



## Refugee Children Education and Social Work according to the Perspective of Education Experts in Greece

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes the way that education system in Greece approaches refugee children. In particular, it brings out the point of view of educational specialists as well as social workers. The central aim of this article is to bring to the surface new perspectives related to the intervention in the social integration of refugees. It is a qualitative research based on the principles of grounded theory. The sample consisted of social workers and teachers who worked in schools attended by refugee children. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. The results yield a variety of useful information that can be used by scientists specialized in the field. Issues such as holistic intervention, individualized analysis of cases, training of specialists dealing with the education of refugees are some of the central points of this research. In conclusion, it can be noted that it is a complex effort which requires a good prepared organization of the educational system as well as the society hosting refugees. In conclusion, the results of this research can be used by all experts in the field so as to create significant and effective changes.

**Keywords:** *Refuge Children; Education; Social Work*

### **Introduction**

Immigration constitutes an increasing familiar matter that concerns today's societies. Because of the existence of this phenomenon, it gives a sense in a different way to the meaning of civilization and the socioeconomic change. This phenomenon catalyzes for both immigrants themselves and the society that receives them. Social work focuses on the importance needed to bring the action in both individual but also wider level. Specifically, can be referred the intervention in family, and widely cultural level, in sections that affect communal, social functionality. Social work and specifically the ecosystemic approach focuses on the complex way of (evaluation, estimate and intervention in a situation. At the same time it constitutes a dynamic procedure because it is based on a very scientific experienced background of sciences such as social work, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. In other words, human nature and the wider purview, in which it is formed is a changeable condition for social work. Germain (1973), Hartman (1976) and Siporin (1980) are the experts according to whom; social work should plan interventions and political actions in an extensive level, apart from the traditional individual psychotherapeutic way of intervention. As theoretical scholars of the ecosystemic model of social work,

they lay particular emphasis on the environment in which a person lives, for instance such as family and school too. According to Berger, Federico and Mc Been (1991), in every environment exists a unique composition of the way with which are combined biological, psychological, socioeconomic and political factors. A social worker has to embrace a holistic way of approaching human behavior in order to be up to perceive the way with which the environment impacts on its social functionality. Just as in the majority of unfavorable conditions, so too the most vulnerable shoulder a great part of the consequences. Refugee children already experience intense incidents of violence in their countries, afterwards during the travelling procedure, they live quite hard experiences, maybe in the same degree with the ones they have already experienced and in any case the same dangerous and eventually reaching the reception country, hereon Greece, they are integrated in the educational community giving their own fight to cope with the new requirements. In the present inquiring project, it is attempted to be illustrated the way which refugee children that reach in Greece experience their integration in the Greek educational system and the local society. Moreover, it is inquired the part that social work plays a role or could play a role contributing mainly in the whole attempt of facing the problems that occur mostly in education. The intervention of social workers, involves the inquiring of the factors that form the chain of social relationships aiming at the development of a professional relationship which is set in, in apprehension, respect and acceptance of the culture that refugees carry (Potocky - Tripody, 2002). The first part of the article aims at the description of the theoretical purview which governs the specific purview, presenting some main perspectives that are mentioned in the bibliographical sources. The second part presents the way which the project was planned and carried out, the results and conclusions that developed from the whole procedure. Ultimate aim is the contribution in a survey level, the depiction of reality in the Greek educational system and after all the emergence of the way which social work can intervene in the field.

