

## Shaping educational expectations in a transient condition: The case of Syrian Refugee Youth in Greece<sup>1</sup>

Maria-Theodora V. Giannopoulou ([marygian91@hotmail.com](mailto:marygian91@hotmail.com))

Georgios Nikolaou ([gnikolaou@upatras.gr](mailto:gnikolaou@upatras.gr))

Department of Primary Education, University of Patras

### Abstract

*The last few decades have witnessed the shifting scenery of globalization with its postmodern assumptions of instability, ambiguity, fluidity and dispute of the established values. This has led to cutthroat competition between the stronger and the weaker countries of this world, resulting in conflicts and consequently in forced migration. Particularly, in this “post truth” context the concepts of citizenship are constantly being negotiated, as human flows have increased, bringing ambiguity to the world setting. As far as Europe is concerned more and more challenges are triggered, by the growing number of refugees, related to their settlement and management of their needs. Meanwhile, the reappearance of extreme beliefs, manifested through the closure of Western European borders turned Greece into an intermediate “waiting area”, rather than a gateway to Europe for a large portion of refugees. Staying for a long time in such a standby condition leads to refugee’s degradation and inhibits the meeting of basic needs, such as the education of refugee children. Taking into consideration the above, combined with education’s potential in promoting citizenship and belonging, the present paper seeks to give voice to 13 Syrian refugee children, temporarily settled in a Refugee Camp in Western Greece. In this paper, their aspirations about their future education are to be explored. More precisely, semi-structured interviews attempted to bring forth their views about both the significance of education and their desire for its continuation. The coding of the interview data, which were collected during a two-month period in 2017, and the following content analysis revealed how their educational experiences, before and during the temporary residence in Greece, contribute to the formation of their educational expectations. Finally, this paper reports the data acquired and emphasizes the deep desire of refugee children to return in a formal educational context, so as to quit refugee identity and regain a student identity, that was lost during their refugee journey.*

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<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Giannopoulou, M.-T. & Nikolaou, G. (2020) *Shaping educational expectations in a transient condition: The case of Syrian Refugee Youth in Greece*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 798 - 812). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children’s Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

## **Key words**

Migrant Crisis, Refugee Children, Educational Expectations, Standby Condition

## **Introduction**

Recently, neoliberal examples of globalization have shown particular emphasis on free markets, on the abolition of inter-state borders, on the privatization and on the open capital markets that promote economic growth (Galbraith, 1999; Kearney, 1995), which, however, have undermined the possibility of economic development of the weakest economies, leading to a global insecurity and instability, as the power is concentrated on the few, who are characterized by increased tendencies of expansionism (Galbraith, 1999; Richmond, 2002). Such conflicts, provoking new forms of inequality (Giddens, 1994, p. 5), end up in waves of reactionary or oppressive immigration and as a result a social transformation exists (Richmond, 2002). "The case of Syria is the biggest humanitarian crisis of our time, from which millions of people are suffering," said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi (UNHCR, 2016), as during 2015 and in just 10 months, the number of refugees coming from the country rose to 4 out of the 3 previously millions (UNHCR, 2015). Actually, the last decade, the Mediterranean was transformed into the most permeable border between Europe and its neighbors (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2014). This fact, combined with the gradually imposed restrictions on crossing the borders by neighboring countries (Richmond, 2002), led to the accumulation of many refugees in Greece (UNHCR, 2016), most of whom come from Syria, as the country is considered the main entry point of Europe because of its' geographical location. In fact, it's a waiting country, a transit center for refugees, wishing to relocate mainly to western Europe (Papadopoulou, 2004; Skordas & Sitaropoulos, 2004). In such a transitional situation, refugee children, considering its' key role for their integration and adaptation to the new society, expect to know their future, seeking appropriate education, while they have remained outside a formal school for a long time (Düvell, 2012; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008, p. 4, 8; Shakya, Guruge, Hynie, Akbari, Malik, Htoo, & Alley, 2012; Skordas & Sitaropoulos, 2004). This paper includes both a literature review where increasing emphasis is given to the educational expectations of refugee children and a presentation of the findings arisen from a recent study that focused on how past educational experiences play an important role in shaping such expectations.

