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Locked-down learning amid COVID-19: young refugees in Greece and their supporters co-navigating a new crisis

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ABSTRACT

Greece, and the hundreds of thousands of refugees currently trapped in the country, are no strangers to 'crisis'. Financial collapse and migration mismanagement were already severely impacting newcomers' ability to participate in education before COVID-19 lockdowns made the situation even more dire. Based on interviews from a study on young refugees' (aged 15–25) engagement with education in Greece, this paper explores how exactly lockdowns impacted learning and compounded pre-existing issues. It details how crisis was felt at the micro level as lost and disrupted learning opportunities, and as uncertainty and immobility – demonstrating the social, material and affective impacts of crises in the everyday. The paper also shows how youth expressed their relational agency by navigating constraints with the support of peers, educators and non-governmental organisations, even as technological and family-related issues came into play and supporters (or 'co-navigators') faced their own bureaucratic and practical hurdles. It concludes by arguing for sustained financial and political support for refugee-serving organisations, alongside greater flexibility and accessibility in the public education system.

Introduction

> The accommodation programme, due to the COVID situation, has been suspended. Thousands of people are expected to exit their apartments *and* containers in sites by the end of May. Ten thousand, something like that. And we are talking about school!
>
> Lydia, NFE[1] programme coordinator, 28th April 2020

Refugees[2] arriving in Greece in recent years – following the deeply unsettling experience of displacement – have entered a country itself dealing with 'critical times' (Dalakoglou & Agelopoulos, 2018). The 'crisis' narrative surrounding the economic crash of 2008 and increased migration flows peaking in 2015 has justified exceptionalist state responses such as severe cuts to public funding (Christodoulou et al., 2016; Petropoulos & Tsobanoglou, 2014). Indeed, these events and their consequences have resulted in the country being termed a 'crisis-scape' (Vradis,

2014). This has had far-reaching consequences for the refugees who have come to be caught up in it. Prior to the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, they were already being held in overcrowded camps far outside cities, for example, and were struggling to obtain the documents needed to work legally – which has long limited their ability to participate in Greek social and economic life (Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019; Skleparis, 2017).

When the pandemic reached the country in March 2020, refugees then faced additional discrimination in the form of prolonged camp lockdowns, based on imagined threats to wider public health (Cossé, 2020; HRW, 2021). Importantly for this paper, such measures also restricted their ability to attend high schools, universities and other places of learning (such as non-governmental organisation (NGO) centres) which made it even more difficult for displaced youth to either begin or continue along an educational trajectory. Indeed, Fischer (2021) notes that while the government's response to the pandemic was lauded for swiftly putting strict restrictions into place, the Greek and international mainstream media failed to recognise the disruption to young refugees' education, and its 'worrying consequences'.

Based on an ethnographic project which itself became entangled with the pandemic and its restrictions, this paper discusses how youth and their supporters (such as non-formal educators and social workers) experienced these difficulties and took steps to navigate them. By paying attention to young refugees' navigational strategies – using Vigh's (2009) lens of *social navigation* – the paper aims to re-centre their agency and tactics for dealing with adversity, and the role of relationships in this process. In doing so, it builds on a burgeoning area of research which highlights refugee communities' individual and collective practices of challenging isolation and marginalisation, including during COVID-19 (e.g. Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022), and their ability to work out 'their own agency for survival' alongside essential governmental and institutional support (Okello et al., 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, in providing insights into how a marginalised group experienced and responded to crisis, the paper has relevance for those researching and supporting communities in other contexts facing shocks – whether health-related, environmental or socio-political.

I begin the paper by outlining how I understand the concepts of 'crisis' and 'navigation'. I then summarise the available literature on the nature and impacts of lockdowns in Greece, and its gaps, before describing the project and how I adapted its methodology in response to COVID-19 restrictions. In the remainder of the paper, I present and discuss how this new crisis was felt by young refugees in the study – covering impacts such as losing out on learning and work opportunities – and how they and the key supportive actors around them once again adapted their navigational tactics in response to these new challenges.

Conceptual understandings: navigating crisis

While the term 'crisis' abounds in political rhetoric in Greece and across Europe, its definition is challenging to pin down. It has theological roots, associated with judgement, but it can also refer to medical emergencies: in the sense of a critical moment requiring immediate intervention (Antentas, 2020; Koselleck, 2002; Roitman, 2012). It can suggest 'judgment, critique', 'a turning point in history'

or 'a chronic condition without a clear prospect of resolution' (Boletsi et al., 2020, pp. 2–3); as well as a 'moment of truth' when '"the real" is made bare' (Roitman, 2012). Indeed, for Antentas (2020, p. 316), the COVID-19 pandemic was evidence that crises 'reveal the hidden which we usually do not see'; making it possible to 'clarify the nature of relationships and social structures'.

