

THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES INTO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF GREECE

**The case of Trikala ...
Trikala embraces refugees!**

This paper attempts to present the efforts of the Greek State and the Greek society to manage the refugee crisis in the period 2015-16. The educational program for the integration of refugees into the education system of Greece is presented and a brief reference is made for its implementation in the city of Trikala.

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PRAGUE, OCTOBER 2018

HISTORICAL DATA

Over the last twenty years, the migration issue in Greece is an issue that comes back in different forms, taking up a central spot in public discussions.

In the past, especially since the end of the Second World War, Greece, due to its poor economic situation, did not attract economic migrants, but on the contrary, Greeks were forced into immigration.

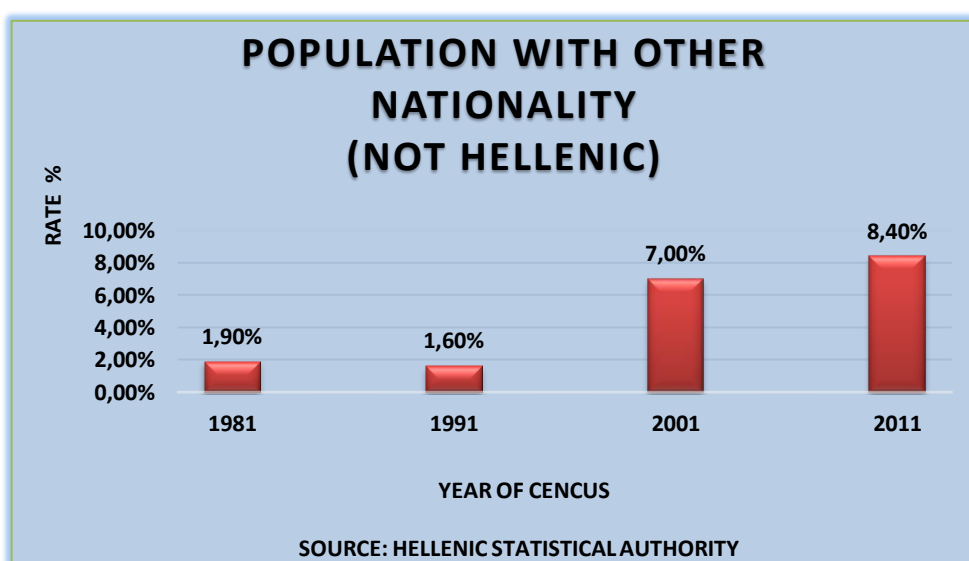
Greece until the 1980s was mainly a country exporting economic migrants.

After the end of the 1980s, it changed into a migrant host country as shown by the censuses of 1981 -2011, below.

Table 1: Greece, total population and population of Greek and foreign citizenship in census 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011 (population in thousand)

| | 1981 | 1981 | 1991 | 1991 | 2001 | 2001 | 2011 | 2011 |
|---|---------|-------|----------|-------|----------|-------|----------|-------|
| TOTAL POPULATION OF GREECE | 9.739,6 | 100% | 10.259,9 | 100% | 10.934,1 | 100% | 10.816,3 | 100% |
| POPUPATION WITH HELLENIC NATIONALITY | 9.559,0 | 98,2% | 10.092,6 | 98,4% | 10.171,9 | 93,0% | 9.904,3 | 91,6% |
| POPUPATION WITH NON HELLENIC NATIONALITY | 180,6 | 1,9% | 167,3 | 1,6% | 762,2 | 7,0% | 912,0 | 8,4% |

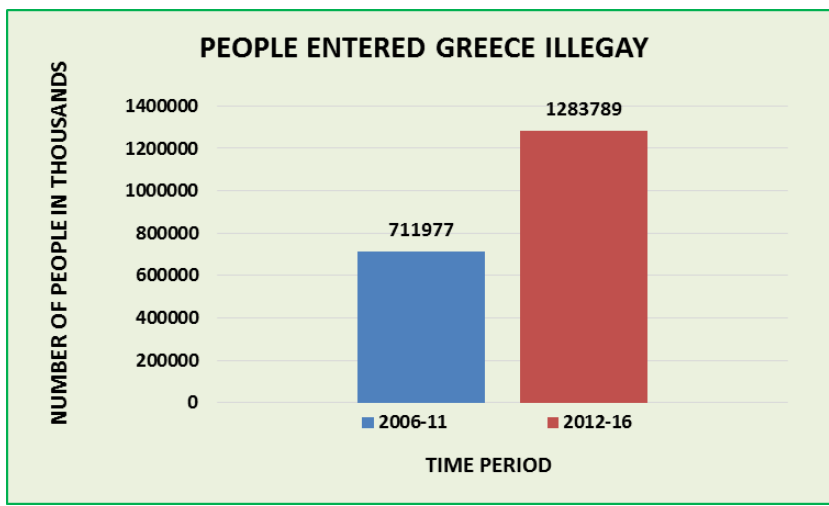
SOURCE: HELLENIC STATISTIC AUTHORITY



Since 2006, the number of people illegally entering the country has started to increase significantly, culminating in the four-year period 2012-16, when almost doubled. Generally, over the decade 2006-2016 more than 1.9 million people have illegally entered our country

| Table 2 : People who illegally entered Greece between 2006 and 2016 | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Time period | 2006 - 11 | 2012 – 16 | 2006 - 16 |
| Total number of people | 711 977 | 1 283 789 | 1 995 766 |

