the microsystem of the refugee family, as well as the exosystem. Since they are positioned in the refugee camp, RECs are in daily communication with the refugee family and, in the majority of the cases, they are the persons that the refugee parents' trust in relation to their children's schooling. Therefore, RECs are the ones that can perceive how parents connect to microsystems to develop their social capital and influence the development of the children's social capital. In addition, RECs are the ones that can engage in mutual negotiation with the refugee family on the refugee children's schooling for the benefit of the children. Furthermore, RECs are the ones that can perceive how refugee families define educational policies and practices concerning their children's schooling and support the refugee family's development of social capital in the new ecosystem. Eventually, RECs are the ones that can raise policy makers' and educational authorities' awareness on the refugee families chronosystem.

Figure 2

RECs' contribution to the refugee family



In the final analysis, according to Berry (2005) acculturation is the process of change in both groups that come into contact in a multicultural society, the settled or dominant group and the non-dominant group. Acculturation relates to policies of multiculturalism that can lead to positive outcomes, such as integration and multiculturalism or to negative outcomes such as marginalization, segregation and assimilation (Berry, 1997). Therefore, members of the dominant group, namely the school context and members of the non-

dominant group, that is the refugee families', had to adopt strategies in their interaction that could lead to positive outcomes in the process of both groups acculturation. To be more specific, the inclusion of the refugee children in the Greek school context which can assist refugee parents' integration in the Greek society, on the one hand, and the development of a multiculturalism ethos of the members of the school context and the broader education context that can assist the development of a multiculturalism ethos of the members of the Greek society, on the other. The establishment of the institution of REC was a starting point, among others, in achieving the task of positive acculturation of both groups' members.

CONCLUSION

The Greek Ministry of Education back in 2016 undertook the necessary action and established the innovative institution of RECs in order to bring in contact the refugee population with the Greek public school system and facilitate refugee children's school enrollment and attendance. The research indicated that the institution of REC was one of the determining factors for the access of refugee children to public schools. A significant number (3.800) of refugee children were enrolled in public schools during 2016-2017 (Stergiou & Simopoulos, 2019). This number increased, reaching 12.867 in school year 2018-2019 (MoE, 2019).

Unfortunately, COVID-19 pandemic resulted in lockdown and remote teaching. At the time the research took place (spring 2020) all pupils of Greek schools could not attend school. Things got worse as due to bad sanitary conditions and density in the camps, all refugee sites around Greece were in sanitary seclusion, resulting refugee children being hindered or even denied access to school.

In an effort to interrelate Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) Ecology Model of Human Development with significant factors, as indicated in the research findings, which shape refugee parents impact on their children's development in the new context, several recommendations arise. These recommendations can raise policy makers' as well as professionals' involved in refugee education awareness of the factors that shape refugee parents effect on their children's schooling. Moreover, these recommendations can raise awareness concerning the development and the implementation of educational policies and practices. Initially, concerning the microsystem, which is the family and the refugee camp, exploration can be proceeded on how refugee parents experience and negotiate their microsystems to raise children in the new context, namely the new country. Secondly, as far as the mesosystem is concerned, namely, interconnections among microsystems that indirectly affect the individual, exploration can be proceeded on how the microsystems are connected and how parents connect to microsystems to develop their social capital. Thirdly, referring to the exosystem, it concerns extended networks, social and other services provided. In this context policies and services can support the development of refugee

parent's social capital and therefore refugee children's social capital. Thus, an examination of the terms can proceed, such as cultural competency and partnership in educational policies and practices, as well as how they are defined and employed by refugee parents concerning their children's schooling. In addition, monitoring can take place of the performance of supporting systems and educational practices in relation to culturally safe support for children and their families, as well as monitoring the quality of education provided to refugee children. Fourthly, the macrosystem, includes the society, the culture and subculture values, attitudes, beliefs, and resources. It is important to realize that Greece is a signatory to the Refugee Convention and to the Convention on the International Rights of the Child. Under these conventions, refugee children and their parents must be included when national data is collected and reported concerning children's schooling, in order for educational policies and practices to be overhauled. Eventually, concerning the chronosystem, it interrelates with influences of socio-historical conditions as well as individual life events. In this event, pre-, trans-, and post- migration factors that interrelate with the refugee children's and their family's accomplishment of the task to successfully adapt to the new environment and particularly to the new school environment should be identified. In this context, the development of educational and social programs and practices that are culturally safe and competent is recommended, while ensuring that policy makers and those that provide their services take into consideration the refugee children's and families' lifetime experiences.

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