In this paper, I also conceptualise crisis as a chronic condition which, as Antentas claims, makes visible the nature of social structures (albeit in potentially discreet ways). It is an enduring and pervasive sense of urgency, uncertainty and precarity which is most acutely felt by disadvantaged and marginalised social groups such as refugees (following e.g. Cantat, 2016; Oxfam, 2013; Rosen et al., 2023): a group who continued to be the most impacted and controlled by ongoing, overlapping crisis mitigation measures during the pandemic. By framing crisis as a 'clarification of reality', this invites us to investigate what exactly this reality is – at every social level. This means going beyond the macroeconomic arguments and concerns which are typically at the centre of dominant discourses (Vaiou, 2014), and updating the questions originally posed by Vradis (2014) regarding the impacts of the global financial crisis: namely, what do crises actually look like? How do they feel? What form do they take in the mundane and in the spaces of our everyday coexistence? For young refugees, in our case, how have crisis mitigation measures filtered down into their lives, and what are the 'daily, soft, lived, and unspoken realities' (Carastathis et al., 2018, p. 29) of such controls – and particularly in terms of impacts on their educational trajectories?

More than this, it is important to investigate how young refugees agentically find ways and means of negotiating such controls, to highlight the fact that they do not simply passively endure crisis but actively navigate it. Here, I draw from Vigh's (2009, 2010) analytical lens of "social navigation" to conceptualise this process. It captures how migrants simultaneously negotiate everyday challenges and long-term planning out of adversity and towards goals they perceive as beneficial, to 'get by' in contexts of ever-changing socio-political conditions. This is especially fitting for the Greek context, with its shifting approaches to migration management, both prior to and amidst the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a focus on young refugees' deliberate and calculated decision-making counters the pervasive image of the passive and powerless refugee, and as such has been used in recent research which aims to centre their agency (e.g. Daniel et al., 2020; Denov & Bryan, 2012; Nunn et al., 2017).

Importantly here, however, I recognise that social relations with family, educational actors and others have a strong influence on young refugees' lives (Daniel et al., 2020): meaning that their navigational actions may be highly relational or indeed collective. To capture this, I refer to actors such as educators, social workers, volunteers within NGOs, peers, family members and others as 'co-navigators', to build on Devenney's (2020) use of the term to describe social care professionals who work with unaccompanied minors. Framing 'social navigation' as a relational act also permits us to bring the solidarity movements which emerge alongside crises clearly into view, along with their possibilities for collective action and bottom-up resilience (Moralli & Allegrini, 2021, S831). In exploring navigation in this way, the paper seeks to provide (more nuanced) evidence of how young refugees re-adapt their praxis amid new forms of crisis – taking the COVID-19 health crisis as an example.

The COVID-19 crisis in Greece: compounding refugees' challenges

Lockdowns and other measures to prevent virus transmission in Greece were swiftly implemented and 'severe' (Giugliano, 2020). The operations of all educational institutions (including non-formal education (NFE) providers serving refugee and migrant youth on the Aegean islands and in urban centres) were closed nationwide in early March 2020; food, social, entertainment, tourism and cultural venues were closed in mid-March; and strict mobility restrictions were put in place from late March (Akritidis et al., 2021; Theirworld, 2020). All refugee-hosting structures, including camps and hotel accommodation, were locked down on 21st March 2020, with these measures continually extended until 15th September 2020 – prompting observers to suggest that the virus was being used as an excuse to keep these structures closed (Amnesty International, 2020; ECRE, 2020). This became more evident when the rest of the country began going to bars, beaches and markets and tentatively welcoming tourists from May to July 2020, and yet refugees in camps were still in lockdown, despite there being few or no new cases (Akritidis et al., 2021; Cossé, 2020; HRW, 2021; Petsinis, 2021).

Beyond having their mobility reduced for a longer period of time, the conditions refugees were held in (such as in Moria camp, on the island of Lesbos) continued to be critically overcrowded and unsanitary, with direly insufficient resources and facilities (Owens, 2017). This led to significantly higher levels of COVID-19 transmission among the refugee community than among the general population in Greece (Kondilis et al., 2021). As well as these urgent physical health issues, refugees also had to deal with increased precarity, 'racial and ethnic inequalities' and hostile, anti-migrant rhetoric, which 'intensified vulnerability' by perpetuating exclusion in the employment, housing, social care and protection sectors (Fouskas et al., 2022). This led to negative psychological impacts (Marchi et al., 2022), which were made worse by the postponement of asylum determination interviews, after applicants had already been waiting for two or more years in some cases.