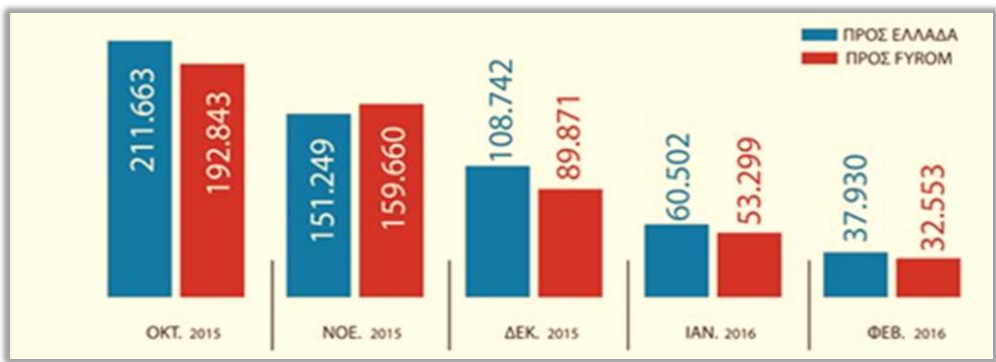
Source: Ministry of the Interior and Administrative Reconstruction



In the first period (2006-11), 50% of the immigrants illegally entering Greece came from another European country (mainly Albania) and the most of them were economic migrants. This was mainly due to the economic and political situation of the countries of origin, the need for a workforce in the undeclared economy that grew uncontrollably until the economic crisis, geographical proximity to the countries of origin and ease of access due to the difficulty of guarding maritime borders.

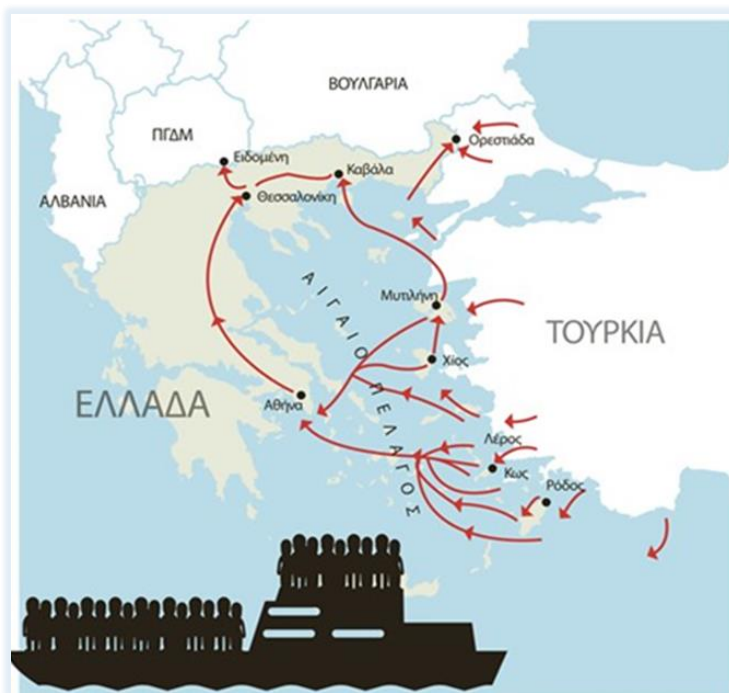
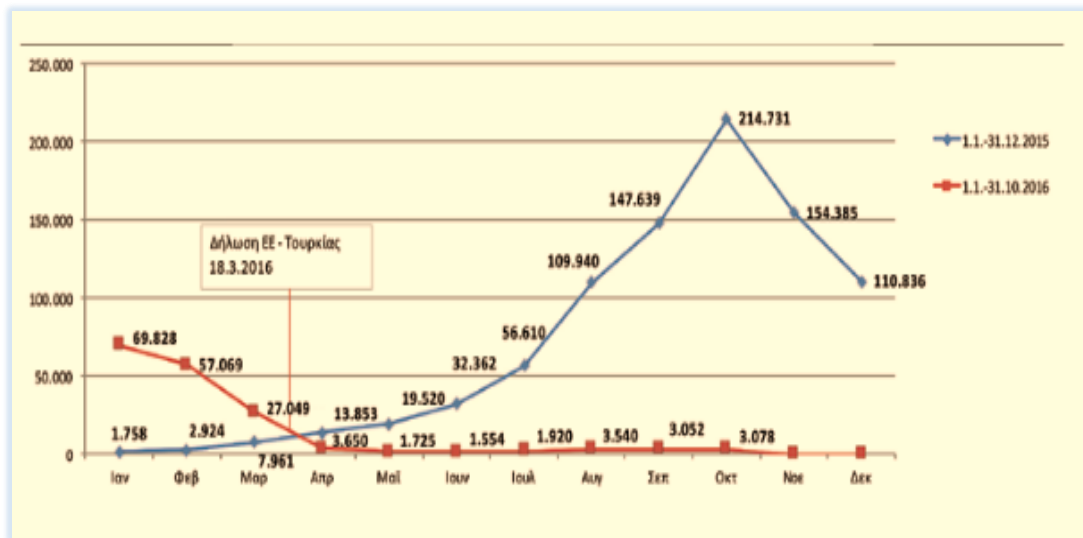
In the second period (2012-16), more than 80% of those arriving in Greece came from the countries (Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan) and they are refugees who left their countries because of the war. They are not interested in staying in Greece but moving quickly to one of the "rich countries" in Europe. This is apparent from the very small number of those who have applied for asylum.

