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**No Lost Generation: refugee children education in Cyprus**

**Ioanna Katsounari, Phivos Phylactou and  
Helena Heracleous**



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THE LONDON SCHOOL  
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# No Lost Generation: refugee children education in Cyprus

Ioanna Katsounari\*, Phivos Phylactou<sup>†</sup> and Helena Heracleous<sup>‡</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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Education is a right for every child and a critical opportunity. For refugee children and adolescents, it holds the key to a life with less poverty, better health and an increased ability to take the future into their own hands. This research paper aims to investigate the current situation in Cyprus in regard to the integration of refugee children in the educational system and suggest strategies and policies that will have an impact on the educational chances of these children. It combines data from desk research, interviews with key actors and educators, as well as interviews with refugee children and parents. Findings address the main barriers to integration in the educational system for refugee children and provide the background for recommendations to be made that will increase the educational success of these children.

**Keywords:** Refugee Children, Asylum Seekers, Cyprus, Educational Integration, Educational System

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## 1. Introduction

The so called ‘refugee crisis’ has revealed a number of weaknesses in the capacity of host countries to cope with such a large and unforeseen inflow of people in need of protection. Refugee children are a particularly vulnerable group that is easily overlooked in official statistics. The number of refugee and immigrant children out of school is in most cases unknown because these children constitute a small number in household statistics and are not counted in general statistics of children (OECD, 2018). Under EU law, children who seek asylum or have obtained international protection<sup>4</sup> have the same access to education under the same or similar conditions as nationals. Article 14 (2) of Directive 2013/33/EU requires that asylum-seeking children entering an EU Member State be included in (compulsory) education within three months. Early and effective access to inclusive, formal education is one of the most important and powerful tools for integration, as the European Commission states in its 2017 Communication on the protection of children in migration (FRA, 2019).

Educational integration is understood as *“a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning”* (UNESCO, 2005, p. 12). The first challenge for host countries is to provide access to education to refugee children and the second challenge is to develop educational policies and practice that respond to the needs of refugee students and promote their inclusion in schools and societies in the medium- to long-term (Pastoor, 2016).

Attention on the issue of integration of children of refugees into education is relatively recent. The research on refugee children and youth in education is limited and often case specific, which makes generalisations difficult in the context of considerable data gaps. Studies mainly indicate that attention for refugee children in education has been rather limited and often refugee children are not distinguished separately (Bloch, 2015). Also, the limited data show that refugee children usually face more barriers than children of immigrants (Mc Brien 2009; Bloch et al. 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). In addition, it seems that across countries there is also an important difference *in vision* on what it takes to include newly arrived refugee children in education (Crul et al., 2018). Previous research has stressed that the attempt to integrate refugee children can only be accomplished through a systematic and holistic approach in the educational field (Vaiopoulou, 2017). Furthermore, research has indicated the importance of evaluating the impact of different institutional arrangements in relation to each other (Crul et al., 2018).

Cyprus has seen a [sharp rise in refugee arrivals](#) since the beginning of the refugee crisis in the region. Many children arrive in the island with their families, while others

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<sup>4</sup> In this research paper, the term ‘refugee’ represents children who are asylum seekers or are subsidiary protection status holders.

arrive alone through traffickers. For these children, access to both formal and non-formal education is often a challenge. Despite the rising number of refugee children attending school in Cyprus, there has been very limited data on the experience of these children at all levels of education and the barriers they face in their attempt to integrate into the educational system. Thus, the main objective of this research paper was to investigate the current situation in Cyprus, in regard to the integration of refugee children and youngsters in the educational system. The report addresses the challenges faced in the educational arena concerning equal access to quality education for refugee and asylum seeking children in Cyprus and it includes recommendations regarding educational policy and practice to address and improve the education of every child. To this date, this is the first national research project which has been conducted that draws data from several sources, including the opinion of the children themselves regarding their experience in the Cyprus educational system.

This research paper aims to address these issues by answering the following questions:

- What educational opportunities are there for refugee children in the compulsory school age in Cyprus?
- What educational policies and actions are being undertaken for these children?
- What challenges do educators encounter and how do they respond to these challenges?
- How do the children perceive the educational system in Cyprus and the opportunities they have for integration?
- What are the parents' viewpoints regarding their children's experience in the educational system and the opportunities that exist for the children to succeed at all levels of education?

As far as the structure of the paper is concerned, the authors discuss the crucial role of education for the integration of refugee children in the host societies, the labor markets, and general well-being of refugee children. The paper also discusses successful policy practices that have been applied in other countries and takes an overview on policies and practices that have been applied to this date for the integration of refugee children in the educational system of Cyprus. The paper was based on a literature research, interviews with key stakeholders and educators as well as interviews with refugee children and their parents.

## 2. The key role of education to refugee children

The school is a miniature of society and education is considered to be the golden opportunity for refugee children to achieve a better future (UNHCR, 2019). Given that refugee children have been through forced displacements and humanitarian crises, while some of them were forced to be separated from their families, education can be crucial for both their development and protection (European Commission, 2016). Education is considered a key factor in times of displacement that can foster social cohesion, and help refugees rebuild their communities and pursue productive, meaningful lives, while it strengthens the cooperation and social interaction between individuals from different ethnic groups (Sacramento, 2015).

Refugees will respond to school and their new environment differently depending on a variety of individual and contextual factors, including country of origin, race, ethnicity, religion, culture and socio-economic and educational background before migration. Other important factors are the age at the time of flight, migration and resettlement, personality characteristics and the level of family support and sustenance (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009; Matthews, 2008).

