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No Lost Generation: refugee children education in Cyprus

Policy Brief

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Executive summary

This policy brief, aimed at education policymakers, provides analysis and insights on how the right to education for refugee children in Cyprus could be ensured from a policy perspective. It does so by reviewing the current status of access and integration to the educational system in Cyprus and the barriers to education that refugee children face, using data available in this area. The policy brief provides an overview of the national framework on education for refugee children and the main issues faced during the implementation of practices. In the last section of this report, a set of policy recommendations is offered which aims to guide policy makers to ensure that refugee children have equal access to the educational system in Cyprus.

Context

Education is a right for every child and a critical opportunity. Given that refugee children have been through forced displacements and humanitarian crises, while some of them have been separated from their families, education can be crucial for both their development and protection. What is more, through education refugees are provided with the knowledge and the skills to contribute to social transformation and to sustainable and peaceful coexistence.¹

In the official political discourse, refugee education is an established right and opportunities are given to those who wish to be educated. However, in practice, there seem to be significant deficits which are reflected in the high dropout rates of refugee students, their poor academic performance compared to other students, and their significantly restricted access to higher levels of education and particularly to tertiary education.²

Furthermore, educational policies are lacking on issues that support the educational and social inclusion of refugee students. The inclusion of refugee children into a new educational system is often accompanied by a number of challenges and barriers.³ This poses considerable problems as the integration of refugee students in educational systems is not only important for their academic outcomes, but also for their social and psychological well-being. The first major challenge for host countries is to provide access to education to refugee children, while a second challenge is to develop educational policies and practice that respond to the needs of refugee children and promote their inclusion in schools and societies in the medium to long term.⁴

This document presents a policy perspective on the right to education of refugee children in Cyprus. It does so by presenting, first, an account of the status of the access to education of refugees in Cyprus. Second, it discusses the challenges involved, from a systemic perspective.

Key Points

- Inclusive education is for everyone and it encompasses school staff, students, parents, and their communities.
- There are more than one potential policies for the effective integration of refugee children in the educational system. Multiple approaches need to be developed with flexibility to adapt to specific needs.
- A community-based comprehensive approach that involves parents/custodians of children and seeks to quickly integrate them into mainstream classrooms and activities, and into society is recommended.
- Continuous teacher training is a key to success.

Drawing on this, the final section compiles a set of basic policy recommendations that are intended to offer guidance for the fulfilment of refugees' right to education, responding to the ambition of inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030.

This policy brief is divided into two main parts. The first one presents a short introduction which provides the context for the brief. Building on the contextual data, the second part suggests policy measures for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into all levels of education in Cyprus. The brief ends with a short section of conclusions.

Data sources and methodology

The policy brief is mainly based on information collected by contextual research related to current policies and practices in Cyprus and interviews with stakeholders between January and May 2020. The data collection with stakeholders was based on a semi-structured interview format which investigated integration opportunities of refugee children in the educational system of Cyprus. The data gathered constitute the basis for the policy brief.

I. Current status of access to education for refugee children in Cyprus

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*).

The policy framework of the MoEC for the integration of pupils with migrant background into the Cypriot society falls within the following five priority axes:

A. Greek Language Learning

As a matter of top priority, programs for learning Greek as a second language are offered to these pupils in Primary and Secondary Education. In recent years, various models have been adopted in the Cypriot education system for the linguistic support of pupils with migrant background:

- Providing reinforced teaching and offering intensive Learning Program of Greek as a second language in Primary schools.
- Intensive Learning Program of Greek as a second language in Secondary Education Schools (established since 2008).
- Providing language support in schools where the institution of the Zones of Priority Education was operating (Zones of Educational Priority (Z.E.P) - from 2004 to 2015) and in schools applying Activities of Social and School Inclusion, from 2016.
- Offering Greek language courses - in the afternoon - from the Adult Education Centers (A.E.C) and the State Institutes of Further Education (S.I.F.E) of the MoEC.

B. Reception of newly-arrived children with migrant background

The goals of implementing the reception programs and activities are to adapt and familiarize newly-arrived children with the new school and social environment and to support their studies,

as well as to inform the pupils and their families of their obligations and rights as a result of their participation in the education system. To this end, the MoEC has published detailed information leaflets in various languages (Reception Guide in Cypriot Education, Welcome to Cyprus...Welcome to School).

C. Training of Teachers

Education and training of teachers in intercultural education and in teaching Greek as a second language is necessary in order to provide them with the tools to respond adequately to the ever increasing challenges of their profession. The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, in cooperation with the Directorates of the MoEC has in recent years organized a variety of training activities (workshops, conferences, seminars – experiential learning workshops, optional seminars, school seminars, etc.), with the aim of raising awareness and supporting primary and secondary education teachers on matters regarding the integration of pupils with migrant background. Emphasis was placed on issues of addressing diversity and the implementation of an anti-racist policy, as well as on teaching Greek as a second language.

D. Collection and analysis of data on the needs of pupils with migrant background

The Centre for Educational Research and Evaluation (CERE) has in recent years prepared Greek language competence tests for the induction of students of primary and secondary education into specialized programs of learning the Greek language.

E. