



Refugee Education in Cyprus: Challenges and Opportunities

1. Introduction

Education is a basic human right, enshrined in the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*. The *Refugee Law of Cyprus, 2000*, Section 9H- provides for the access of asylum-seeking children to the public elementary and secondary education system under the same conditions as nationals. The Refugee Law further provides that their school enrolment should not be delayed for more than three months from the date on which the application for asylum was lodged (Refugee Law, section 9H, transposes Article 14 of the recast *Directive 2013/33/EU of 26 June 2013 on laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection*).

Education plays a central role in UNHCR's refugee protection and durable solutions mandate. Protecting refugees means ensuring that their rights, security, and welfare are recognized and safeguarded in accordance with international standards, and their non-discriminatory right to assistance and services, including education, is realized. UNHCR's position is therefore that since refugees share the same rights to education as nationals, they should have access to national education programmes at all levels rather than in refugee-exclusive systems that are not sustainable, are not appropriately monitored or able to guarantee timely certification that can lead to continued education during asylum.

Participation in primary, secondary, tertiary, catch-up, accelerated and other types of formal and non-formal education programmes can foster social cohesion, provide access to life-saving information, address psychosocial needs, and provide opportunities to link with or establish referral mechanisms for psychosocial issues specific to displaced children and youth. Participation and accomplishment in education increases opportunities for self-reliance and provides a sense of purpose, normalcy and continuity in otherwise unsettled environments. Educated children and youth stand a greater chance of becoming adults who can participate effectively in civil society in all contexts.

2. Access to the national education system

Children at Kofinou Reception Centre

The population of children at the Kofinou Reception Centre changes constantly and arrivals can take place at any time of the year. It has been the practice to enroll children in local schools and when the local schools could not accommodate more students, arrangements were made for children to attend schools further afield with transportation to and from the school and extra teaching staff allocated accordingly.

Typically, UNHCR finds that children at Kofinou were attending school in their home country prior to arriving in Cyprus and are keen to continue with their education. A difficulty that has been highlighted however is that there is no official procedure to assess the educational and

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

In November 2016, an incident at the local gymnasium led to a fight between local children and child asylum seekers residing at the Kofinou Reception Centre. Following the incident, three child asylum seekers were expelled and no further enrollments to the local school have been permitted ever since. At present, four children are being taught the Greek language for three hours per day at the Kofinou Reception Center. This class, which is for children aged 12 and above who have not been enrolled in (or have been excluded from) the school system, is cause for concern. The recent report of the Ombudswoman report highlights that this “preparatory class” does not comply with international legal standards and the right of every child to education, regardless of background, language or refugee status. The report further highlights the responsibility of the State in ensuring the fundamental rights of every child and the need for the State to have firm policies, which are not altered by racist or xenophobic reactions.¹

Unaccompanied children

Unaccompanied and separated children who are at the shelters in Nicosia and Larnaca are, when there are places available, enrolled into special programmes operating in four upper level secondary schools. Two of the schools are geared towards technical education and the remaining two towards academic education. The children are assigned to these schools based on availability rather than their choice, skills and inclination. No enrollments to upper level secondary schools have taken place of children staying at the shelter in Limassol. The shelter became operational in November 2016 and no technical or lyceum school places were allocated at the time.

There at present just over 100 unaccompanied/separated asylum-seeking children residing in the four shelters (the number fluctuates weekly) and the majority of which are aged 16-17. At the time of writing this note, only 46 children have gymnasium, technical or lyceum school places. Of those attending school, there are difficulties with attendance as children feel a lack of motivation due to a range of factors. Some students report boredom, especially those placed in the special programmes at the lyceum or technical schools, as the lessons are often repetitive in order to cater for the differing education levels of the group. Other children are not motivated due to the inability to gain a formal qualification upon completion of their schooling. Still others lack incentive to follow their education as they have pending applications to transfer to other EU countries under the “Dublin Regulation”² and therefore feel that there is little point.

The children in Larnaca and Limassol who are not enrolled in school are attending afternoon State institute classes (τα Κρατικά Ινστιτούτα Επιμόρφωσης) in Greek, Mathematics, and Computer Studies. In addition, some girls who are enrolled in school in Larnaca are also

¹ Office of the Commissioner of Administration (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Cyprus, with reference to the integration into general education of refugee children living at Kofinou Reception Center (13 March 2017) (1/2017).

² REGULATION (EU) No 604/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast) – <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:EN:PDF>

electively attending the State institution classes as a means to receive extra tuition. UNHCR also finds that within the cohort of children attending the State institute classes, some express frustration as they are in fact keen to continue with formal education. Conversely, some children express satisfaction with the classes as they previously have had no formal education in their countries of origin, or have only been educated to primary school level.

Addressing the schooling challenges

It has to be recalled that in all actions concerning children, the **best interests** of the child is a primary consideration (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3). In order to address the difficulties identified above as regards the schooling of refugee and asylum-seeking children, the following is recommended:

(a) Planning and managing mainstreaming

- The Ministry of Education to commission a study to be carried out by an educational expert in relation to mainstreaming, schooling capacity, refugee concerns, etc.;
- Training programmes for teachers on refugee background and protection needs, including strategies to address academic, linguistic, psychosocial, and social cohesion issues;
- To place refugee teachers/teaching assistants in classrooms to support with language/translation needs;
- Training programmes for school administrators on refugee education policy, documentation waivers, certification, placement, systems to liaise with refugee parents and community;
- Orientation programmes for school community (teachers, students, parents) on refugee background and policies, potential benefits of refugee inclusion, and how they can help to support inclusion of refugee learners;
- Programmes that support both teachers and students, as well as refugee children and families – this could include ongoing training for teachers, academic/language support for refugees, parent meetings, youth and sports clubs;
- Use of interpreters and cultural mediators to facilitate communication between the schools and asylum-seeking and refugee children.
- Closer coordination between the Asylum Service and the Ministry of Education to properly plan for school places by conducting regular analysis of arrival trends, and to ensure that children of compulsory school age are swiftly enrolled in schools, regularly attend classes, and are provided with the necessary learning support (see integration measures below);
- Establish a functioning, integrated system to track refugee student and teacher needs to ensure successful inclusion and transition, as well as general enrolment, attendance and completion data.

(b) Preparing refugee children for mainstreaming

- Participatory assessment of refugees' and community's concerns, and advantages and disadvantages of mainstreaming;

- Comprehensive assessment of the educational level of all newly-arriving to ensure appropriate placement by academic level (refugee students should not be placed in lower levels due to language barrier);
- Assessment of language needs and providing language classes at the earliest possible;
- Orientation for students on new curriculum, classroom culture, expectations and social cohesion;
- Orientation for parents and community on education system requirements, legal obligations, documentation policies for admissions, certification, academic concerns, school liaison systems, etc.
- Ensuring that transport, school supply and other schooling costs are not barriers to access to education;

(c) Schooling options

- Unaccompanied children of technical and lyceum school age should not be marginalized and placed in separate classes, but rather should be offered supplementary lessons, additional language classes, and other necessary support to be able to participate in mainstream education at either a technical or lyceum school;
- the choice of school should be based on skills and inclination;
- For those children of lyceum or technical school age who have had no formal education in their country of origin or who have only been educated to primary school level, it may be necessary to offer alternative education in accordance with their literacy levels;
- For those children of lyceum or technical school age who have pending applications to transfer to other EU countries, schooling options should be considered in light of the child's individual circumstances (i.e. age, level of education, and imminency of transfer from Cyprus).

3. Additional integration measures

Despite the considerable efforts of the Ministry of Education and concerned schools, there are continuing difficulties with the integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children into their new school environment. The issues identified include conflicts between children, absenteeism, language barriers, adapting to the new learning process, the relationship between the parents and school community, and racism. In addition to the measures listed above, the following should also be considered.

- ***Educating the educators:***

The establishment of good practice guidance for educators will support schools to receive asylum-seeking and refugee children and help them to learn more effectively.

Example of good practice guidance:

- [Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children/young people in education](#): good practice guidance for Hampshire schools. (see pp 23 onwards which provide useful practical

tips and case studies – this manual also provides information on asylum and refugees for school teachers and others working at the school)

- **Teaching about refugees:**

As forced displacement has reached historic levels and schools all over the world are welcoming into their classrooms an increasing number of refugee children, teachers are also facing the challenging task of teaching children about refugees, asylum and migration. Quality teaching materials which the teachers can use to help pupils make sense of forced displacement in all its complexity are all the more important at a time of intensified public debate about asylum and migration and greater media to these issues. UNHCR has produced several teaching resources, for example,

- Not Just Numbers <http://www.unhcr.org/not-just-numbers.html> (also in Greek);
- Passages Game <http://www.unhcr.org/passages-game.html>;
- Against All Odds <http://www.unhcr.org/against-all-odds.html>;
- UNHCR Data Website <http://www.unhcr.org/unhcr-data-website.html>.

- **Developing and implementing education policies:**

Various educational policies have proven to play a significant role in helping refugee children to integrate, i.e. sustained language support, building the capacity of schools, avoiding the concentration of disadvantaged children, and demonstrating the value of cultural diversity. A working-group involving the Ministry of Education, head teachers, teachers, educational psychologists, parents and students could be established which meets periodically to review and address educational policies and make recommendations. They could also help develop a manual on educational policies that are effective in helping integrate asylum-seeking and refugee children in their new school environment.

Examples of manuals on education policies:

- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Immigrant Students at School – [Easing the Journey Towards Integration](#).
- [Center for the Study of Democracy](#), Integrating refugee and asylum-seeking children in the educational systems of EU member states.
- [Education for refugee and asylum seeking children in OECD countries](#): Case studies from Australia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (2010), Education International.

- **Providing adequate information for parents:**

Information leaflets for parents of refugee and asylum-seeking children on the education system in Cyprus will help to answer some of the common questions that parents may have and also help to develop and strengthen a relationship between the parents and the school. UNHCR is pleased to observe good practice by the head teachers of the Kofinou elementary and kindergarten whereby all information is translated for parents, which helps them to feel included in the schooling process and understand how to assist their children to better integrate.

Example of information leaflet:

- Information leaflet for parents of asylum seeker and refugee children attending primary education prepared by the reception and integration agency with assistance from [Integrate Ireland Language and Training](#).

- ***Anti-racism activities at schools:***

Since 2002, UNHCR has engaged in a number of educational activities with students and teachers at various schools to raise awareness, foster empathy for refugees and promote diversity and co-existence and bridge the division between “us” and “them”. During the last two and a half years, these activities have been reinforced by the Ministry’s anti-racism Code of Conduct at schools introduced in 2014.

UNHCR believes that the Anti-Racist Code of Conduct and Guide should be implemented at all schools with high percentage of refugee and migrant children. It is, as well, important that periodic assessment is carried out to determine the impact the Code and Guide has had. More specifically, information should be compiled on the number of racist incidents against refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants that have been recorded at schools so far and the outcome of the handling of such incidents at the respective schools.

[UNHCR Cyprus, April 2017](#)