UNHCR's (2019), position is that since refugees share the same rights to education as nationals, they should have access to national education programmes at all levels rather than in refugee-exclusive systems that are not sustainable, are not appropriately monitored or able to guarantee timely certification that can lead to continued education during asylum.

The educational integration of refugee children can only take place if all (or at least most) of their learning, social and emotional needs are addressed. Refugee children need to learn the host country language, develop their mother tongue, overcome interruptions in schooling or limited education, and adjust to a new education system. They also need to be able to communicate with others, feel a sense of belonging and develop a strong personal identity. Furthermore, refugee children need to feel safe, and be able to cope with loss, separation and/or trauma (Cerna, 2019). Different individual, interpersonal and institutional (school-level) factors can shape the prevalence of needs of refugee children. Factors include all individual, interpersonal and school-level characteristics that influence the needs of refugee children. Among individual factors are language proficiency, mother tongue proficiency, and physical and mental health. Interpersonal factors include connections with peers as well as family and social support of refugee children. School-level factors include the learning environment, teacher-student interactions, school engagement, assessment at school-level, extra-curricular activities and

parental involvement in the school community (Cerna, 2019). A variety of targeted policies and practices shape these factors.

According to Save The Children Foundation (2018), education produces positive effects on the emotional wellbeing of the refugee children. The trauma of displacement or any other traumatic experience of the asylum seeking children could be reversed by following a structured routine. In particular, the quick integration in the educational system of the host country helps these children restore normality. The safe and supportive school environment could ease the stress and create safety (UNHCR, 2019). For some refugee children, learning constitutes a source of control in a new and ambiguous environment (UNHCR, 2015). In particular, secondary education provides a safe space for personal development and positive social networks for adolescents whose transition to adulthood has been disrupted by instability and violence (UNESCO, 2019).

The teachers are seen as the key people who will help the children rebuild their social world (Gateshead council, 2016). A caring school environment makes the host country appear to be a welcome and safe place to be. Feelings of stability are developed (UNESCO, 2019) and the day-to-day life becomes easier to handle by children. Eventually, the school could be a potential place for interventions, giving access to mental health interventions (ISTSS, 2017).

School is the place where refugee children could create relationships with children from different cultural backgrounds. Establishing relationships with children from the host country will make their social and cultural inclusion easier. Education encourages the social cohesion and tolerance of people with different backgrounds. During the school classes, children have the opportunity to learn the language of the host country and practice the language with the native speakers. All these tools offered by school are considered essential for the healthy integration of the asylum-seeking children in the hosting society (Save the Children, 2018).

In addition, children that attend the school are less likely to be involved in child labor and criminal activities. Secondary school enrollment protects the refugee child from criminality in this vulnerable age period. Without access to secondary education, refugee children and adolescents are vulnerable to child labor, exploitation and negative coping behaviors, such as drugs and petty crime, associated with idle time and hopelessness (Save the Children, 2018).

Furthermore, if all girls attend primary school, the percentage of the child marriage would decrease by 14 per cent, while the percentage would fall by 64 per cent, if girls complete their primary school studies (Save the Children, 2018). Therefore, educating girls can drop dramatically their chances to enter early marriage, teenage

pregnancy, sexual exploitation or gender-based violence. Beside these, the further girls go with their studies, the more they are likely to develop qualities like leadership skills, entrepreneurship and self-reliance. In addition, by obtaining qualifications they have better chances to earn a higher salary for them and their family (Save the Children, 2018).

Secondary and higher education therefore need even more attention in the context of refugees returning to their home countries. These levels of education can increase tolerance, lead to a lower enrolment in extremist movements and to a lower probability of civilian conflict, and therefore have a great role to play for building a peaceful and sustainable society (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

### **3. Best practices in educational policy for refugee students**

A vital top-down approach to sustaining quality education access to refugee and migrant children is successful policy implementation (Ataiants et al, 2018; Crul et al, 2019; Korntheur, Korn, Hynie, Shimwe, & Homa, 2018). Such policies have been designed and implemented in various parts of the world, including the European Union and the Middle East (Crul, et al., 2019), the United Kingdom (McIntyre & Hall, 2018), the United States of America (Ataiants et al, 2018), Canada (Korntheur et al, 2018), and Australia (Killedar & Harris, 2017).

When discussing successful policy implementation, an important factor to consider is cross-cultural differences. For a number of reasons, different countries implement different policies based on factors such as their own educational system, their capacity, and their refugee situation (See Table 1).

In some countries such as Canada and Germany, even though policies are implemented nationally, their educational systems vary by state/province (Korntheur et al, 2018). Further, aspects such as the age of compulsory education could vary between countries, as for instance is the example between Greece -5 to 15 years of age- and Germany or Sweden -6 to 16 years of age (Crul et al, 2019).

Germany stands out among all European countries as having the most comprehensive policy approach, with a strategy developed in 2015 (KMK, 2015) outlining national measures for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the German higher education system. The main focus of the strategy is to facilitate the path into higher education for those asylum seekers and refugees who are motivated and with the aptitude to study, or who were previously studying in higher education before coming to Germany. There are a number of actions addressing recognition of qualifications and prior learning, bridging programmes, guidance and

counselling services and financial support. The strategy is fully costed, and has a clear budget allocation (Eurydice Report, 2019).

**Table 1.** Best policy practices

<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Policy</b>
Compulsory Education	Belgium	Organised school network days.
	Germany	Monthly group and individual meetings.
	Sweden	Focus on initial mapping combined with language developing pedagogy in addition to language skills.
Pre-Primary Education	Turkey	Access to refugee minors to the public early childhood educational system.
	Belgium	
	Germany	Asylum status grants same pre-primary education access as natives.
	Sweden	Free access to pre-schools as soon as they enter Sweden.
Higher Education	Finland	Skill centres provide vocational training combined with language instruction for refugees aged 17 and over.
	Sweden	Adult classes to obtain a diploma or improve language skills.
	Netherlands	
	Austria	Increased minimum age of receiving a high school leaving certificate.
	Sweden	Extended residence for higher studies and/or employment.
	Germany	

Another example of a successful top-down approach to tackle some of these obstacles regard one of the largest refugee hosting countries during the past few years; Turkey. Due to the huge number of Syrian refugees entering Turkey, the country was, at first, unable to include the majority of these children in their educational system. Most refugees were enrolled in NGO-led temporary educational centres, where education was provided in Arabic. However, the Turkish Ministry of National Education decided to support, through policy making, the integration of the Syrian children in Turkey’s public education system (UNCHR, 2019). These policies

included the right of Syrian refugees to join the Turkish public educational system, and 15 hours per week mandatory Turkish language classes provided in the temporary educational centres to prepare them, supported also by a large-scale project to provide academic support, material, transportation, and teacher training. Also, funds were raised to build more schools in order to avoid overcrowding. Further to these measures, the Turkish government financially supported some of the temporary educational centres (Crul, Keskiner, Schneider, Lelie, & Ghaemina, 2016). These policies, according to the UNCHR (2019) largely increased the number of refugee children that entered the public-school system of Turkey (63% of all refugee minors by the end of 2017/2018 academic year).

### 3.1 Entering compulsory education

In some cases, entering education might be troublesome due to lack of information provided to the refugees (Crul et al, 2019; Koehler, 2017; Noorani, et al, 2019). To tackle this in Belgium, further to local integration centres and NGOs providing information, some schools organise network days to connect the refugees and their families with the educational system in a more integrative way (Koehler, 2017). In Germany, monthly group and individual sessions are organised for asylum seekers, with a focus on their educational system and opportunities (Koehler, 2017). Furthermore, to better integrate children into compulsory education, prior education is usually being assessed, by either standardised methods (e.g. 'START' project in Stockholm, or 'assessment and assignment centres' in Munich), or by more individualised curriculum approaches (e.g. in Finland, the UK and the Netherlands) (Koehler, 2017).

In order to prepare refugees for entering mainstream education, in some countries refugee students join separate classes with a focus on language skills as well as on the hosting culture and society, for usually a maximum period of one or even two years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a; Crul, et al, 2016; Koehler, 2017). In some other cases, refugee students join mainstream classes straight away, but are offered such classes in addition (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a; Koehler, 2017). An approach that seems to stand out here is the situation in Sweden, where the aim is attending such separate classes for the least time possible. In Sweden, transition to mainstream classes are not only focused on language skills, but rather to initial mapping combined with language developing pedagogy (Skolverket as cited in Crul, et al, 2019). Further to these language skill classes, almost every EU hosting country, offer additional support and attention to refugee children entering a new educational system. This support is often given for one or two years, but in some countries (including Cyprus), it can be given indefinitely (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a).

### 3.2 Entering pre-primary education

In some countries, including Turkey and Belgium, policies grant access to refugee minors to the public early childhood education system (Cerna, 2019). Nevertheless, considering all of the above barriers, these countries additionally receive support by NGOs and international agencies, with a number of different services (e.g. teacher education, material, psychosocial support, reception centre management, etc.) (Cerna, 2019). In Germany, as soon as refugees receive an asylum status, they are granted with the same conditions to access pre-primary education as natives, however costs don't always make this feasible (Crul et al, 2016). In the Netherlands, given its pre-primary education system, it is almost impossible for refugee children to join some pre-school facilities available to the natives. Refugees and immigrants in the Netherlands can, however, attend specialised facilities (with a very limited accessibility) which focus on language acquisition, but with much less school hours, and separated from the natives (Crul et al, 2016). In the majority of Europe, access to pre-primary education is linked with legal status. A difference that stands out here is in the Swedish system, where refugee minors can attend pre-schools as soon as they enter Sweden -free of charge-, and often with access to specialised language learning focused pre-schools (Crul et al, 2016).

### 3.3 Selection of econometric methodology

Policies also exist in some EU countries to support the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into higher education. For example, Germany designed and implemented policies to support those motivated and who have the capacity to enter higher education, or those who were studying in higher education before entering Germany (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2019b). Part of Germany's strategy was also to provide foundation programmes, and similarly Portugal and Serbia introduced policies that allow refugees to access government financial support with the same or lower criteria as for native students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b). In other countries (e.g. Norway, Sweden and Denmark), policies are more limited, with the focus being on supporting language acquisition and recognising previous educational qualifications (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b). In general, the main supportive policies in most EU countries to facilitate higher education access, relate to financial support, through scholarships, exemptions, and lowered criteria requirements compared to regular international students (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b).

In cases where refugees were previously engaged in higher education, almost half of the EU countries adopted processes to recognise previous qualifications in cases where documentation (e.g. academic credentials/qualifications) is unavailable. These countries follow the legal framework proposed by Article VII of the Lisbon

Recognition Convention<sup>5</sup>, which recommends the development of fair assessment procedures to establish whether the refugees fulfil the requirements to enter higher education (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b). In other cases, when qualifications are inadequate to enter higher education, policies exist that allow for alternative ways to access it. These alternative ways include (1) bridging -or other types of preparatory- programmes (most common alternative in EU), (2) entrance in higher education without formal qualifications, or (3) recognition of previous non-formal and/or informal training to enter (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2019b).