### **Theoretical Purview (Bibliographical Survey)**

According to the treatment of Geneva the definition of refugee is defined as <<every person, who has a justified fear of persecution because of the race, religion, nationality, political beliefs or participation in certain social group that is out of the area of his citizen ship and he cannot or because of his fear does not want to resort to the protection of this country>>. As respectively prescribed in the UN Convention 1951, regarding the refugee's status, as a refugee is described someone who is located out of his country and has well founded and justified fear of returning because he may be persecuted due to religion, nationality or his participation in a social group or because of his political beliefs. Apart from the particular UN Convention in 1951, the Protocol of the United Nations in 1967 regarding the refugees' status, defines their rights and their responsibilities and encapsulates provisions with regard to a variety of issues of their everyday life, as it is the right to work, education and living. The fact that refugees have to be given equal treatment with the citizens of their settlement country constitutes a significant matter. The composition of the High Commission of the UN Convention for refugees (2017) relating to education <<Staying behind: The education of refugees in crisis>> refers that child of school age normally go to school 200 days in a year. However, 3,5 million refugee children of school age, by the requisition of the high commission could not attend school at all in 2016. This is extremely worrying, since school is very important for the creation of consistency for the refugees' families. The composition of the high commission points out the value of education, reminding that education <<equals with investment to the future>>, creating and nurturing scientists, who will rebuilt and give new life to their countries.

Refugees applying for asylum, immigrants and others that are included in the so-called <<weak>> social groups searched for a better life for them and their families, experiencing in their daily life discrimination and exclusion (Loesher 1995, Ife 2008), Deprivation of basic human rights of vulnerable groups does not only concern the groups themselves, but also reflects on the whole civilization, social justice and social rights of a society. The unequal treatment and discriminations that refugee children and their families experience constitute major obstacles to their gradual absorption in the community and development of their personality. In Greece, the last ten years the number of refugees has dramatically increased because of the war in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The particular

fact in combination with the negative attitude of countries in central and north Europe to welcome the refugees caught the country unprepared to handle the new data. It is about an issue that has not been written much. Especially, with regard to the way that school community <<welcomed>> the specific phenomenon and formed its present attitude, there is not an adequate number of bibliographical sources. However, in a study carried out by the Ministry of Education (2017), it pointed out that some of the basic characteristics of the pupils-refugees image, constitute the need for provision of psychological support both for the students themselves and their parents as well, such as taking measures of intervention in the refugees' reception environment. This brings out for social work, a notable challenge, constitutes a field of intervention that may bring about substantial results. Besides, the International Federation of social workers, specifically points out the priority that must be given to the refugees' psychosocial needs which constitute a fundamental right of the human existence. Even it is about a worldwide phenomenon, the social workers occupation with refugees is a complex matter that can hardly find common theme axes, however, the emergence of distinctive features that frame this phenomenon brings upon useful findings (Robinson, 2014). According to McBride (2018) what derives from the survey of the international bibliography is that the most essential element in the intervention is the matter of the refugees' children may be the holistic approach that researches the environment that a child lives in and focuses on the coverage of the complex needs for the development of its personality. This requires the social workers' intervention in training organizations, health, community and generally all the involved organizations. At the same time, it points out the decisive role that is set in, in the field of education, regarding the development of children's skills that will lead them to the obviation of any social exclusion. Taylor and Sidhu (2012) agree with this finding, adding the importance of the refugees' reception environment, the confrontation of racist attitudes that are based on ignorance and fear for the unknown and unfamiliar, and lastly dealing with traumas that refugees' children may carry with them from the country they have left. Butler (2007) as well as Robila (2018) completing the foresaid perspective, pointed out that workers, experts, professionals who are occupied with refugees are asked to deal with especially complex matters, with multidimensional perspectives, that are related with factors such as financial, educational, health and social structures and for this reason they need different training-specialization in this specific field.

According to Fong (2004) considering the ecosystemic model of social work, social workers need to lay emphasis on the research of the refugees' family environment, the cultural profile of the country they have come from, but also the traumatic experiences they have lived because of the war, for instance tortures, loss of close relatives, psychological but also physical suffering. The connection of the individual-refugee with the environment that he lives in, is formed in the course of time, is based on the experiences, merits and potentials of the family that he lives in. This relationship forms his ethics, behaviors as well his attitude towards the political, socio psychological environment in which he lives today.