## **Literature Review**

In this part of the paper, the topics, which will be covered, concern the sense of the term “refugee children”, combined with the term “educational expectations”. Specific emphasis is going to be given to the expectations that refugee children shape for their education, even though they are temporarily settled in a transit country, exploring their past and current educational experiences as a key factor.

According to the theoretical framework of the European Commission, refugee children have both children’s and refugee’s rights. In many cases, their rights as children are likely to enter their refugee rights as they have the same needs for care, education and special treatment beyond the particular needs as refugees. A child is considered to be a refugee when he/she is under the age of 18 and is seeking refugee status or any other international protection, is accompanied or not by his / her parents or by any other adult and has to leave his/her country because of war, civil war or generalized violence (ECRE, 1996).

In most cases, refugees and their children coming from countries in the Middle East do not have high educational and professional skills and deal with many problems because of their skin color and the religion of Islam, as the latter relates to violence and terrorism in the Western world (Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005). They belong to the category of semi-voluntary immigration, as, unlike migrants (voluntary immigration), they face the compliance with dominant culture as a kind of alienation from their own culture (Ogbu, 1982). According to Bauman (2004, p. 40), these individuals belong to a lower class without having the right to choose their identity and to participate in the social context. Of course, this is not a homogeneous group but individuals who, even though they come from the same country, have a variety of nationalities, cultures, languages, racial backgrounds (Hek, 2005b; Matthews, 2008).

Specifically, young people, who are forced to leave their homeland, need to negotiate their identity, not only in terms of their current residence, but also of their origin and prospects (Bash, & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006). However, it has been stated that people who have left their country because of conflicts on their land, they do not usually hope to succeed in a country where they did not choose to emigrate. However, if they wish to deal with the obstacles that arise during their movement, such as language and discrimination, they resort to education in order to overcome them (Stevenson & Stigler, 1994).

Indeed, research studies, carried out in the field of young refugees, have pointed out that school facilitates the establishment in the new society, as it strengthens the sense of belonging to a group, it promotes social and emotional development and it creates a sense of routine (Hek, 2005b). In general, a person builds on its past performance to create expectations for future situations, which are a prerequisite for targeting and identifying incentives for action (Jacob & Wilder, 2010).

In terms of education, expectations refer to a more realistic assessment of the likelihood of achieving a desire, while aspirations are related to the desire of a teenager to achieve high levels of education, linked to a sense of hope and being more abstract and idealistic concepts for the future (Bohon, Johnson & Gorman, 2006; Feliciano, 2006; Jacob & Wilder, 2010). Thus, aspirations and expectations are important predictive factors of later achievements, as adolescents set goals that they pursue in a broader sense within the constraints imposed by the social environment (Saha & Sikora, 2008).

Given the foresaid findings about the role of past performance in shaping future expectations (Weiner, 2000) and the fact that school act as mediator in social and emotional well-being (Hek, 2005), increasing emphasis has been given to past and current experiences that affect refugees' children educational expectations (Bohon et al., 2006). Besides, refugee children, being a high-risk population, face many obstacles, like other minority or marginalized groups, contributing to their social instability. Among these problems is the interruption of their education which results in difficult communication in the new context of a suspicious reception environment (Hek, 2005b; Thomas, Nafees & Bhugra, 2004). The lack of schools in resettlement areas, the refusal of schools to accept refugees as pupils, the continued mobility of refugee families and the ignorance of their rights are often the cause of the cessation of their education and its inadequate provision (Joyce, Earnest, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

In many cases, the prolonged period that they stay in camps, makes it difficult to join the new school environment, due to the limited contact with western culture. Actually, staying more than five years in a hosting center can lead in devastating consequences for the educational development of refugee children. Consequently, they lack their educational motivation, which is likely to be linked to the fact that although education is considered an investment for the future, the future of asylum seekers is considered uncertain and full of problems, and their educational experiences are extremely unstable (Ngo, Bigelow, & Wahlstrom, 2007; Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008).

Unfortunately, although many western countries have signed human rights conventions, there is a discrepancy between their ideals and the settlement policies that they have adopted for refugees, resulting in the marginalization of the latter (Devere, McDermott & Verbitsky, 2006; Taylor, & Sidhu, 2012). One of the usual practices for dealing with the refugee crisis is the provision of accommodation to refugee populations in camps in neighboring countries for long periods of time, until their asylum application is approved. So, the educational experiences of refugee children in host countries are limited to non-organized courses that take place within the camps by trained or not teachers, without books and without a formal teaching program –far from the concept of an official school. It seems that such type of policy does not take into consideration the counterbalancing role of education on the psychosocial

implications of war and the creation of stability and hope for the future (Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008; Sidhu, Taylor & Christie, 2011).