In Europe, even though policies do exist (as discussed above) to provide educational opportunities to youth over the age of 16 (up to 25 in some cases), they are usually limited to vocational schools. Specifically, in Germany vocational schools offer 2-year specialised programmes and are the main (and in some EU countries the only) academic training provided to older refugees. A similar policy holds in the Netherlands, where short-term vocational training is offered, leading most refugees into the vocational sector (Crul, 2017). One important confounder limiting older refugees' higher education access to vocational training, is their unavailability to take part in the student tracking system of their hosting country (Crul et al, 2016). In most cases, the age of arrival will determine their access to tracking and general educational selection paths. Specifically, the age of arrival combined with the age of compulsory education and the educational tracking system of the hosting country, in most cases define the post-compulsory education path of the asylum seekers. For example, Germany, and likewise the Netherlands, has a very stratified tracking system with very early selection, making it almost impossible for refugees to take any other track than vocational training (Crul et al, 2016; 2019). In contrast, Sweden's system is less selective (and selection takes place later in the academic career), offering more post-compulsory educational choices for refugees arriving at a late age (Crul et al, 2016; 2019), and even provides tracks targeted for students who have Swedish as their second language, (however it must be noted that this track seems to be lacking and needs improvement; Bunar, 2017). These determinants often place older refugees in tracks designed for students with high levels of disruption or drop out (Crul et al, 2016). Moreover, with only a few exceptions, most EU countries fail to monitor the asylum seekers' and refugees' participation in higher education, making it difficult to provide feedback for the different policy implementations (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b).

*Overcoming Higher Education Barriers.* In order to overcome some of these barriers, some EU countries adopted specific measures (see Cerna, 2019). In Finland, since

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<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, ETS No.165. Available at: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/165>

2016, 'skill centres' provide vocational training combined with language instruction to refugees over the age of 17. In the Netherlands and similarly in Sweden, older refugees can attend classes to either obtain a diploma or improve their language skills. Another approach refers to amendments that were made, such as one in Austria where the minimum age of obtaining a high school leaving certificate was raised to 18, or such as one in Sweden where older refugees up to the age of 25 can extend their residence permit for the duration of their secondary studies. Likewise, in Germany refugees are allowed to stay in the country for the duration of their vocational training and even during (possible) subsequent employment.

### 3.4 Other non-formal education access

Beyond formal education opportunities, some approaches for educating refugees follow other non-formal ways, often in the form of mentorship and/or guardianship programmes, or individual, group, and/or community activities (Butkute & Janta, 2018). Examples of such non-formal programmes are NGO led educational workshops that take place in various countries (Sweden, Greece, Netherlands, Ireland), offering activities like handcrafts, arts, music, drama, homework support, well-being, and others (see Butkute & Janta, 2018). Further, there are examples -for instance in France-, where in-house schooling is organized and provided, typically by volunteers (Butkute & Janta, 2018).

In the majority of refugee hosting countries an apparent consensus for the focus of asylum seekers' education, seems in all levels (pre-compulsory, compulsory, and post-compulsory) to be the acquisition of the native speaking language (Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2017; Crul et al, 2016, 2019; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b; UNCHR, 2012, 2016, 2019). Taking this into consideration, policies that are already being implemented as well as future ones should emphasise on facilitating and supporting second language acquisition for refugees. Following the latest UNCHR (2019) guidelines, such policies should be weighted accordingly when evaluating their impact in refugee and asylum seekers education.

The most successful integration of refugee and immigrant children into education appears to occur when the age of arrival is somewhere near the start of the compulsory education age of the hosting country (Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2017; Crul et al, 2016, 2019; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b). The combination of providing equal rights and obligations (as the native students) to the refugee students, along with preparation courses and additional support seems to allow for better refugee integration into the hosting country's system (Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2017; Crul et al, 2016, 2019; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b; UNCHR, 2012, 2016, 2019).

The main issues found with refugee education, regard access to the system beyond the compulsory age; that is pre-primary schooling and higher education studies (Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2017; Crul et al, 2016, 2019; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b; Koehler, 2017). Limitation of financial resources, trauma, accessibility problems and other barriers, make pre-primary education inaccessible to refugee and immigrant infants and their families (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017), and only very few countries have managed to include them in their pre-compulsory educational system (Cerna, 2019; Crul et al, 2016). As for higher education, amongst other reasons, tracking and selection systems limit the opportunities of older refugees, usually within the vocational setting (Cerna, 2019; Crul, 2017; Crul et al, 2016, 2019; European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b; UNCHR, 2012, 2016, 2019). Even though some policies exist in order to overcome this issue (Cerna, 2019), most EU countries still offer limited higher education access to refugees entering the country beyond the compulsory education age.

#### **4. Background: Refugee children education in Cyprus**

Cyprus received a total of 4,393 asylum applications from January until August 2020, according to data disclosed by the interior ministry's asylum service. Around 19,000 applications for asylum are still pending from the previous years. According to the asylum service's report, there has been a significant increase in the number of applications submitted since 2017, with the record number of applications submitted registered in 2019 with 13,648. The Covid-19 pandemic and a tougher stance on migrants' arrivals in the island, saw the number of asylum seekers drastically decrease in 2020 (Cyprus Mail, 2020). However, there is no data up to this date in regards to the number of refugee children that enter the educational system in Cyprus. The Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture keeps records for the total number of children from developing countries that enter the educational system in Cyprus from kindergarten until high school (See Table 2). In addition, there is data showing that for the first four months of 2020, 82 unaccompanied minors attended secondary education or technical schools (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, personal communication, 10 April 2021).

**Table 2.** School attendance of children from developing countries in Cyprus (2020)

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Total student population</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Pre-primary</b>	790	11883	6,65
<b>Primary</b>	3078	53234	5,78
<b>Lower secondary education</b>	1498	22886	6,5
<b>Upper secondary education</b>	901	17011	5,3

In March 2011, following instructions from the Minister of Education and Culture, an Interdepartmental Committee was set up for the integration of children with migrant biography in the Cypriot educational system. Representatives of the Directorates / Services of the Ministry of Education, Academics and representatives of educational organizations participated in this committee. During the years 2012-2014, service meetings were held on individual issues that concerned students with migrant biographies (diagnostic essays, training of teachers, operation of a data recording platform, etc.). In December 2014, the final report was submitted to the Ministry of Education regarding the participation of the Pedagogical Institute in the European SIRIUS Network (2012-2014), on education of children with a migrant biography. In 2016, a Policy Paper was approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture that covers all the dimensions of the issue regarding with the integration of students with migrant biographies in the Cypriot educational system. The policy framework of the Ministry of Culture concentrates in the following five priority axes:

### **1. Teaching Greek as a Second Language**

In recent years, various models have been adopted in the educational system of Cyprus for the language support of students with migrant biography:

- Provision of additional teaching and accelerated teaching programs of Greek as a second language in Primary Education;
- Provision of accelerated teaching programs of Greek as a second language in Secondary Education (since 2008);
- Provision of language support to schools which operated the Educational Priority Zones (from 2004-2015) and in schools which operated the DRASE<sup>6</sup> programs since 2016;

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<sup>6</sup> Programs for school and social integration

- Provision of afternoon Greek Language courses from Training Centers (Epimorfotika Kentra) and State Training Institutes of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

## **2. Reception of new arrived children with migrant biography**

The objectives of the implementation of these programs and activities is the acculturation and familiarization of newly arrived children with their new school and social environment and to offer support for their studies, as well as informing the students and their families about their obligations and rights as a result of their participation in the educational system. In order to accomplish these objectives, the Ministry of Education and Culture has published a Reception Guide in Cyprus Education and a Welcoming Guide in Cyprus' schools<sup>7</sup>.

## **3. Training of educators**

The Pedagogical Institute, in collaboration with the Directorates of the Ministry of Culture, has organized various educational activities over the years (workshops, conferences, seminars – experiential workshops, optional seminars, school-based seminars, etc.), with the aim of promoting awareness and the empowerment of primary and secondary school teachers in issues related to the integration of students with migrant biography. Additionally, in the case of Secondary Education, the Pedagogical Institute provides - on an annual basis since 2008 - support at the school level to the teachers of the Greek Learning Program as a second Language.

## **4. Collection and analysis of data on the needs of students with an immigrant biography**

For effective intervention to take place, it is important to gather data on the needs of students with migrant biography and to administer at the beginning of their studies at the school compulsory Greek diagnostic tests, as well as their classification at levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

## **5. Intercultural approach to new curricula**

Intercultural education is not just for migrant children, but also for Cypriot children. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture recognizes the fact that the formulation of an integrated strategy for intercultural education makes it necessary to take additional measures, such as the adoption of the intercultural approach in the new curricula.

In the Policy Paper it is also suggested that it is necessary to map the migrant population by school unit (e.g. schools with a continuous flow of refugees / immigrants and schools with re-settled immigrants) in a uniform way, so that it is possible to differentiate the measures applied with possible common elements applied along all the steps. Further, the successful integration of students with

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.moec.gov.cy/odigos-ekpaidefsis/>

migrant biography in the Cypriot education system also depends on fighting racist incidents to which they may be subjected as victims. This could be accomplished through the anti-racist policy of the Ministry of Culture "Code of Conduct against Racism and a Guide to the Management and Recording of Racist Incidents".

In addition, it is suggested that the combination of the phases of preparation, transition and integration - support, as well as the implementation of a system that combines accelerated teaching and support hours for learning the school language. A suggestion is made that the preparatory phase lasts between 1 and 3 months and can take place within and /or outside the school space and time.

The transitional phase is suggested to take place within the school year and space and last one school year. This phase that includes the inclusion of children in the general classroom is combined with intensive teaching of Greek as a second language, with special provisions in the school curriculum depending on the level of education. The transitional phase concludes with the language assessment to verify the ability of children to attend to the content of subjects in the school curriculum.

The integration phase can last up to two school years. During this phase it is suggested that children are included in the general class on an equal footing with their classmates and receive support lasting up to 5 teaching hours per week, inside and/or outside of school time. If necessary, additional supportive teaching may be offered to individual subjects inside and/or outside school time (e.g. after the end of classes).

Also, it is suggested that teachers who undertake the role of teaching the Greek language classes acquire the expertise to do so. This implies the institutionalization of training in teaching Greek as a second language and its official inclusion in basic education / in-service training and in vocational training.

Finally, in each school unit it is important to assign a teacher, responsible for welcoming students with migrant biography, as well as to form a network of "mentors" (mentor-classmate, mentor-educator, a mentor from the community who can be involved mainly during the preparatory phase). The close cooperation of the school unit with the local authorities is deemed important, with the aim of educating and involving parents, facilitating the reception of populations (e.g. refugees) and improving participation in training programs (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

According to the Report 'Refugee Education in Cyprus: Challenges and Opportunities' published by UNHCR in 2017 (the only report available on this issue), refugee children in Cyprus face several obstacles in terms of their integration in the general educational system in Cyprus. In particular, it has been emphasized that there is no official procedure for children residing in the refugee reception center in order to assess the educational and cognitive level of the children upon enrollment in school.