Impact of lockdowns on young refugees' education

As of October 2019, there were an estimated 37,000 refugee children in Greece, and of those who were of school age, approximately one-third (12,800) were enrolled in public schools (UNICEF, 2019). For all youth, schools were closed for in-person teaching on 10th March 2020; partially reopened in mid-May for a short period before the summer holidays; and then closed again from November 2020 until the beginning of 2021 (HRW, 2021). As part of these social distancing measures, NFE centres were also closed (Theirworld, 2020). For young refugees, available reports suggest that this resulted in record levels of educational exclusion during the 2019–2020 academic year (RSA, 2021). This was due to camps being locked down for prolonged periods; a lack of digital devices and technological infrastructure in the sites, and thus an inability to follow online courses; an even greater lack of transportation; understaffed reception classes; and resistance among both the 'local' and refugee communities to youth attending schools (Caritas Hellas, 2021; Ombudsman, 2021; Theirworld, 2020).

While the government rolled out an 'overdue mass-digitalisation of social services, including education', virtual teaching was said to create a 'massive' gap between

privileged and underprivileged children, and between those in urban and rural areas – with 'significant disadvantages' for refugee children in camps (Fischer, 2021). They were also apparently left out of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs' initiative to provide schools and students with laptops and tablets (HRW, 2021). It appeared to fall to individual schools to help refugees overcome the challenges of accessing online learning, with some more prepared and open than others: such as those already participating in refugee inclusion programmes (see, for example, EWC, 2023). Outside of the formal system, NGOs used lower-tech resources for learning or to connect learners and teachers – such as podcasts and WhatsApp messages – but these initiatives were still hampered by the lack of technology and delays with roll-out, due to the severity of the situation (Theirworld, 2020). On top of these issues with accessing learning, the lack of contact with NGOs meant that refugees also missed out on other information and psychosocial support.

According to the Greek Ombudsman (2021), this meant that while 62% of school-aged refugee children in mainland camps were enrolled, only 14% could participate. Problems persisted throughout the 2020–2021 academic year, with only 1 in 7 young refugees in camps able to attend school. This caused organisations such as Human Rights Watch (2021) to call for an urgent reform of 'discriminatory policies' before the next year began. Despite more than 4 years now having passed since the outbreak of COVID-19, we still know little about the impacts of this health crisis on young refugees' education in Greece – and indeed in Europe more broadly. Even less is known about the impact of the pandemic on youth over 18; about *non-formal* educational programmes; about children and youth in accommodation situations on the mainland (rather than camps on the Aegean islands); and about how young refugees tackled these barriers themselves or found alternative ways to continue learning. This paper contributes towards filling these gaps.

Researching into an unexpected third 'crisis': an adapted methodology

This paper stems from a doctoral study on educational participation among 15- to 25-year-old asylum-seeking and refugee youth in Greece, with ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Thessaloniki. Youth were invited to participate if they were attending at least one educational activity per week; if they were 15–25 years old; and if they had arrived in Greece during or since the 'peak' of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015. These criteria enabled an understanding of what supported youth to continue participating in education, amid laws and policies put in place in response to the 'refugee crisis', while the age range aligned with NGOs' youth programming. Local community members such as teachers and cultural mediators (i.e. those with first-hand experience of young refugees' (educational) experiences) were also invited to participate. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

The original plan, which was the case for the majority of the fieldwork (between October 2019 and March 2020), was to volunteer as an English as a Foreign Language teacher and teaching assistant at four NGOs in Thessaloniki, while observing other educational activities and holding interviews. During this time, I met new and old colleagues, got to know young refugees around the learning centres, taught and helped with lessons and began individual and pair interviews. I held two pair interviews with

four youth, and interviewed 17 actors close to them: being teachers, coordinators, social workers, caretakers,[3] cultural mediators and a parent. Including those with first-hand knowledge of the young people's experiences (as well as broader understandings of the social, legal and political conditions for refugees and their education) alongside the young people themselves meant that a broader picture of the situation could be painted. They complemented and provided wider context on young people's views, rather than replacing them.

However, around the beginning of 2020, news of the COVID-19 outbreak reached us, causing considerable worry among the refugee community. When the first case was reported in Greece, panicked chatter filled the classrooms. By early March, several learners were staying away from lessons, citing fear of the virus as the reason. By 10th March, as schools and other educational institutions closed, the NGO coordinators followed suit and cancelled all in-person activities until further notice. With borders closing, and my family on the other side of one in a neighbouring country, I reluctantly left both the city and Greece. What my colleagues and I imagined would be a 'two-week break' until things 'blew over' became a multi-year pandemic.