FLOWS OF REFUGEES: OCT. 2015-FEB 2016



SOURCE: UNHCR

ARRIVALS FROM THE SEA PER MONTH (2015-2016)



REFUGEES FLOWS TO AND FROM GREECE

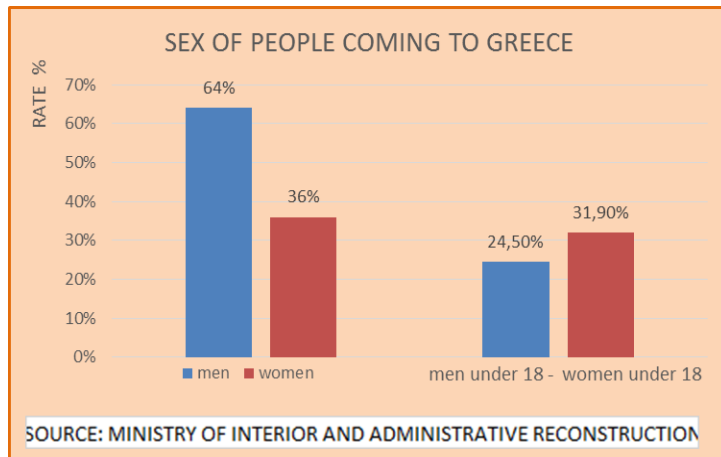
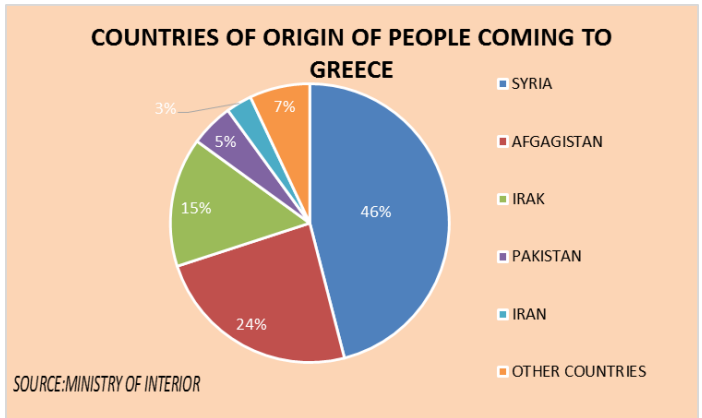
This population initially headed for Piraeus and then crossed the country towards the border between Greece and FYROM and the passage of Idomeni.

Upon the closure of the border and the EU - Turkey agreement in March 2016, some 60,000 refugees were trapped in Greece according to official data, and remained at that level until February 2017, while since then, despite the small number of arrivals in the islands, it has been decreasing due to the intensification of family reunification and resettlement schemes in other countries.



The refugee population that entered the country was not homogeneous. According to the data from the General Secretariat of Migration and Refugee Policy within two years (2015-2016) we had:

- 1,200,000 arrivals in the islands
- 7,000 arrivals through landal borders
- 50,000 savings at the sea
- 765 arrests of traffickers



During the period 1.1.2016 to 31.10.2016 the percentages of men and women varied: 64% of the incoming were men and 36% women.

A characteristic feature of the refugee population, which was of crucial importance in designing the education program was the fact that there was a very high number of people under 18:

24.5% of men and 31.9% of women were in this category.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS has some important features:

- It is the largest and most pressing refugee influx to European soil since the Second World War.
- Refugee flows are mixed with migrants, making the treaty extremely complex.
- Refugees and immigrants arrive in the Greek islands crossing a narrow sea border, which is extremely difficult to control.
- Greece has been forced to take on the role of a European leader in tackling the crisis under unusual and very difficult conditions
- Greece, Greek society and the state have achieved a huge work in just 18 months, giving a daily battle to the fundamental European values of humanity and solidarity and defending the security of European borders, through tough economic crisis.