Therefore, decisions such as whether a child should be placed in the last grade of primary education or first grade of secondary education are taken without any consultation.

Unaccompanied children residing in shelters in Nicosia and Larnaca are allowed to enroll into four upper level secondary schools. Two of the schools focus on technical education and the other two on conventional education. The children are assigned to these schools based on availability rather than their choice, skills, and inclination. In addition, no enrollments to upper level secondary schools have taken place of children staying at the shelter in Limassol. The shelter became operational in November 2016 and no technical or lyceum school places were allocated at the time (UNHCR, 2017).

For those attending school, there are difficulties with attendance as children feel a lack of motivation due to a range of factors. Some students report boredom, especially those placed in the special programmes at the lyceum or technical schools, as the lessons are often repetitive in order to cater for the differing education levels of the group. Other children are not motivated due to the inability to gain a formal qualification upon completion of their schooling. Still others lack incentive to follow their education as they have pending applications to transfer to other EU countries under the “Dublin Regulation” and therefore feel that there is little point (UNHCR, 2017).

The children in Larnaca and Limassol who are not enrolled in school are attending afternoon State institute classes (Epimorfotika Kentra) in Greek, Mathematics, and Computer Studies. In addition, some girls who are enrolled in school in Larnaca are also electively attending the State institution classes as a means to receive extra tuition. UNHCR also documented that within the cohort of children attending the State institute classes, some express frustration as they are keen to continue with formal education. Conversely, some children express satisfaction with the classes as they previously have had no formal education in their countries of origin or have only been educated to primary school level (UNHCR, 2017).

## **5. Methodology**

Educational institutional arrangements in Cyprus for refugee children were investigated as formulated in the Integration Context Theory (Crul, 2016). This theory roots in research into the effects of differences in the school system differences on the educational and labour market careers of children of refugees. Seven aspects have been identified as being influential for the school careers of refugee children: (1) Entrance into education; (2) Welcome, preparatory or

introduction classes; (3) Pre-school arrangements; (4) Second language instruction; (5) Additional support; (6) Tracking; (7) Education after compulsory school. This research project investigated all seven aspects of educational integration for refugee children.

In order to accomplish these objectives, the research team planned the following activities:

- (a) A thorough literature review was conducted of existing educational policies, strategies, and practices related to refugee children at different educational levels in Cyprus. Information was collected from a top-level authority in this aspect in Cyprus, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, related to the strategic approaches applied for the integration of refugee children into all educational levels. This was accomplished through the collection of a range of official documents, including the national strategy and action plan. In addition, dedicated large scale measures were investigated as well as the implementation of Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and general access and participation measures targeting non-traditional learners. An attempt was made to investigate issues applicable to children attending technical/vocational schools as well. With a view to effectively protect the right to education for refugees and seek sustainable policy solutions, the main features of the right to education – availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability – were investigated that may offer a relevant framework for Cyprus to adopt and implement solid legal and national policy frameworks prohibiting discrimination or exclusion based on any ground and protecting fundamental rights. Thus, specific challenges and issues in relation to access in education quality as well as relevance of education for refugee children in Cyprus were identified and possible policy responses have been developed.
- (b) A thorough literature review of policies implemented on a European level was conducted. The findings of this comparative research enabled the research team to define measures that European governments take to better support refugee children in their education. The research identified the key challenges faced by refugee children in accessing quality education and provided examples of best practice that will contribute to the formulation of policy recommendations for a national approach to improving education for these children. Furthermore, the literature review framed the questions for the semi-structured interviews with professionals and children/parents.
- (c) Six professionals working in agencies serving refugee children and their families were interviewed in order to identify good practices as well as gaps in practice. The scope of interviewing professionals was to identify barriers to

accessing education, including finding a school placement, sustaining a school placement, and accessing support to remain in school.

- (d) Fifteen educators who are working in schools with refugee children at all educational levels were interviewed. The scope of the interviews with the educators was to document what solutions are proposed or are in place at a local and national level in order to reduce or overcome barriers to education for these children and how far existing practices are effective in increasing access to education.
- (e) Refugee children (25 total) completed questionnaires regarding their viewpoints and experiences related to their access and inclusion to educational opportunities at all levels. In addition, 8 families were interviewed in order to gather data from families who have children at school age regarding their own viewpoints with their children's experience with the Cyprus educational system. It has to be noted that the initial research plan was to conduct separate focus groups with parents and with children. However, this research phase coincided with the restrictions enforced by the government due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore access to shelters and reception centers was prohibited. As such, the research team, after receiving approval by the funding organization, proceeded with administering questionnaires to children, while phone interviews were conducted with parents. It has to be noted that questionnaires were translated in English, French, and Arabic. Interview participants were aware of our role as academic researchers and provided with an information sheet about the research, its potential risks and benefits, and their rights within the research; all gave their oral consent for participation.

Data was analyzed with the use of thematic analysis based on the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). The methodology used allowed for a systematic and holistic research approach which led to the integration of data and production of advanced policy output/recommendations.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1 Challenges in accessing education**

The process of assessing the educational needs of refugee children is done mainly by the Educational System (teachers). Upon arriving in the country, the children are asked by the officials of the relevant Services and Organizations in collaboration with an interpreter, about their level of education and languages they speak. The families or the guardian are then informed about the process of enrollment in the school and that attendance of minors in the educational system is mandatory. In the case of an

unaccompanied minor, the registration process at the school is undertaken by the Shelters that host the children.