We realised by the end of March 2020 that COVID-related mobility restrictions had an indefinite end, and so the NGOs I was volunteering for set up online classes and I restarted lessons and interviews virtually. Twenty-one local community members took part in these online interviews – totalling 38 altogether – as well as the remaining eight members of the 'core group' of 12 youth. Most of these were individual interviews, with the exception of one pair who wished to be interviewed together. These conversations (whether in-person or online) lasted from 25 min to over 1 h, with an average duration of 40 min. All those interviewed chose to speak in English, despite my insistence that either I or they could invite an interpreter to join us.

The primary impacts of changing to online methods were practical. It required everyone to have access to suitable devices and a stable internet connection which could at least handle voice calls, and meant that they were engaging in interviews mostly from their own homes, which raised questions of confidentiality. All interviewees knew I would be recording, and gave their consent for this, while also confirming that it was a suitable time to talk. However, speaking online from family homes or accommodation centres could still have made them reluctant to share particular information. All interviews followed the same semi-structured question schedule, to try to minimise the impact of the change in methods. However, inevitably, we discussed the unexpected arrival of the health crisis, which unintentionally extended the scope of the research. Continuing research interactions online also meant that we lost out on opportunities for casual conversations around the physical learning spaces. I tried to mitigate this by making the interviews feel informal, to give space for everyday conversation. In the end, these primarily one-on-one conversations were valued by the youth especially. For all those involved, the very fact of entering a global pandemic together meant that the nature of our relationships inevitably changed: we shared our fears and uncertainties, and the impacts on our work and education.

Overall, the ethnographic approach allowed interviewees to tell 'thick' stories (Kohli, 2006); but as they were relatively few in number, and the young refugees were all attending some form of education before lockdowns, these stories may not be representative of the broader young refugee population in Greece. They do, however, contribute

to a more in-depth understanding of one group's experiences, and provide important themes to be explored in future research – such as the digital divide and the broader social impacts of lockdowns.

The rest of this paper explores how the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis was felt by the young refugees in the study and the actors closest to them. I start with its specific impacts on their educational engagement and provision, before exploring their wider challenges and how they navigated this new level of precarity.

Disrupted navigation: the health crisis as further educational uncertainty

It is important to note at this juncture that we are not entering the story as the youth were experiencing crisis for the first time. They had already navigated out of contexts of conflict or other threats to their lives, and had arrived in Europe and continued to employ certain tactics to negotiate the ever-shifting socio-political Greek landscape and its chronic state of emergency. That is to say: as with young refugees in other contexts, they were no strangers to crisis or its navigation (Nunn et al., 2017). In this field site, most of the youth had been successful in overcoming administrative, spatial and temporal barriers to engage in some form of learning offer by the time of the study (Hunt, 2021). When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, one young woman was studying for a bachelor's degree, and others were attending either senior high school (λυκείο) or vocational high school (EPAL). Alongside these formal studies, they participated in non-formal language, arts and sports courses run by NGOs and local volunteer groups in camps and community centres. Other initiatives were also beginning to pop up around Thessaloniki and catch young people's interest, such as an in-person conversation club led by local volunteer university students. This was popular among all involved, but especially among the young refugees, as it offered the chance to meet other young people, improve their Greek and talk about everyday topics.

The biggest issue, then, as lockdowns began, was that these in-person learning opportunities were either paused or lost, which substantially disrupted the trajectories youth had been establishing for themselves. As mentioned above, schools closed on 10th March and only partially reopened in May. Furthermore, non-formal activities around the city were also suspended: such as in-house learning at centres for unaccompanied youth; local volunteer activities such as the conversation club; and the Greek, English and German language classes run by NGOs. This was incredibly disappointing for the young attendees, as many were learning Western European languages as part of their plans to apply for family reunification in countries such as Germany – demonstrating how for young refugees, education and migration goals amid compound crises can be interdependent (Jordan & Brun, 2021).

The immediate uncertainty of not knowing for how long educational centres would be closed, and the consequences this had for their studies and well-being caused the youth anxiety. Hala, for example, a 15-year-old from Syria, told me on the 11th March that if schools had to remain closed for more than a month, a plan was proposed to cut into the students' summer holidays to make up for lost time. She was very unhappy about this, saying that while they had a lot to study if they wanted to pass the university entrance exams, 'I need a break too! . . . I can't go straight into next year!' Marwa, a 25-year-old from Syria – who had won a prestigious scholarship to study for a bachelor's degree – also

had doubts about being able to complete her education in the longer term. As she said, 'I'm waiting to graduate, hopefully! Ha. If this Corona is finished, next year I will graduate'. Lockdowns also disrupted youth's plans to pursue vocational education routes either in Thessaloniki or elsewhere, due to the closure of potential employers' offices and their own restricted mobility around the country. This was the case for Sayed, a 22-year-old from Iran, who had had an interview for a traineeship in Athens but could not pursue it further due to lockdowns.