This study adds to this small but growing body of evidence, as hardly any studies have been carried out about the educational expectations of refugee children, temporarily settled in transit countries, as Greece. Taking into account the above findings about the educational condition of refugee children along with the fact that personal narratives of refugees provide different perspective on their experiences and needs (Hek, 2005; Hickey, 2005), the purpose of this research was to examine how the educational expectations of Syrian refugee youth, who are temporarily settled in Greece, are shaped and how these are associated with past and current educational experiences.

## **Method**

The findings presenting in this paper are part of a broader study that was completed to examine the factors that influence and shape the educational expectations of refugee youth, who stay temporarily in a transit country, as Greece. In addition, this article is based on a small-scale qualitative research project, which included semi-structure interviews that took place with young refugees in a camp and examined their expectations on education.

### **Context and participants**

Data were collected from a refugee camp, situated in Western Greece, which was selected because of the easier access on this. More precisely, the refugee camp is located in a coastal area, some kilometers away from the nearest village. It's a camp where initially, there were about 350 Syrian refugees, victims of the war, mainly families with children. Because of this particular type of population, non-probability sampling method that refers to a convenient data collection from population, who are willing to participate in the study, was adopted (Cohen & Manion, 2013, pp. 113-114; Robson, 1993, p. 314). The participants, who are the focus of the present article, were 13 refugee youth, coming from Syria, their age ranged from 12 to 20 years old and almost all of them had been in Greece for a year. Among them there were seven boys and six girls, who had a satisfactory level of knowledge in English. The survey was conducted between January and March in 2017. The focus on this specific age of children is justified both by a better knowledge in English and by the fact that after 12 years educational and professional expectations begin to be shaped, as the transition from adolescence to adulthood gradually takes place. The desires and aspirations become more realistic, since self-awareness and awareness of the real possibilities, based on which there is the expectation of achievement, rise (Beal & Crockett, 2010).



## **Data collection and analysis**

Since the children were minors, their parents were first approached in order to provide their consent and then the children themselves, to be asked if they want to participate in the interview process. In general, there was a willingness to participate in the study, as the researcher's participation in volunteer lessons, which were organized in the camp, provided an opportunity for closer contact with refugee children, facilitating the creation of an intimate environment, a prerequisite for conducting interviews. During these courses important information emerged about the refugee journey and the future dreams, which acted as an exploratory phase, in order to shape the research axes, as well as the guidelines for designing the semi-structured interviews. After it became clear that anonymity would be ensured and that there was the opportunity of no response in any case, the interview process started.

The interview was preferred as a tool for data collection, since it is considered to be the most appropriate method of qualitative research when someone aims to investigate in depth the personal narratives of the respondents themselves (Mason, 2003; Robson, 1993, p. 322). Besides, the way the respondent formulates the answer (tone of voice, hesitation, expression of the person, etc.) offers information, which in a written answer is concealed (Bell, 2014, p. 206). Individuals were contacted directly about participating in the study and then an individual, semi-structured interview was conducted with a duration of 20-30 minutes. Furthermore, given the absence of a common communication language and because of the inability to be a translator during the interviews, they were conducted in English, as many of refugee children had a sufficient knowledge in it.

All interviews were audio-recorded and immediately transformed into text form, after the collection of data. All these were coded and analysed for emergent themes. In order to process the data, resulting from the study, the content analysis approach was used, which refers to a process of identifying, coding and categorizing the primary elements, derived from the data, in order to construct an interpretive framework that responds to research questions and allows the understanding of social phenomena.

## **Results**

In this part of the paper the results are going to be presented according to the categories created after the analysis of the interview data. The range of issues identified by all participants were quite similar, although there was a different emphasis. So, in turn those issues are presented in a thematic form, as it was emerged from the data-set. They were as follows: Educational experiences during their living in Syria, Educational experiences during the refugee journey from Syria

to Greece, Educational experiences during the temporary settlement in Greece and Educational expectations and the importance attributed to education.