Entrance into formal education could be hindered due to extended stays in first reception centres, where school enrolment is not always compulsory. Such challenges seem to be even more pronounced when it comes to early childhood education and care, upper secondary education, and vocational training. Distance and transportation to schools, cost of school materials, insufficient information provision to children and their families about procedures and available services, seriously impacts school enrolment and attendance according to parents of refugee children. Unaccompanied children who turn 18 are at particularly high risk of early school leaving as they tend to lose the support received from the national child protection system when aging out. It appears that adolescents, particularly those aged 15-17 years, face greater challenges in integrating into the national education systems in formal high schools or institutions for vocational training. Some of them have gone beyond the age of compulsory education, which in Cyprus is 15 years.

In Technical Schools, classes operate specifically for unaccompanied minors. In these classes, it is allowed to register students who arrive in Cyprus without their parents/legal guardians. Students are offered 14 hours of language instruction in Greek per week in addition to other technical subjects. Students who attend this program receive a certificate of attendance after completing 65% of the teaching hours of the courses offered. According to the teachers interviewed in these schools, one of the major difficulties presented is the different level of language proficiency and academic knowledge (especially in specific subjects) of students. Therefore, teachers must constantly adapt and simplify their teaching material in order for students to be able to apply it to everyday life. In addition, students' motivation also varies, depending on each student's background and aspiration (to work, transfer to another country, continue studying).

Additional language and cultural mediation support is scarce, yet essential to address language barriers and communication challenges, as refugee and migrant children often do not have sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction or there is a low interest in learning the language of the host country, for example many unaccompanied minors are waiting for family reunification and transfer to another European country.

## 6.2 Tracking

National education statistics distinguish only between Cypriot and non-Cypriot citizens (third world nationals). Therefore, there is no data available on how many

refugee children attend school as well as the number of refugee children who drop out of school.

### 6.3 Introduction/Transitioning programs

Regarding the preparation of the child for his transition to school, through the website of the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute rich support material is provided for teachers which can be used and utilized depending on the school age. For example, there is a reception guide for the first days of school, a guide for teaching Greek as a second language, etc. Also, educational material is provided through the UNHCR website which can be used in teaching and various school activities.

Refugee students have to attend two learning environments: the regular class and the transitional class. As soon as they arrive, they are obliged to take all the courses of the regular class with the exception of Greek literature, ancient Greek, history, religion, and French. The regular class is characterized by a low cultural diversity, as Cypriot students are more numerous than foreign students. Refugee students report that they feel disengaged from the rest of the students, which in turn makes them feel less motivated to attend school. In addition, refugee students find it difficult to follow those subjects that are taught in a language they are not familiar with yet. Some of these students have never been to school before. Learning English is not excluded from their curriculum and therefore they have two new languages to learn at the same time.

### 6.4 Learning Greek as a second language

According to educators, there are tests that assess the acquisition of Greek Language for refugee children upon their admission to the educational system. The Center for Educational Research and Evaluation has in recent years prepared Greek language tests for the integration of students in Secondary and Primary Education in specialized programmes for learning the Greek language. In particular, in Secondary Education, in the framework of the Greek as a Second Language Learning Programme, the Center for Educational Research and Evaluation developed a test during the school year 2009-2010, with the aim of verifying the level of Greek of students with Greek as a second language, and a revised abbreviated test during the school year 2010-2011. These tests include a written test (oral comprehension, written comprehension, written production of language) and an oral interview. The administration of diagnostic tests is done on a mandatory basis by the teachers in the Programme, according to the instructions of the Directorate of Secondary Education. In addition, a new Lyceum test was prepared in a manner approximately similar to what was done for the Gymnasium.

In the afternoons, classes are held within the School with intensive lessons for learning Greek as a second language. In addition, to the school-based programs, the State Training Centers implement various programs to support adults and students learning Greek as a Second Language.

Refugee students are taught fourteen hours of Greek language lessons per week. Two levels of Greek language instruction are offered and each level's duration is one year. As such, no refugee student could attend Greek language instruction for more than one year. This planning presupposes that this period is satisfactory in learning Greek. However, some children may learn Greek within a year while for other children it may take longer than two years. Therefore, the individual needs and learning abilities of each child are not taken into account during the language instruction planning and implementation.

Difficulties appear to be more pronounced for Arabic speaking students because of the different reading and writing code as well as cultural differences with the Cypriot culture. Many of these children have not learned to write in their native language, as such it is quite challenging for them to learn to read and write in a foreign language. Therefore, no matter how hard they try to concentrate and adapt to this transitional stage, sometimes children lose their motivation in continuing their studies or are often absent from school. The fact that professional translation is not made available to schools contributes to the lack of communication between school staff and students.

Some teachers did not take during their studies any course in intercultural education and therefore do not have the necessary skills to deal with intercultural differences. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education obliges teachers to take a few courses related to intercultural education. Often, teachers of Greek as a second language do not have a good command of English or any other foreign language.

## 6.5 Use of alternative methods of learning

As it has been reported by educators and refugee children participating in the study, for the first level of Greek language lessons, teachers use the google translator to translate the Greek word into other languages. In addition, teachers use pictures to explain words that seem more complicated to refugee students and they speak slowly and use a lot of examples. Furthermore, teachers are using a book of Greek language which has a very good level of Greek, but has not been adapted to the needs of refugee students.