This meant that at the micro level, the health crisis was felt by young refugees as a new degree of uncertainty and a further warping of time; and as indefinite suspension of the already fragile educational and vocational trajectories they had built up over their months or years in the country, with their various motivations. Their timelines once again shifted and became more uncertain, as they were now dependent upon not only the length of their educational programmes or the time taken to make immigration decisions, but also upon highly unpredictable virus-related restrictions. This further disrupted their movement along their desired life trajectory, or their process of 'social becoming' as they transitioned into adulthood (Vigh, 2006, p. 33). This adds evidence to the literature of how disruptions to educational activities can both literally and symbolically put young refugees' ongoing navigational projects on hold – such as learning foreign languages to 'bolster' their applications for family reunification in Western Europe.

Broader impacts: the health crisis as material and social loss

Another issue for youth who had already completed educational programmes was being able to use the skills they had learnt to gain paid employment. Sayed, for example, had already completed one traineeship with an NGO alongside attending high school. However, despite applying for various roles, he told me that 'they haven't responded yet . . . but after quarantine [we will] see what will happen'. Hamid, a young Kurdish man in his early 20s, had also missed out on such opportunities. He had been offered a position as an assistant translator with an NGO, but this had been put on hold due to lockdowns. I commiserated with him and he smiled sadly. 'Soon', he said. 'After quarantine'. This reminds us that despite their best navigational efforts, young refugees are still vulnerable to newly arising constraints or exertions of power which can be significantly challenging – or indeed impossible – to overcome (Devenney, 2020). As Vigh (2009) originally argued, young migrants can only act in response to their social context and its pushes, pulls, hierarchies, power relations, cultural practices and other influences.

In this case, the lack of employment options led to even greater uncertainty about what the future held than the youth were already accustomed to as refugees in Greece. They were used to being held in long waits for documents and asylum interviews, for example, and for decisions on their access to formal education; as well as being denied paid work. The present then became even more unsettled due to the unpredictability of constantly changing rules and restrictions. As Marwa said at the end of April, 'the thing is they are giving extensions, every time the period is going to finish . . . We were expecting to finish at 27th April, and later on, they just said 'no, you will stay more, until May'

Beyond this uncertainty, the youth shared how they felt they were losing touch with 'normal life'. For example, when I was talking to Jilwan, a 25-year-old from

Kurdistan, on 12th May, he told me that he missed busy city centre life, and was considering risking going outside. All of the youth were naturally frustrated with being 'trapped' at home, and primarily missed social interactions – most of which centred around educational activities in school or NGO settings. For example, Hala told me in mid-April that she did not like the lockdowns because usually 'in the morning I had school, then ... going with friends. I don't stay in home. For me it's too hard!' However, lockdowns dragged on, and youth remained confined at home for several more weeks.

The loss of social connections did not only refer to friends, but also to other supports such as counsellors from NGOs and other learning settings. Marwa, for example, said that pre-COVID-19, she had been speaking to her university psychologist often, but then struggled to find a counsellor via an NGO to continue this form of support during lockdowns. As she said,

> they could arrange me WhatsApp call, arrange me Viber call, any kind of thing you know – that someone's telling me, like, you're going to be well. It's really important sometime that you have someone who's going to say, 'everything's going to be well'. Even if it's not true ... it's making you relaxed. When you are stress, you're not able to make a right decision. Sometime you need some advice, you know? It's not always money. Sometime if someone's talking to you, it can be more than money. For me, it can be more.

This reiterates that education – and especially when non-formal – is not only a site of learning, but also one of meaningful horizontal (i.e. peer-to-peer) and vertical (e.g. staff-youth) psychosocial supports, including in the form of specialised services. Such social relationships have been found to be vital for refugee communities around the world who are navigating precarity; and not only for their empowerment and individual and collective pursuit of a better life, but indeed for their survival (Denov & Bryan, 2012; Lee, 2012; Swartz, 2021). These supports, as well as learning offers themselves, are then disrupted or lost in times of crisis, as Theirworld (2020) also found for refugees in Greek camps.

Navigation goes virtual: online learning challenges and tactics

When schools closed, the last years of high school were prioritised. Online learning options were created, but there were issues with not only young refugees being unable to access courses, but all students. Hala, for example, explained that she could not do all of her courses, despite her best efforts to access them:

> I tried so much, and I called the school. They didn't answer me. There are so many people like me, the children that I have, my friends, they tell me also we cannot go inside the programme. I just say it's fine, I try, but they didn't accept.