### **Educational experiences during their living in Syria**

Concerning the first category of results it became clear that all refugee children had attended school in Syria, while a lot of them had done English lessons, proving the emphasis of their families' on empowering them with as much educational skills as possible. More precisely, a sense of nostalgia and joy appeared in their eyes, while they were talking about their old school, revealing their intense desire and expectation that in the future they will be able to return to a normal educational environment similar to that of their country.

Interviewee Observation/Response: ...I went to school until ninth grade, but I did not finish it, as I left Syria a month before the exams. The school was good but full of people who, due to the war, went to Damascus, which was the safest place. It was the same school like here. I did also English lessons since the first grade, but I did not speak English because there was no one to talk with. (3rd interviewee: 15 years-old boy)

Nevertheless, refugee children were forced to abruptly interrupt such a daily routine as the education, because they had to abandon their homeland, due to armed conflicts, which not only threatened their lives but affected also their way of living. As it was pointed out, their parents' aim was to find a safer place in order to ensure a better future for them.

Interviewee Observation/Response: From the first moment of the war in Syria, when (my parents) saw that the school is about to close, they just said we go to one place to find a school for our children. So everyone did in our town and so we moved to Europe. (1<sup>st</sup> interviewee: 16 years-old boy)

Interviewee Observation/Response: ...we couldn't go to school in Syria, we could not work, and my house was destroyed by a raid and my father and my brother were inside (but now they are fine). (13th interviewee: 13 years-old girl)

### **Educational experiences during the refugee journey from Syria to Greece**

It was proved that before arriving in Greece, refugee youth stayed temporarily in other countries, as Turkey and Iraq, where they had to remain days to years outside formal or non-formal educational context. Moreover, most of them had to work occasionally as assistants, builders, translators, hairdressers, factory workers etc. in order to financially support their families for continuing their refugee journey.

Interviewee Observation/Response: After Syria I went to Turkey for a year. I did not go to school. I worked in a factory to make money and come here to Greece. (11th interviewee: 14 years-old boy)

In a few cases three of the children, and concretely only three girls managed to attend a formal school class while staying in other countries before arriving in Greece. At this point, it is likely that both the longtime residence in the neighboring countries and the gender factor played probably a role, as girls often receive the corresponding protection from their family without being forced to work.

Interviewee Observation/Response: Then I continued my education in Turkey, it was like a high school. A school with Arabic and Turkish at the same time, five days a week Turkish and three days a week Arabic. (5th interviewee: 15 years-old girl)

Interviewee Observation/Response: After Syria I went to Iraq for three years and I went to school there. The school in Iraq was very good and the teacher. (8<sup>th</sup> interviewee: 12 years-old girl)

### **Educational experiences during the temporary settlement in Greece**

Most interviewees said that they were involved in educational activities with volunteers, in the refugee camp where they stayed, as they considered it as a counterbalance to the lack of formal education and as a way to boost their pre-existing knowledge. Such type of educational activities during their staying in the refugee camp in Greece involved not only English lessons but also mathematics, geography, history, Greek, dance, sports etc..

Interviewee Observation/Response: I have done English in Syria for a long time, but I have practiced it more here. We did maths, geography, history, English with volunteers and Greek with some volunteers who came from Patras and taught us some Greek ... (1st interviewee: 16 years-old boy)

It is noteworthy that at the time the interviews took place, refugee children had just started Greek public school in local area. Indeed, when they were asked about it, they showed a great excitement and a strong desire to proceed their education, no matter where they live.

Interviewee Observation/Response: ... These days we go to Greek school. I am really excited about it. My teacher was surprised that I am only fifteen years old and now I can read Greek in a week. I will continue, because I want to learn Greek, as some people talk, and I don't understand anything. So, I think that I have to learn this language. (5th interviewee: 15 years-old girl)



### **The importance attributed to education**

In fact, the data described in foresaid categories as the intense desire to attend Greek school daily, and the willingness to learn Greek, reveal an expectation about the continuance of education, despite the temporary residence in a country, that they had never dreamed before. They also reported that they will be able to study, so that they can work as they want. Indeed, some of the expected professions, mentioned, were those of doctor, lawyer, engineer, psychologist, etc..