The teaching of refugee children does not include to the extent that it should, audiovisual material, presentations through pictures and videos, power point

presentations, creative works and generally the learning of knowledge in a more practical, experiential and functional way that promotes the comprehension of the lessons, without the language being such a big obstacle. These methods of teaching are taught primarily in the Elementary and High School (Gymnasium) than in the Lyceum and in many cases, due to the pressure that exists to cover the necessary material, the use of the above alternative teaching methods is not possible.

## 6.6 Provision of psychosocial support

Psychosocial support in schools is often lacking to assist teachers and refugee children, who may have difficulties to concentrate and learn in class due to stress and trauma accumulated in countries of origin, in transit or at destination. This may also relate to pending family reunification and asylum procedures, as well as significant differences between education systems. Teachers lack the specialized knowledge to support refugee students cope with the psychological impact of their experiences.

## 6.7 Early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) – the phase before primary education – is increasingly acknowledged as providing the foundations for lifelong learning and development. Access to public early education systems in Cyprus is not granted for refugee children as places are not guaranteed due to a large number of applicants per year. Therefore, mothers of young refugee children cannot join the labor market after the maternity period due to the inaccessibility to early childhood education and care. This in turn, has an impact on the financial status of the family.

## 6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the barriers and difficulties identified through the research conducted for this project. They are framed in accordance with the literature which shows that measures can be multifaceted -developing mentoring and cultural mediation schemes, making adequate resources available to address socio-economic disadvantages, providing information about the school environment, engaging with parents, ensuring additional language support, and strengthening anti-discrimination legislation (UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, 2019).

- The creation of a database to record the number of refugee students who are attending school, interrupt their schooling, attend some other form of informal schooling which could be accessible to all relevant parties (e.g. UNHCR, Social Welfare Services, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth). This will allow for effective monitoring and timely decision-making.
- The provision of open pre-school arrangements free of charge for the very youngest group (0-4) of refugee children immediately, regardless of their status.
- The creation of reception classes within the school units so that refugee children socialize with their classmates and come in contact with the Cypriot culture. In these classes, Greek language instruction should take place for these children to be able to meet the requirements of the curriculum.
- Children could benefit from an individualized curriculum during their first year in the formal education system. Activities could be tailored to children's specific needs and profile (being an unaccompanied child, coming from a war situation, etc.). A flexible curriculum depending on the needs and capacities of children. Refugee children can follow part of the curriculum in welcome classes and part in regular classes.
- Tutors should be made available for refugee students. Extra academic help may be very beneficial for a refugee child who may feel additionally stigmatized by poor performance in school. A good relationship with a tutor/mentor can provide a personal meaningful connection for the child.
- The provision of alternative methods of teaching (e.g. audiovisual material) should be used more frequently for refugee children at higher levels of education as well.
- The presence of cultural mediators in schools, could facilitate the process of integration of these children in the educational system. Cultural mediation should promote the improved communication between the school, the children, and their families as well as local communities.
- Professional interpreters should be made available in schools with a significant number of foreign speaking refugee children.
- Schools should be staffed with educational/clinical psychologists as well as with vocational counselors in order to provide support and guidance to refugee children.
- Because the risk factors for early school leaving are multifaceted, the linkages between schools and other critical public services (health, child protection, social protection, parental labour market support, etc.) should be

strengthened to ensure that barriers to school enrolment and factors contributing to early leaving are addressed.

- The government should fund the transportation of refugee children from reception centers and shelters to public schools.
- The capacity building of teachers should be strengthened by attending professional trainings on teaching refugee children as well as dealing with symptoms of stress and trauma.
- The government should support the provision of non-formal education, such as homework support and support for extracurricular activities which could strengthen personal development of refugee children.
- Schools should collaborate with local NGO's in order to plan activities within and outside the school in order to increase cultural awareness and opportunities for socialisation.
- Existing possibilities of adult education could be used for students after compulsory education.

## 7. Conclusions

This was the first research study to be conducted in Cyprus which investigates the barriers to educational access and integration for refugee children. The most common challenges identified to accessing education across all age groups of refugee children include inaccessible pre-schooling, language barriers, residing in remote locations, lack of information on educational opportunities, limited financial support for asylum applicants, and disengagement from local students. Lagging behind peers in the local language skills, and wider psychological factors, may also affect these children's ability to perform well at school. Refugee children's educational access and attainment are not tracked through the national monitoring system, meaning that their educational needs and achievements remain largely invisible. A lack of parental support for unaccompanied children in their learning activities and failure to engage in their school life (for example, because of a language barrier or restricted financial means) can also have a detrimental effect on children's educational success and wider integration. It has to be noted that this research has indicated that considerable efforts are made by teachers to make the material relevant and often adapt it to the individual needs of each refugee student. In fact, most unaccompanied minors interviewed, noted their satisfaction with the school material. However, one important issue addressed is the fact that these children feel disengaged from native students. To this extent, it is emphasized that

schools should facilitate the inclusion of these children within the school peer system. A sense of belongingness in their peer group, could in turn help them take a more optimistic view of their educational options and potential progression.

Findings suggest that policies should address the learning, social and emotional needs of refugees through a holistic model. This means that collaboration between different agents is crucial in meeting the complex needs of these children. Findings underlie the importance of access in pre-primary care and post-compulsory education for refugee children. This is a finding that has been supported by other studies in this area (e.g. Cerna, 2019; Crul et al. 2018). Equally important is to receive personalized learning and support and benefit from teachers that have acquired intercultural education. The learning environment in schools can play a crucial role in supporting or hindering specific language and learning programmes for refugee students. Most importantly, policies can only be successful if schools have a positive school climate, which also includes parents and communities.

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