Serkar, a young Kurdish man in his 20s, told me at the end of May that he had also found it difficult to continue with high school online, because of the nature of virtual education:

> It's so difficult online, because if you don't speak [in person], and the internet is bad, you don't understand little bit ... If your friend is with you, it's much better! For online study, and to go with outside. Better to learn language.

Another key issue, beyond poor quality internet connections and isolation from friends and teachers, was not having the technology to participate in the first place. In mid-May, Jilwan said that he was still participating in online lessons and speaking with teachers every day, but that he was reliant upon his phone as he did not have a laptop.

These technological problems compounded other pre-existing issues, such as reception class teachers starting late in the year and learners having to do paid work alongside their studies. Hasan, for example, a 25-year-old from Kurdistan, had been accepted into a vocational high school, but had only just started his lessons before the restrictions were put in place:

> Hasan: I start with first year because the language. But we are so unlucky, because our teacher came late. In the end of January, the teacher started the language lessons – just February we start the classes, the lessons from Greek – and the Corona outbreak is came. And we stay at home all the three months, ha. And this month from first of the June, the Greek government decided that the school will be closed because it's finished . . . for the summer. Like we don't get benefit, the first year that we learn the language.
>
> Lucy: Were there no online lessons . . . ?
>
> Hasan: Er, we try to do it, but because this time we don't have good internet—you are living in camps, and, yeah, a little bit difficult.

While previous studies employing the social navigation lens have identified how technology can facilitate refugees' journeys and settlement processes (Gough & Gough, 2019) – or, conversely, make their environments and movements more precarious (Mollerup, 2020) – this study shows how the social terrain itself can become virtual.

Beyond technological issues, young refugees' access to distance education was also hindered by some families' dismissive ideas about the usefulness of online (or indeed any digital) education. As Nadia, a cultural mediator, told me three months into the lockdowns in May:

> From the hotel that I'm working now, the teachers of the children wanted to send some material through emails – through, you know, WhatsApp, so the children, during the lockdown, will be doing some homework. The parents were very negative about that. They said our children do not understand anything in the class. How are they going to do some homework on our mobile? Et cetera. And I don't believe that any of those children have done anything, because the parents were negative . . . They believe, you know, if you want to go to school, there should be a book.

When youth were older and had children of their own, there were other issues with learning online at home. As an example, our first lockdown classes at the NGO where I was teaching were somewhat chaotic. Not only did we have to learn together how to access and best use the platform, as both teacher and learners, but we also struggled with children and other relatives talking, shouting and playing in the background and trying to get learners' attention – as well as coming in and out of the room or frame. Coupled with this were their unstable internet connections, which caused learners to have to leave and re-enter sessions and then need to be brought up to speed.

These challenges mostly align with those in the literature from around the world on refugees' education during lockdowns. However, while many studies have discussed family- and partner-related challenges such as household members refusing access to

technology, restricting privacy or committing more domestic and gender-based violence (Baird et al., 2020; Mandikiana et al., 2021; Seguin, 2020), none have previously mentioned barriers such as parents' dismissive attitudes towards digital educational methods. This supports Daniel et al.'s (2020) argument that it is important to focus on not only how young refugees navigate through society, but also the interactivity between generations as they do so.

In this case, over time, some of the young refugees' issues were smoothed out – but unfortunately, they also caused several learners to choose not to continue. As Melissa, a coordinator at an NGO, put it, learning online 'is a new skill to develop – to be able to [use] digital platforms, especially when it involves trying to engage a community that has so much going on in home life ... It really is impressive'. This ability to overcome technological and family-related challenges and find ways to keep learning was seen across the youth in the study – as most found alternative resources for learning online which were more accessible. Just a few days into lockdowns, for example, those participating in one NGO's programmes were already sharing resources in their WhatsApp chat: including language lessons on YouTube, Coursera open online courses and websites with advice on writing CVs. The trainers at different NGOs, too, sent videos, vocabulary exercises and suggestions for continued online activities in class WhatsApp groups.

By mid-June, the youth had found various other opportunities. For example, Hasan told me that he had taken part in online exchanges organised by the Erasmus+ educational programme for young people across Europe. Others, such as Jilwan, passed their time in lockdown by engaging in autodidactic activities such as reading: 'I have read three books until now ... I download by PDF, and I read'. Such strategies of self-learning and seeking out alternative educational opportunities are, again, very limited in the global literature on refugee education, and especially in relation to the COVID-19 health crisis. In terms of their social navigation, this also adds evidence to the literature of how virtual resources and networks can be valued in and of themselves as non-formal sources of learning, rather than only as a pathway to formal education (e.g. Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

There are key motivational factors to consider, however. The teachers and programme coordinators I interviewed mentioned that when youth were progressing well in their lessons, and were already at a higher level (such as in language learning), they were more keen to continue studying during lockdowns – and especially if they had a good relationship with their group and teacher. The youth in the study demonstrated such strong motivation, and especially when they were nearing the end of courses and coming up to important exams, like Hala and Marwa.