TACKLING THE CRISIS The Greek authorities managed the unprecedented refugee flows in the country, creating as soon as possible hosting structures. Former military camps were converted by the Ministry of National Defense into refugee camps.

In addition to state host structures, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other NGOs have created other host structures (apartments, hotels, hospitality in families) in the islands and in the hinterland.



Host structure in Larisa

HEALTH CARE: A Vaccination program has been developed for all children residing in Host structures or elsewhere by the Ministry of Health together with the Ministry of Migration Policy. The program is a prerequisite for the inclusion of children in training programs and was implemented in co-operation with NGOs and UNICEF support (donation of 62,000 vaccines) based on the decisions of the National Committee for Vaccines.

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS: Among the refugees there were many unaccompanied children, which were the most vulnerable part of refugee / migratory flows and for which particular attention was paid. In March 2017, according to the UNHCR the estimated number of unaccompanied minors in the country amounted to 2,100, 92% of which were boys, most of them over 14 years old (main nationalities: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria).

In this context, 48 hostels were established and operated for unaccompanied minors and a total of 1,256 places. The hostels, which operate under the general supervision of the Greek State, employ social workers and psychologists as well as 24-hour health and safety staff, legal representation services, educational and recreational activities.

EDUCATION OF CHILDREN OF REFUGEES: Greece has set as a priority and considers it a duty and an obligation to ensure and facilitate access to public education for all minors living in Host structures. The Training program has been developed by the cooperation of the Ministry of Migration Policy with the Ministry of Education and it is being implemented with mass support from local communities despite the exceptions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM:

- Ensuring the right to education, which is a basic human right for every child.
- Ensuring psychological support and gradual integration of refugees into educational system of Greece or the education system of another European country in case of relocation.

In March 2016, the Ministry of Education set up the Scientific Support Committee and commissioned it to develop a plan to integrate the refugee children into education system. This plan was prepared by the Scientific Support Committee and implemented by the Management Team (11 executives in Athens and 5 executives in Thessaloniki), the administrative mechanism of the Ministry of Education and the 62 Refugee Training Coordinators who were responsible for the education of the refugee's children.

As Refugee Training Coordinators, qualified teachers were appointed. (Studies in intercultural education, working experience in teaching Greek as a foreign language and voluntary work with refugees)

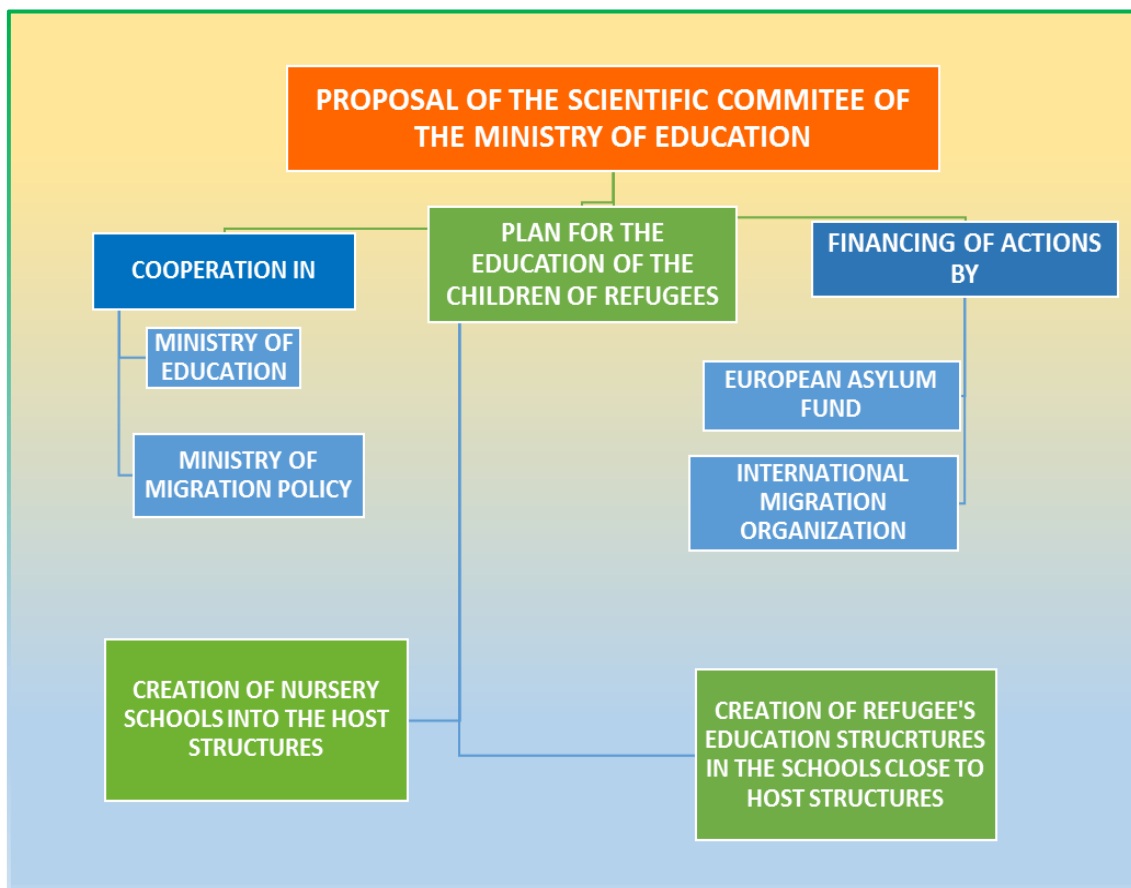
A coordinator has to monitor, manage and coordinate whatever is related to the education of refugee students during the morning regular public school program.