Interviewee Observation/Response: ... I want to become a doctor, I like it, but I do not tell everyone that I want to become a doctor, because maybe they will tell me I cannot. Whatever it is, I do not care about them. (1<sup>st</sup> interviewee: 16 years-old boy)

Interviewee Observation/Response: Yes, I will continue, I learn some simple words in Greek. If I could be better in Greek, no problem. If I have to stay in Greece I will go to university. I will not wait, I will continue to learn some Greek words and then I will go to university. (4<sup>th</sup> interviewee: 16 years-old boy)

High educational expectations are affirmed not only by the desire to continue school but also by the belief that they will be able to reach university, in order to fulfill their future aspirations. Such expectations were justified by the fact that refugee children recognize the value of knowledge. It is remarkable that they regard learning, especially foreign language learning, as a as vehicle of communication and social inclusion as they believe that the more foreign languages one knows, the easier it is to communicate with a larger number of people. Maybe that is why a positive attitude towards Greek language exists.

Interviewee Observation/Response: I like to learn languages. Languages can do many things if you want to talk...you can communicate with everyone. Knowledge is everything. You need to know more than you do not know. (1<sup>st</sup> interviewee: 16 years-old boy)

Interviewee Observation/Response: Of course, I want to continue school and achieve my dream ... I think I'll go to university. (5<sup>th</sup> interviewee: 15 years-old girl)

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative data, resulted from semi-structured interviews, were used, in order to illustrate how educational expectations of refugee youth are shaped according to their past and current educational experiences. Results derived after the content analysis emphasized the main effect of previous educational experiences, as the attendance of school, on educational expectations expressed by refugee youth who are temporarily settled in a transit country, such as Greece.

More precisely, it was shown that all refugee children, who took part in the study, want to continue school generally either in Greece or in the country where they expect to settle permanently. In addition, most children showed their expectation to reach the higher education level, with one of them expecting to reach even a postgraduate level. As they said, their high educational expectations may be attributed to the high importance that they attach to knowledge as they consider that education either through participation in a formal educational programme either by attending informal lessons with volunteer teachers, constitutes a key for smooth acclimation.

Specifically, learning more than one language is considered as a means for optimal communication with more and more people, which may well justify the positive view towards Greek language. In other words, education seems to be a link with society, contributing to future membership and success (Hek, 2005a; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008). Moreover, it has been established that education offers a sense of regularity, which is expected to trigger the socialization of refugee children so that they can start a new life within the new community (Nagasa, 2014; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008; Wilkinson, 2002).

Meanwhile, their answers revealed that they are expecting to return to school in order to regain a daily life, that will ensure them security and acceptance and that will allow them to quit refugee identity by boosting their student status. The advantages of education as a tool that facilitates the achievement of individual projects, have been, also, supported by other researches, which regard education's role in providing a sense of normality and a participatory life in the new social context (Saha & Sikora, 2008). At the same time, as it is already known, an individual's expectations are largely influenced by the accumulation of past experiences, shaped by the previous life experiences (Bohon et al., 2006).

So, the high educational expectations of refugee youth, who are temporarily settled in Greece, may be attributed to the educational experiences in Syria, as maybe if they didn't have an educational background, they wouldn't express the same desire to attend school. It can also be attributed to the absence for a long time of a formal educational context during their journey to Greece, which may intensify the desire to attend formal school. Furthermore, the period from the beginning of migration journey to the full settlement at one place, as well as the length of staying in a camp, being involved or not in non-formal educational activities with volunteers, affects the educational expectations of young refugees and the subsequent acquisition of academic Skills (Kanu, 2008; Wilkinson, 2002). Finally, the violent interruption of education due to armed conflicts, was found to have a significant impact on the educational expectations of refugee children, which maybe shape a positive or negative attitude towards education (Dryden-Petersen, 2015).

However, at this point, it is worth noting some of the limitations regarding the generalizability of these findings in future research. The quality of findings was affected maybe by the limited number of research subjects, the sampling at a

single Refugee Camp, the one-dimensional use of interviews, which are characterized by subjectivity and the use of English for communication. All in all, longitudinal studies should be carried out towards the examination of educational expectations expressed by Refugee youth, in countries of temporary or permanent settlement. Larger samples, different age groups and other reception countries, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as trained translators, could, also, offer a possibility for deeper insights in the question, investigated in similar studies. Despite, such limitations, this study gives rise to the conduction of further researches, concerning the educational expectations of refugee youth in transient conditions.

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