Educational actors as co-navigators: adapting and empathising

The disruption to young refugees' education was also frustrating for those organising and delivering learning initiatives, as they had worked hard in the years before the pandemic to gain the trust of both learners and administrators. One such example was Vera, an experienced teacher and Refugee Education Coordinator[4] (REC), who was part of a group of educational volunteers who had just gained access to another centre for unaccompanied youth. As she explained:

> For some shelters it was forbidden for any volunteer to go to the shelter, because it was the organisational decision . . . But with us, it's easier . . . We are on the second year. They hear from all around what we are doing, and it's more easy for us to be trusted . . . We were making progress before, ha, the lockdown. It was good.

In general, however, established NGOs adapted quickly to online or other forms of learning offer, or suggested other tools if these were inaccessible, despite having their own organisational challenges. Centres which provided services for refugee youth faced difficulties with not only staff shortages, but also changing rules from both their managing organisations and the government. For example, when some in-person activities were eventually permitted, Cassie said that in the shelter for unaccompanied youth where she worked, 'there was an instruction that we shouldn't be putting many people together. So the teachers could only make, like, groups of one, two, maximum three people. So . . . we try to give them exercises in order to do alone'. As well as finding flexible arrangements which worked, they also provided youth with devices and suggestions for self-learning:

> We also suggested them many applications like Duolingo or other useful ones to learn languages, that they use because it's a funny way for them to learn. So they really like that. And then we were donated recently some tablets from UNICEF, and we have slowly started to do the classes from the school.

In general, however, NGOs had more flexibility than state institutions to adapt their learning offer quickly, and according to learners' needs. The women's centre, for example, established online lessons within two weeks of lockdowns coming into force.

Beyond continued educational support, NGO staff and volunteers also provided other forms of help to their members from the refugee community. Melissa was just one example of this, saying that, 'there's been a few occasions that . . . I've been able to deliver some items or do like a pharmacy run, or supermarket run, or something like that'. Staff from other NGOs would send youth daily challenges, articles on maintaining well-being during lockdowns and fun activities in their WhatsApp chats – alongside learning materials – in an attempt to keep the groups' spirits up. This exemplifies not only the wider role of education and educational relationships in their lives, but also the potential 'emotional value of practical forms of assistance' provided by co-navigators (Devenney, 2020, p. 926).

It could be suggested that staff and volunteers were even more motivated to help due to sharing in and thus understanding some level of the uncertainty of refugees' lives. While the educators and other community members I spoke to already supported youth and their right to pursue an education pre-pandemic, their own experience of being held in indefinite lockdowns amid a health crisis seemed to give them an extra layer of empathy – an understanding of what refugees' inherently uncertain life might just be like. This correlates with research from across Europe which has found that personal experience of a crisis can increase solidarity and caring for others, at least in the short term (Voicu et al., 2020). When I spoke to cultural mediator Ali, for example, in May, he told me how youth had been spending their time pre-lockdowns, and how he understood:

> Usually what I was observing, was that when they were not participating in . . . sports, or education, they were playing with smartphones. You know, playing games, 24 hours . . . It's

reasonable – because even us in this quarantine time, we also lost the way, and the flow of our life. The regular one.

Similarly, when discussing her refugee students' aspirations, Vera said that:

> I think that they are lost in limbo . . . It's kind of a situation that we're feeling now, that we're starting experiencing now with a lockdown, I think. That we don't know where are we going, and what happens next. When is the next day, what is the next day? So now I started feeling how they feel, I think. Maybe. It's very difficult for them to think of a future, and to wish things for their future.

This suggests an increased level of sensitivity to young refugees' educational access and other support needs, as they navigated their way out of lockdowns together.

In the short term, coordinators such as Melissa were seeking legal advice on how they could continue their programmes, despite not falling into any of the categories of educational provider permitted to operate by the government. This meant that as well as providing practical support in the everyday, such actors were working to stabilise young refugees' environments in the long-term – laying out pathways to their aspired-to futures by trying to reinstate or create learning opportunities.