The proposals of the Scientific Support Committee for the education of refugee children were based on the following conclusions:

- The liquidity of the refugee population required continued monitoring, an assessment of changing circumstances and constant adjustments with administrative and scientific criteria
- The management of the refugee training project required the synergy of various departments of the Ministry of Education, many others ministries, international organizations and NGOs
- The whole project was a political high-responsibility policy that required quick decisions at the staff level

Organization of the Education Program by age groups:

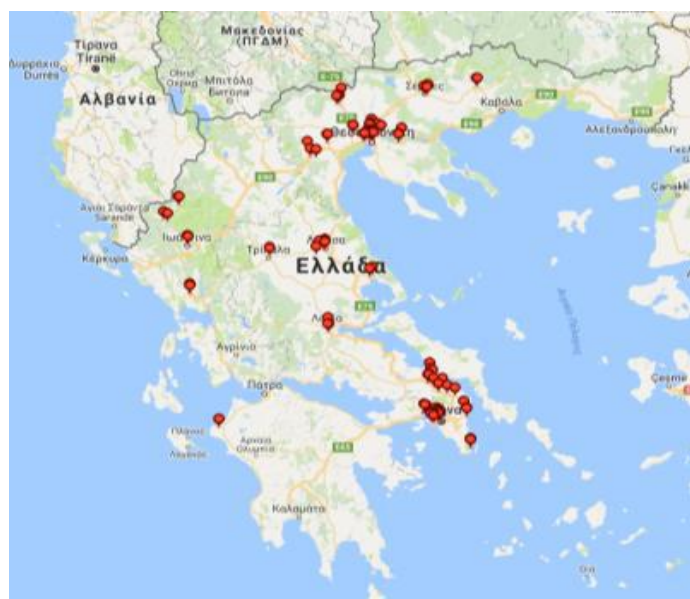
- Operation of kindergartens within Host Structures.
- Integration of children aged 6-12 in Refugee Education Structures (DYEP) of Public Elementary Schools,
- Integration of children aged 13-15 in Refugee Education Structures (DYEP) of public high school.
- Organization of children's mother tongue programs
- Organization of sports and artistic activities and creative employment programs, in cooperation with NGOs.



From October 2016 to March 2017, 111 training structures with 145 classes were set up, involving 2,643 primary and secondary school pupils living in host structures other than those on the islands.

Operating Education Structures, Greece (March 2017)

Source: Ministry of Health Management Team



Problems, failures and delays occurred during the implementation of the project:

- Coordination problems, overlapping responsibilities and competition between services
- Continuous changes in the location of host camps and refugees population movements
- Numerous children who were trapped with their parents in the Aegean islands had not access to formal education
- It has not yet been possible to find adequate solutions to the problem of lack of evidence of high school diploma and ways of matching foreign high school diplomas with Greek ones
- The guidance of Coordinators was incomplete, so they were forced to improvise
- The operation of kindergartens delayed too much due to the inability to create or find safe childrens' playgrounds in time and due to the frequent movement of refugees from camp to camp.

Despite the difficulties, the children of the refugees have adapted to the educational process and rules required by school life, responded to lessons, involved quite a lot in different activities, there was a progress in learning Greek, Mathematics and English.

School Leakage

The rate of attendance was varied

- from region to region
- between elementary and secondary (it is clearly lower in high school)
- between schools in the same region

The main feature is the unstable participation and the non-systematic presence. Discontinuation of schooling is usually due to the relocation of the refugee family to another country, or to a relocation to another city in Greece or elsewhere (apartments, etc.).

Factors that affected students' attendance and leakage, related to the attitudes of refugees themselves, their expectations and the particularly adverse conditions they lived in, as well as those related to the organization and operation of training structures such as:

- the way teachers are selected / placed and their inadequate training,
- the continuing mobility of teachers for professional / formal and economic reasons,
- the great difficulties of teachers to operate within the particular conditions of the educational structures and to handle both the subject of communication with children and the peculiarities of the open curriculum.