While according to Synder, May, Zulcic and Gabbard (2005), it is pointed out that the attempt from social workers of grouping and categorization of the refugees and their families features, contains a possible danger of omitting the uniqueness of the way that functions and impacts on its members, each family. Also, according to Maluccio, Pine and Tracy (2002) about social work, cooperation with the family is especially important, with regard to the children's school environment. Intervention in school environment is necessary to be based on a relation of cooperation between the social worker and the family in order to place common action axes. On the same wavelength Okitikpi and Aymer (2003) refer that is necessary the creation of communication tools from social workers with both refugees and their families. Specialized intervention in this field requires a special way of thinking for the way with which social work can intervene. Knowledge and skills of social workers must be redefined over the way of implementation to the refugees and their families' needs. While according to Nash, Wong and Trlin (2006) the adoption of new skills is essential from the side of social workers as far as it concerns work with refugees. Specialized ways of cooperation with individuals and especially with their family environment in a short, medium and extensive level can bring about significant results in their social absorption within the refugees reception societies. Balgopal (2000) makes equivalent indications, he

refers that the majority of refugees face a common complex of difficulties that include matters of apprehension, of the reception country's language, obstacles in socialization, difficulties in the function of the family, (dividing and further migration) and racism experiences, discrimination and oppression. These particular fields require specialized knowledge and skills from social workers (Balgopal, 2000). He continues referring that in this regard of social work, cultural pluralism is necessary because it comes to the front and helps appreciating the uniqueness of the refugees' different cultures. In a way it appreciates the values, high principles and ethics that are included in these civilizations. These fields can comprise at the same time, challenging actions for social workers. Understanding the refugee's skills that can significantly contribute to their socialization, as learning new skills may constitute an object of intervention of social work.

In this sense, diversity may be interpreted as a strong point and not only as weakness which potentiates exclusion. Appreciating dignity that people stand for, and that is based on the ethics, high principles but also on their traditions, social work can play an active, determining part, for instance, these peoples' attitude may constitute a positive element towards the value of life and appreciation of daily things, because of peace, in contrast to the modern west world and way of life that heavily focuses on consumerism. The development of communication relationships between neighborhoods and the community, since earlier hearths of xenophobia are dealt, may bring about new data that in final analysis will improve the cultural level of the whole society.

Respectively, according to Rosenberg (2009) what is essential in social workers' intervention lies in the holistic way of action. Utilization and coordination of all the included bodies, in a low, average or extended level should be considered as a basic element. Intervention in school background needs at the same time combinatorial work with the community and the family environment. The action spectrum in education may and must be very plane. The fields that refer to social absorption and abrogation exclusion differ.

There is restricted bibliography related to the social workers' way of action in a school environment and in contrast to the traditional services of social work e.g., welfare programmers, cooperation with other specializations such as teachers, professors are considered to be an enforced need. A fact that is pointed out is by (Gibelman 2001) but also Suppes and Wells (2008). In particular the latter, focusing on the social workers' work in an educational unit, refer that specialization in this object, constitutes a turning point. Apprehension of the students', their parents' but also their teachers' background constitutes a significant requirement during the practice of social work. On this basis, according to Rosenberg (2009) experts are called to build bridges among school, local society, services and families in order to improve the students quality of life. At the same time, just as important to integrate, is the action of social workers in the teaching timetable of the contextually school unit. According to Lynn Bye (in an interview to Rosenberg) social workers have to accomplish a very difficult attempt, to gain the real confidence of the families, both the visitors and the locals. To accomplish this, it is required a sincere and individualized attitude towards every family. For instance, even the time of visit in the environment of the family may be related to the proof of this attitude. Every individual approach in a context of respect and recognition of its unique decency constitutes a prerequisite business element of the social worker in education. According to Collett (2004) the post traumatic school of the refugees catalytically impacts on their adaption in the new society in which they are called to live. A fact that needs to form in a systematic approach handling from social workers <<Susceptibility>> of the children's' mothers that stems from their cultural profile heavily affects the children' social absorption. At the same time, cases in which there are division of the parents, because of the refusal of asylum approval, to one of the two parents, complicates more the situation especially for children. A noticeable interest presents Potocky –Tripodi (2002) opinion according to whom, social workers and all the professionals who work in the field of refugees' social absorption are called to investigate their own beliefs and attitudes. In order to be able to show the proper sensitivity towards the refugees' culture, it is necessary to detect their own cultural background as far as it concerns high principles and attitudes and