Conclusions

This paper has contributed towards filling a gap in the literature on not only how refugee youth experienced the start of the pandemic and its associated (educational) challenges – facing yet another 'crisis' – but also how they pursued post-15 learning themselves during lockdowns. This goes beyond the common focus on what was provided for them, and its accessibility and effectiveness, which is often measured globally in terms of standardised learning outcomes (or indeed losses) (e.g. Donnelly & Patrinos, 2020). The paper detailed the material, social and affective aspects of the crisis as they were felt at the micro level, describing how in-person learning opportunities were paused or lost; and how, when online alternatives were made available by the state or NGOs, they then struggled with accessing devices and stable internet connections, and especially in camp settings.

Viewing young refugees' experiences and perspectives through Vigh's (2009, 2010) analytical lens of 'social navigation' helps to illuminate how they acted amid these new, additional uncertainties surrounding the outbreak of the COVID-19 health crisis in Greece. It draws our attention to how their navigation was already in progress, and to the unpredictable and shifting nature of the social terrain itself, even after leaving contexts of conflict and poverty (Nunn et al., 2017). The young refugees in this study were experiencing yet another substantial shift and were forced to re-adapt their praxis to disentangle themselves from new obstacles and confining structures; taking advantage of emerging pathways and social resources to move forward with their lives (Vigh, 2010). This included finding ways to continue with their learning.

The paper demonstrates the adapted tactics refugee youth used to navigate these new challenges and persevere with learning despite the noise and distractions of family and home life, while many of their peers found it too difficult to find the time, space and technology to continue. They shared information and resources with friends, for example; repeatedly contacted administrators to try to gain access to online high school courses; and used any device available to them

to participate. They also drew substantial support from 'co-navigators': mostly connections at NGOs who provided educational and wider assistance, such as much-needed counselling services and help with everyday tasks, even when these organisations faced their own bureaucratic hurdles. As such, the paper deepens our understanding of young refugees' (educational) agency, and particularly its nuanced relational qualities; as they not only engaged *social* resources in their navigation of this new crisis, but also *virtual* resources (such as learning apps). These socio-material tactics overlapped: they searched for and shared digital learning resources among one another; used alternative learning tools to teach themselves; and found and joined virtual activities such as Erasmus+ exchanges to develop their language skills and make connections. Overall, support was not only drawn from vertical relationships in a one-directional manner – from actors who were in relatively superior social positions – but also from horizontal relationships with peers. This adds more nuance to the literature on how young refugees draw from supportive relationships to continue their studies (e.g. Dånge, 2023).

Such insights have various implications for research, policy and practice. In terms of research, they demonstrate the need for further youth-focused enquiry which centres their own views on 'crisis' and highlights their capacity to navigate barriers themselves, with the support of key actors and resources in their specific context. This is needed to counteract dehumanising and patronising narratives of the young refugee as only a passive victim of conflict and disaster, and to instead highlight their agentic potential to effect change (Sen, 2018). Research is also needed to investigate the longer-term impacts of lockdowns and the pandemic more widely, and how young refugees' own navigational acts can best be supported on the other side of it.

In terms of policy and practice, the paper highlights the need for the Greek public education system to address its key issues of flexibility and equitable access, to not only benefit young refugees, but all learners with additional support needs. Coming out of the pandemic, young refugees need specific, tailored inclusion measures to try to mitigate the impacts of the incredibly damaging and discriminatory practice of prolonged camp lockdowns, as well as increased racism and xenophobia among the general public. It is also essential to commit to funding non-formal education and NGOs, and to permit them to work more freely, to counteract the current attempts in Greece to limit humanitarian operations via legal cases, bureaucratic hurdles and negative press (Choose Love, 2021).

If this is done, then there is a chance to find hopefulness in this additional crisis: in its possibilities for positive, inclusive change post-pandemic. However, how Greece's strong solidarity movement may continue to evolve and promote this change following its third 'crisis' in 16 years, and how it may support young refugees' own navigational capacities to continue their education, remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Non-formal education. The Council of Europe (2019) defines *formal education* as that which takes place in educational systems, follows a syllabus and involves assessments, while *non-formal education* (NFE) – despite also being organised and intentional – mostly takes place outside of the formal system and does not result in accreditation. It may be more

focused on particular activities, skills, or areas of knowledge and take place in community settings such as NGOs.
2. This paper refers to both those who have been granted refugee status under the 1951 Convention and those who have applied for it (i.e. 'asylum seekers'), but uses the catch-all term 'refugees' for brevity and to align with the international literature.
3. In Greece, a 'caretaker' is a member of staff who provides pastoral care in a shelter for unaccompanied minors.
4. 'Refugee Education Coordinators' are teachers from the public system who have been seconded to liaise between schools, refugee families, NGOs and other stakeholders to support and encourage public school enrolment (OECD, 2018).

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