Problems were less in schools where, there were teachers with experience/knowledge of teaching Greek as a second language and there was a connection and communication between the education structure and the morning program. Also, the creation of a community climate in school between teachers and a positive group climate among children helped a lot. In general, the educational integration of students at the level of the high school involved more difficulties than primary school.

GOOD PRACTICES DEVELOPED BY REFUGEE COORDINATORS

Activities with parents

- Involving parents in accompanying children during their transportation to school
- Regular informative meetings with parents.
- Creating of parents' associations
- Parents' associations visiting reception classes to get to know the Teachers and be informed.
- Holding visits of teachers at host camps to get to know the parents and inform them about their children's progress, communicate and exchange opinions.
- Informing teachers about parents' concerns and anxieties
- Participation of teachers in events in the hospitality centers (e.g. in celebrations with the students' families).
- Educational meetings with agencies offering informal or non-formal education at hospitality centers (UNHCR, NGOs and other civil society organizations).
- Co-ordinate or participate in lessons (e.g. Greek, foreign languages) aimed at student parents
- Organization of activities outside the hospitality centers with the students' families: visits to museums, archaeological sites, monuments, getting to know the city, attending theatrical plays.

Activities with Children

Outings

- Getting to know the natural environment, the city and its history.
- Using public transport so that children get to know the city and its habitants.
- Educational visits to activity parks, museums, archaeological sites, monuments, sites of environmental interest.
- Participation of children in educational workshops, games and experiential activities held at museums, education institutes, libraries.
- Attending shows without language barriers (i.e. music shows, Puppet Theater)

Relationships with community / society

- Organizing open-school educational events with parents, teachers, representatives of local authorities, and representatives of collaborating ministries for the integration of refugee's children in schools
- Open events - talks about the refugee.
- Presentation of pupils' artistic activities to the wider audience (exhibition of children's paintings, screening of documentaries created by students in the framework of a seminar, presentation of musical works with the participation of children, creation of e-books from children's artistic projects).
- Contact with universities and promote the attendance of courses by refugees as observers

THE EDUCATION OF REFUGEES IN TRIKALA

Let's see how the educational program was implemented in Trikala

1. School Year 2016 -2017

A host structure was established in Trikala that hosted about 60 families with 256 people.

Families were asked if they wanted their children to go to school.

Some families feared that if children were going to school here (in Greece) then it would be difficult for them to go to another European country. For this reason, they hesitated to send their children to school.

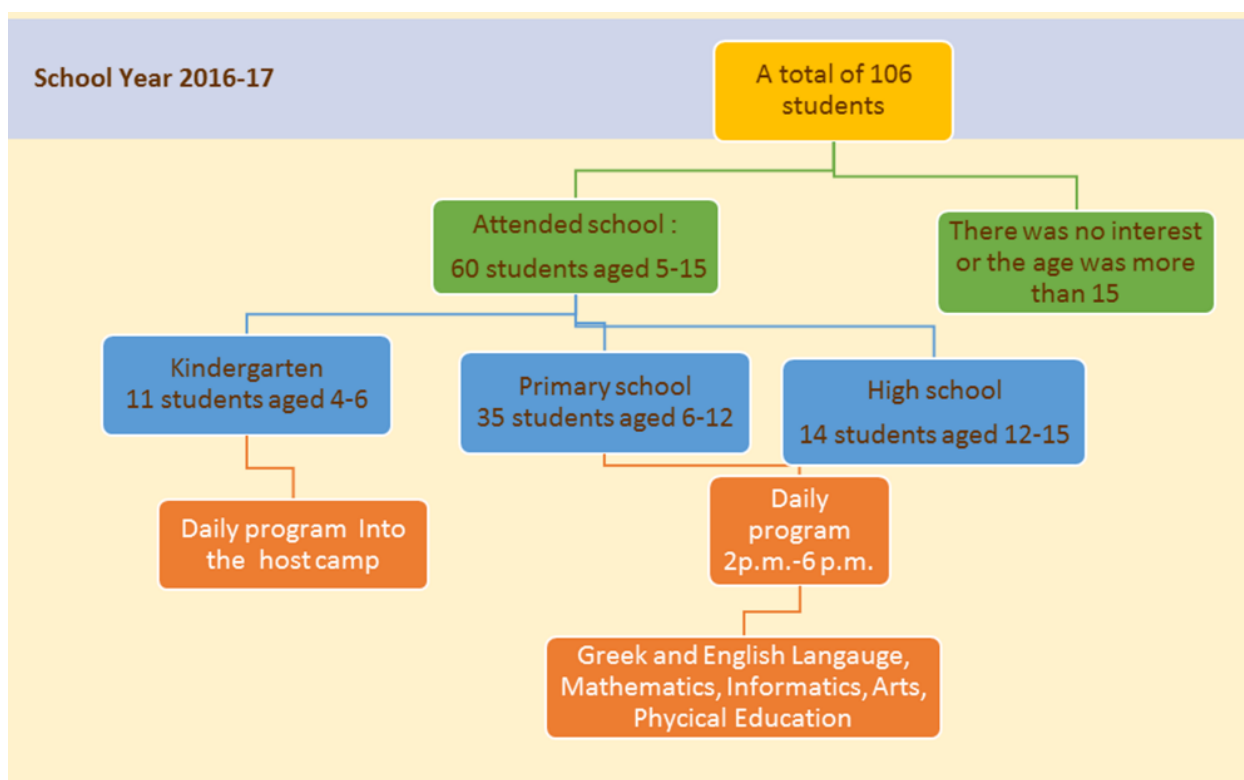
There were a total of 106 children. Only 60 children aged 5 to 15 attended lessons. For children over the age of 15, it was not possible for this first year to organize courses. For the rest there was no interest from their families for the reasons we mentioned above.