the way that affects their professional identity. The wish they must express, is very difficult to change their own thoughts, emotions and behaviors towards the field so as to be effective. Stereotypes and prejudices that function inhibitory in the practice of social work constitute primary matters. It concerns a procedure of lifelong learning that includes the constant learning of the refugees' lifestyle but also theirs. According to Valtonen (2001) a significant point of intervention in refugees' social absorption, comprise fields that are related to the education of social skills, learning a language and integration into employment. Social work can detect the condition of oppression that may be developed in the above fields and intervene respectively. Emphasis is laid in the field of employment in which the potential that many refugees have, can be brought out, according to the skills they have developed in the country they come from. Even it is hard to find working positions that fit with their skills, however, in many cases they may seem available to work, even in positions of lower status. Intervention of social work is this that can help the obviation of social exclusion focusing on the refugees' absorption in the job market. Individual difficulties that arise in every refugee's reception society merit an individualized way of detection, intervention planning and action. In this context a coordinated, holistic way of activation of the experts can bring about significant results.

According to Mirza (2011) in the developed countries, disabled refugees experience a particular exclusion. Beyond the fact of the systematic absence of recording their particular characteristics, at the same time they are excluded because of their disability from the basic actions of social absorption that are generally planned for refugees. In the refugees' retention centers there are not remarkable actions to support disabled people to participate alike the rest refugees, in the programmers of social absorption. Even in those cases, that an elementary recording of disabled people is done, the listing of their skills is omitted. It is obvious how much worse is the data when someone approaches the matter of disabled people who suffer from psychiatric or mental difficulties. Significant matters for social workers who work in this field, constitute the apprehension of the refugees' culture and in particular the perception of the part that plays an essential role in elements such as individuality concerning team work, religion, importance of the family and principles that affect it, the concept of human existence, the feeling of belonging, and generally the feeling of national identity and how it affects the refugees' relationships with the rest of them.

According to Balgopal (2000), a social worker can play the role of the civilization's mediator. It is not the first time that the role of social work in bibliography has been referred as the one of the mediator. Social workers mediate in the individual social commitment between the members of the team and the systems that affect them. It is not the first time that the role of social work in bibliography has been referred as the one of the mediator. Social workers mediate in the individual social commitment between the members of the team and the systems that affect them. These interaction systems are acclaimed to have power and principle differences hence a mediator is needed.

In this part, a social worker helps the client and the social system to communicate with the most realistic, rational, mutual ways via cooperative skills of mediation, persuasion and negotiation. It is mainly about a cultural mediator. The procedure of cultural mediation includes both awareness of national components and the use of a multilevel context that includes the complexity of an assessment-evaluation of values that a nation's culture has.

## ***Methodology***

This current study is about a survey that was carried out in 2019-2020, in the area of northern Greece and in particular central and eastern Macedonia. Fifteen professionals comprised the control group, namely they were occupied in the field of educating refugees, that is schools but also shelter facilities. The professionals were social workers, education coordinators and educators. It is about a quality survey in which semi-structured interviews and open –ended questions were carried out. The aim

of this survey was to study how the family environment is formed but also the way it impacts on the refugees' immigration, in school environment and wider in the reception society. In this context, was investigated the part that social work can play a role in the field of education utilizing the data that arise.

