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A Day in the Educational Life of a Teenage Refugee in Thessaloniki, Greece

Lucy Hunt

Introduction

In this chapter, I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned about young refugees' experiences of post-compulsory education in Greece. This means upper-secondary education and beyond—that is, senior high school and university—as Greek compulsory education lasts until the end of junior high school, up to the age of fifteen.

I conducted fieldwork in Greece's "second city," Thessaloniki, which is in the north of the country, close to the border with North Macedonia and Bulgaria. During this time, I tried to better understand young refugees' educational decision-making and the factors which make them more or less likely to continue with their education. While many teenage refugees continue to arrive in the country, their participation is fairly low: only around half of fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds are enrolled in public education (MoE 2017). Even when they do enroll, many attend inconsistently or stop attending at all. I tried to explore the stories behind these statistics by, first, working as a volunteer teacher for three different NGOs over eight months; second, holding focus group discussions with young refugees on their educational aspirations and challenges, and doing creative tasks with them; and third, interviewing people close to them, such as educators, parents, social workers, cultural mediators, and so on. To give some background, refugees in Thessaloniki come from a wide range of countries across the Middle East, East Africa, and South Asia, representing diverse linguistic, national, ethnic, and educational backgrounds (Ghandour-Demiri 2017). They are both refugees and asylum seekers, but I am using "refugees" for everybody here as shorthand.

To share what I found, I would like to walk you through a day in the educational life of a sixteen-year-old refugee named Rasoul from Afghanistan, who attends a Greek general public high school. Rasoul is a fictional character based on various young people I met in different informal educational settings and on the things that they and the people close to them told me. I am taking this approach to try to highlight the multi-level, intersecting constraints impacting every part of young refugees' day-to-day school life. In my work, I spoke with young people aged up to twenty-five and would like to mention that older youths attend high school too—especially evening classes at vocational schools. However, this piece focuses on the difficulties faced by children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, which decrease their motivation, make it difficult to learn, and, overall, put them at risk of dropping out.

Before School

First of all, we need to think about where Rasoul is. Does he have accommodation? Is it a container in a refugee camp, a UNHCR-managed apartment in the city, or a bed in a shelter for unaccompanied youth? Some teenagers may also be living in squats, or homeless. For all of them, changes to their asylum status or other decisions may see them relocated or evicted at short notice—meaning that their accommodation situation is generally unstable. For now, let us say that Rasoul lives in one of the camps outside Thessaloniki, with his parents and siblings. Let us also say that he has just woken up. The first thing he has to consider is the weather: What is the season? Is it cold? Is it raining? If it is wet outside, will he be able to dry his clothes later? How does the weather make him feel? He may also worry that his classmates will laugh at him for wearing the same thing again and again, or treat him differently for not having cool-enough outfits.

After getting ready, he tells his family he is leaving for the day. Are they supportive? Or do they think he should be trying to find work instead, as he is an adult and should help by bringing in an income? Young boys and girls who arrive alone are especially likely to be pressured into raising money to remit back home or to pay for (irregular) onward travel so that the family can be reunited in Northern or Western Europe. Rasoul's family might also give him other jobs to do instead of going to school or remind him of interviews or documents that need to be collected. If he has a sister, their parents may delegate childcare responsibilities to her while they search for work, preventing her from attending school on some days.

The Journey to School

Let us assume that Rasoul has negotiated with his parents and is off to school. This could be at five o'clock in the morning because it takes two hours by bus to get to the high school in the city, and he needs to arrive in time for his morning classes. This is, of course, if there are any buses at all, as they may not be running. Other young people he knows may be attending vocational or technical high schools instead, perhaps through evening classes, but those schools are also mostly concentrated in the city, so they face the same problems with public transport. The other issue is that, being *public* transport, the public who are also taking these buses may be hostile to refugees. During his journey, Rasoul may have other passengers tell him to leave their country or ask him why he bothers going to school—telling him that there is no point in doing so, because he is not going to become anything special. He might even have bus drivers segregating him from other passengers. All of these things happened to the young people I met during my fieldwork. For Rasoul, it means that he has to face a number of challenges before even arriving at the school gate.

At School

Let us suppose that Rasoul attends a general senior high school, which claims to offer reception classes for newcomers. These are separate classes for refugee and migrant youth, focusing on language, mathematics, and ICT. However, they only run if there are enough refugee or migrant youth in the school. If there are, a teacher will have to be hired, which can take several months. If the reception class teacher has not yet arrived at Rasoul's school, Rasoul can only sit in on "normal" classes with the rest of the students. Here, he faces three types of challenges: challenges with the content; challenges with the teachers and their methods; and challenges with other students, whether Greek or migrants themselves.

First, he may face challenges with the content. Let us say that Rasoul's mother tongue is Pashto, and that he also speaks Farsi, as well as some Arabic, English, and basic Greek. However, he had to stop school when he left Afghanistan and has now missed four years of learning. As general senior high schools in Greece are generally used to prepare students for university study, the content is very academic, meaning that Rasoul is immediately required to study subjects such as physics in Greek, as well as Ancient Greek language and literature. He cannot afford the extra private tuition which his peers go to in the afternoon,

leaving him at a double disadvantage. This affects his motivation: he struggles to understand the content and knows it is only going to get more difficult as they get closer to their final exams.

This is where the second set of challenges comes in: relating to teachers and the pedagogical methods used. In some classes, the teacher has had some training on intercultural or inclusive education and tries to include him, despite the language barrier. Some teachers try to use visual materials and other alternative methods, and Rasoul and his refugee peers ask them for more of this kind of support. In the worst cases, however, he is given a textbook he struggles to understand and is told to sit at the back and watch and listen. As he does not feel encouraged or included, his motivation drops. In other lessons, he has the opposite problem: some teachers pull him into the spotlight and praise him loudly for completing a task well “despite being a refugee,” or ask him about the scars on his hands in front of the whole class—using him as a learning point for his peers.

These peers at school constitute his third set of challenges. Rasoul has few opportunities to mix with and get to know the Greek students, and after his reception classes start, it will be even more difficult because their group will be isolated from them. He has the feeling that they do not understand what it means to be a refugee or that they have been taught to be scared of refugees by politicians, the media, and/or their parents. They do not necessarily say anything very bad—maybe they make a few comments, speak Greek quickly in front of him, or make jokes based on stereotypes. But they also do not want to hang out after school or during the breaks. Some students may be luckier, such as Rasoul’s sister, who attends junior high school. There, her classmates take care of her, show her around, and share homework help in their class WhatsApp group. But for Rasoul, school is a tiring few hours of feeling uncomfortable, confused, and often invisible.

After School

After school, while other students go to academies for extra tuition, Rasoul usually goes to a community center on the edge of the city for free language lessons. However, he might not be able to go today because the sessions are not running due to funding cuts or a lack of volunteers. Alternatively, Rasoul may have gotten bored of repeating the same topics over and over again: “Hi, my name is Rasoul, I come from Afghanistan.” As students frequently come and go, the teachers have to keep repeating the basics for newcomers.

Instead, Rasoul makes the two-hour journey back to the camp and tries to find a quiet spot to settle down and memorize his new Greek and English vocabulary. Just as he begins, however, a loud argument breaks out next door between some neighbors, making it too noisy to concentrate. This often happens due to living in close proximity and the general frustration among residents. He tries to move to find some quiet, but everywhere he goes he is distracted. For example, friends and neighbors may tell him to put the book down and join them because there is no point in studying anyway. In the end, Rasoul manages to read a few pages before heading to bed, ready to repeat this process the following day.

Perseverance and Support

It is clear, then, that Rasoul faces a large number of social, structural, and material challenges during his day. These all work against both his physical ability to access the school and his motivation to continue studying. However, while I have considered some of the biggest issues young people face, I would also like to highlight their dedication and perseverance. This is evident in the fact that half of young refugees aged fifteen to eighteen are at least enrolled in Greek high schools. Several of the young people I met had either completed high school, entered Greek universities, or decided to take other educational routes, and I observed three main sources of support that helped them to do so.

The first is a positive relationship with their teacher. If their teacher speaks to them, directs them to extra support or, at the very least, lets them know that they see them—making them visible in an appropriate way—they are motivated to keep going. Teachers also have the power to bring students together and help them get to know each other. Second, students also find support through relationships with their peers. For example, if they get to know other refugees and migrants, they can create a small community within the school. This is easier than interacting with Greek students and constitutes an important source of support. However, it is even better if they feel a sense of belonging to the wider school, which can be achieved if the school organizes intercultural events and makes space for other languages, ways of understanding, and ways of existing. Another easy way to get students mixing is through sports and arts, which do not necessarily require much language, time, or money. Third, young people also support themselves via their own agency. They seek out extra support, go to teachers to ask them to try different methods, connect with peers via WhatsApp groups, educate other students on what it means to be a refugee, and undertake

various other actions that promote their own equitable involvement in the life of the school.

Conclusions

To summarize: public schools are a crucial “space of encounter” (Piekut and Valentine 2017) in which relationships with teachers and peers are key. Outside of this space, restrictive structural conditions—such as insecure legal statuses and insecure accommodation—must be addressed if young refugees are to access and fully benefit from education. In addition, the individual’s drive to learn should be nurtured through educational counselling and other methods to encourage them to believe in themselves. It is not enough for refugee students to be legally entitled to schooling and enrolled in high schools. It should also be communicated that they belong and can succeed, and they must be supported in the classroom to make that happen.

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