From the 60 students attending classes,

11 children aged 4-6 attended classes in the kindergarten of the refugee camp,

35 students attended classes in Primary School and

14 students attended classes in the High School near to the Host center.



The students of primary school and the High school followed a daily program from 2p.m. to 6 p.m. They were taught Greek and English language, Mathematics, Informatics, Physical education and Arts. They were transported by bus from the refugee camp to the schools and they did not come in contact with the other Greek students.

2. School Year 2017 -2018

This year, the situation was better as a different program run by a municipality company in cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for the housing of about 400 mainly Syrian , Kurds and Iraqi refugees in 70 apartments.

The refugees went to public school in their neighborhood like the Greek students and attended the morning school program. The results were very good in terms of integration due to the more attractive school environment with bright colors, games, music and images. It was their first educational experience. It was something they are entitled to and they had never had until now. We should not forget that they only experienced war, a nightmarish journey and difficult living conditions. Therefore, since security was their fundamental need, school looked like a paradise for them.

There were 135 refugee students aged 4 to 18.

They attended regular classes according to their age and an effort was made so that they could be taught the Greek language separately for 10-15 hours per week.

Children aged 4-6 (25 students) attended the regular kindergarten program in their neighborhood.

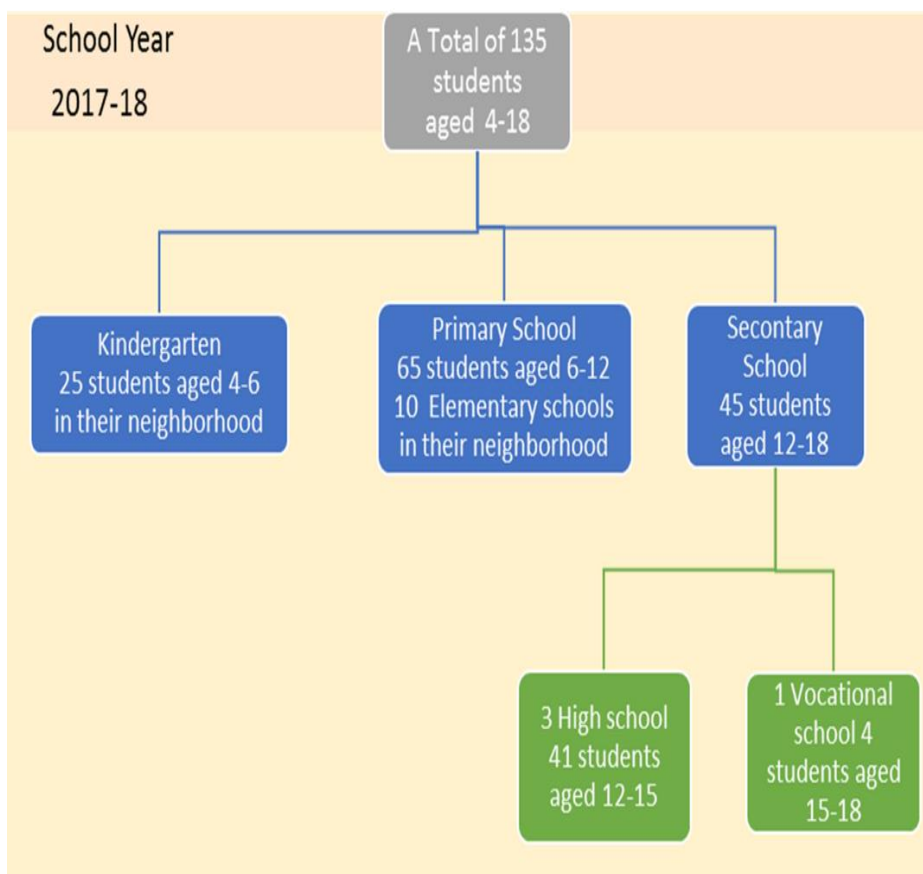
Students aged 6-12 (65 students) attended courses to 10 elementary schools in the neighborhood they lived in.

Enrollment began in October and until March, there were new students joining the same classes as well as new ones.