*Analysis of the results of this survey concerning the investigation of the way refugee children integrate in education*

In the context of survey that was conducted, concerning the refugee children integration in education, some basic points that concern the importance of the children's family environment are detailed, as a reference point for social workers who work in the field. Constant varying social problems are not possible to be covered by inadequate or inactive programs that do not look for new ways and intervention methods. The required cooperation of all the involved <<experts >> in a holistic background of intervention is pointed out by the respondents in a particular way. Furthermore, as a basic element is referred, the cooperation with the family environment: diversity of the professionals' specializations is a nodal part for the success of intervention. E.g., educators, social workers, psychologists. A remarkable importance has the procedure of interpretation. Basic communication depends on the correct interpretation, a special example constitutes the refugees, parents' communication with the parent-teacher association and legal guardian of the local students. In many cases the role of interpreter was taken over by children themselves. The apprehension of the refugees' rights and responsibilities has a direct connection with the interpreter and his specialization in legal matters. (1<sup>st</sup> interview, a woman social worker) The reason why this may happen is the importance that the primary contact of the <<incomers – unknown refugees>> with locals has, in order to reduce fear towards the unknown and at the same time to create communication bridges and development of inner relationships. Social work may perform an intermediation role in this attempt, facing difficulties that may possibly arise. As intervention for social workers may be referred, on the one hand the coordination of all the specializations intervention, on the other hand the intervention in developing relationships between the refugees' families and the reception society's families. In one other point, special interest has the opinion that states an educator with regard to <<regularity>>of children's life. <<Some problems, common points, with other vulnerable groups e.g., Roma, Albanians, etc. Children are different depending on the family that they come from. They cannot in the regularity of life because they simply do not have a regular one. It can change any moment>> and continues <<there were reactions and there will be. For instance, some locals chose to register their children to schools without refugees, so a target group is the children of general school>>. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview, a woman educator). At this point, it is pointed out the importance of the family environment that children come from. Professionals who are occupied with education and refugees' social absorption, can apprehend better the children's profile, though the apprehension of their family's environment and the way with which has been formed and functions today. And continues <<for example I remember a child, a victim of tortures, had a violent behavior, it seemed reasonable, the whole family suffered from .....>> or <<P, a child that studied in the third grade of primary school. He was alone and needed special support and cooperation with many institutions. There are a lot of children that do not have any choice and just wander, in all cases the matter of language is very important>>. At this point, on the one hand is pointed out that the dysfunction of the family because of the problems the child had and on the other hand is recorded the importance of the family's environment absence has, in the way children try to survive in their everyday life. For social work this means that it is required a special care and a way of approaching these refugees.

Moreover, a reference is pointed out by a social worker to the unique value of every refugee child <<there are common ways of communication as long as we look for them...>> being a refugee does not just mean being a legal subject, (3<sup>rd</sup> interview a woman social worker). School subjects and social integration are a dynamic procedure. Just as important is the refugees' educational level, the type of place they come from, urban, semi-urban, rural area because that reflects their ability for adaption to the receiving country. The way of approaching difficulties, shows an optimistic professional attitude which represents to the most excessive degree the standards that stand for social work.

It is also interesting the idea that is expressed by an educator who works as a coordinator in education <<the main difficulty relates to the language, communication, you have to find ways such as sign language, body language, painting. But eventually, the most difficult of all is not the language, it is the fact that many children did not attend schools in their home countries and do not know the way they must behave. They cannot perceive the way something that is called school functions, they do not know <<... little children learn the language very easily, young pupils within six months are able to communicate >> moreover, unfortunately there are children that need support case by case, it is more difficult, they do not feel like school is a way to get away...in that case needs more persistence ... maybe because of the family >> (4<sup>th</sup> interview, coordinator of educational project). Here school is referred as a way of escaping from problems, as a safe environment; however, for some children facing individual family problems in their families, things are different. It is required an individual way of approach and cooperation with the family in order to change children's life. Or elsewhere the same refers <<... there are also things which can arise and you may not be prepared for this. For instance, it has occurred to draw in a free subject of drawing decapitated bodies... you must know how to cope with it, and must not show that you are shocked or surprised ... >> At this point it is pointed out the need for special education or even support of the educators from other experts, in order to be up to handle such circumstances effectively. Children's family environment constitutes a basic required element to the dealing of these circumstances.