Students aged 12-18 (45 students) attended Reception Courses in 3 High schools and 1 Vocational school. As they were older, they could move around on their own. They were taught Greek for 15 hours per week whereas they attended the rest of the courses in regular classes.

2. School Year 2018 -2019

The program is continuing. The families are housing in 70 apartments. They are about 430 people and their nationality are mainly Syrian, Kurds, Iraqi and some Palestinians. There is fluidity and mobility among refugees. Others are coming, others are leaving. For the moment, 120 students are distributed in the same way, as last year, in their neighborhood schools.



TRAINING TEACHERS

1. Live and/or distance training sessions, for substitute teachers hired at refugee educational structures, were organized by the Institute for Educational Policy (**IEP**). In this way, 117 Teachers of Primary and Secondary Education and RECs were trained in four periods (February, October, and November 2016). The duration of the training sessions was four hours each time and included:
 - A brief description and analysis of the cultural, social and pedagogic parameters for the education of refugee children
 - A presentation of the open curriculum and educational materials with examples
 - A presentation of teaching practices by teachers with experience in the integration of refugee children
2. Many school counselors have tried to support teachers by making mandatory training sessions, with educators and associates of the IEP as trainers.
3. Separate training sessions for RFRE and RECs teachers were also organized by other stakeholders, such as the Hellenic Open University.

Regarding teacher training for refugee classes, there is a delay.

Additionally, the following steps have been taken in Trikala:

1. Separate meetings for each level of education have been scheduled by school advisors and refugee training coordinators to share experiences and good practices.
2. A working group of teachers who have refugee students in their classes has been set up, and is coordinated by a psychologist in order for them to discuss the difficulties they face.
3. A voluntary group of teachers has also been set up so that they can get acquainted and interact with refugee parents. The group has been trained by a psychologist specializing on refugees.
4. A two-day workshop for educators have been organised with the aim of raising their awareness on the matter at hand.
5. There was also an exhibition of children's drawings in a central city hall attended by parents
6. Teachers attended an experiential theatrical workshop entitled "And if it was you that...» in order to raise their awareness, promote their involvement and enable them to be in the position of refugees even for a little while.

Nursery training was satisfactory. In all nursery schools, diversity acceptance programs had been made since school year 2015-16, in collaboration with the school advisors. Values such as solidarity, friendship and cooperation have emerged.

The difficulties we encountered were:

1. Teaching the Greek language, as there was the language barrier and despite the fact that several pupils speak English a little
2. The fact that students formed a heterogeneous group. There were children from Syria and Iraq ..., from a village or cities, whose families have either decided to stay in Greece or, as is the case for most of them, want to leave and do not show any interest in learning.
3. The fact that children had traumatic experiences: they have seen their beloved ones being killed, the boats that transported them to Greece sank, and they have been separated from their families, to name but a few. This means that each child does not have the same needs and priorities.
4. Lack of appropriate training for teachers enabling them to safely deal with such situations especially in terms of the pupils' emotional profile and needs.
5. Insufficient number of teachers to teach the Greek language. The existing teachers are not trained to teach Greek as a foreign language.

Despite the difficulties, the integration of refugees into the school community has been extremely satisfactory.

The first year some Greek parents opposed to refugee students attending public school even in the afternoon program,

The second year, when the refugee students joined the same classes as all the other Greek students, there were no objections. We have to mention that many parents have stood by refugee students and are doing their best to create a safe, friendly and supportive school environment for them.

The refugees' attitude contributed to the creation of a cooperative environment since they have caused no trouble; in fact, we have met polite and cooperative people.

Finally, I would like to say that refugees have been in our lives for 3 years. Looking back, we can say that initially, public opinion was divided:

- On the one hand, there were the xenophobic ones trying to terrorize the public by presenting refugees as terrorists, thieves and criminals that would be a serious problem to our city, and
- On the other, there were those who believe in humanitarian values, solidarity and respect for every human being irrespective of nationality or religion.

Eventually, the second one prevailed. The inhabitants of Trikala have welcomed and accepted refugees the way a civilized open society has to and we are proud of it.

Living with the refugees in these three years has shown that nothing terrible happened. On the contrary, we have gained a lot because:

1. We have been able to highlight very important values such as solidarity, respect and support for every person regardless of origin, religion or other differences, and this is important not only for refugees but for everyone.
2. We have come into contact with people of different nationalities; we have learnt about their culture and its similarities and differences when compared to ours.
3. We have given some hope to desperate people but we have received much love, gratitude and they are now feeling more important and dignified as human beings.
4. We have taken strength from them realizing how strong each one of us is when dealing with great difficulties.
5. There is financial benefit for the local community as their money is spent on the local market.
6. We have sent the message that our city is a safe one with hospitable citizens promoting solidarity thus it is worth visiting.

All the above is taught with actions, not just with words to the citizens of tomorrow who are our children and our pupils at school.



We thank the inhabitants of Trikala for hospitality and solidarity

Sources:

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