In other part is referred a positive example of cooperation with the children's family environment. <<We had many parents that stood out ...>> that is to say, they registered their children in teams in order to go out to the rest of the world...>> (6<sup>th</sup> interview, a woman educator). The way with which the family environment can function supportively may be determining for the children's integration in the social environment they live in. Social workers cooperation with those that are willing but also can help, cooperation with educators may bring out considerable results. Worthwhile is the fact that is pointed out by an educator, the necessity of social workers existence in the school environment <<every school needs a social worker and a psychologist. They are very essential, not only one social worker in many schools. Every school needs one, in order to be able to offer>>. (7<sup>th</sup> interview, teacher, coordinator). The quality of the project is depicted in a special way that can and needs a social worker to offer. Occupation in many school units in a parallel basis hinders the offering of the required quality project from the experts among them and from social workers.

### ***Conclusions-Conversation***

According to the ecosystemic model of intervention that social work offers, the factor that can bring about significant results, is directly related to the relationships' comprehension that are developed in every family environment, in conjunction with the project that social work can play a role intervening to this. The detection of the social functioning profile of the family, just as and other <<environments >> for example friends, children's companies after school hours may present other aspects of intervention of the specialties. For instance, the investigation of the environment in which the child itself lives in, not only the school's opening hours but also the rest of his daily time may bring about opportunities for intervention from social work.

Education in cognitive subjects that interest children, but are also useful to their relationships with others, constitute an element that needs special attention. In other words, the adjustment of education in a level of social skills, for example the way they behave in case they receive negative behaviors e.g., racism or how they express their feelings. For all these, social workers or other comparable properly specializations, that in an atmosphere of cooperation can improve the whole condition.

The holistic intervention in all aspects of the environment affects the children's education, it requires cooperation with other specializations and other institutions e.g., local community, associations,

leisure places e.t.c. This fact designates the need for a proper, constant planning but also implementation of actions that can lead to significant results. Moreover, it turns out that in corresponding and comparable subjects is essential the children's family environment to be instructed. This way there can be common axes of intervention and can provide the ability to experience the educational procedure, at the same time children and the rest members of the family, from this perspective, this attempt may create congenial experiences for all the members of the family and therefore this way intervention will have a twofold result.

Considerably important is the concern about the pupils with disabilities, learning disorders, or difficulties as well for these children's parents. Unfortunately, the educational procedure does not expect anything special for these pupils and as a result they come second and experience more difficulties or double discrimination than the rest refugee children do.

At the same time, it is essential to be pointed out the need for planning implementation or proper education programs for the rest of the refugees–pupils. It is important to take into consideration the profile of the reception society and especially children that daily socialize with refugees. It does not constitute an insignificant factor with which it is formed but also interacts with the rest scholastic work force in the attempt of integration in the education system of refugees.

Just as important element constitutes educators training in the field, so that they will be in position to cope with difficult cases that stand out e.g., post-traumatic shock, so as to help children or refer them to properly formed facilities. Educators' proper preparation who are in a daily contact with children constitutes a main required element to accomplish these that education aims at.

A significant element in these actions constitutes the proper assessment of the intervention programs in constant regular periods and the constant re-programming of the interventions aiming at the achievement of the proper adjustments in the sole reality of every educational community or school unit in order to accomplish the maximum possible results.

In conclusion, it is necessary to be referred that the bases and principles of the cultural intervention can be implemented in this field, applying experiences of the past in our country to interventions in respective cases such as for instance immigrants from Albania, Former Soviet Union e.t.c.

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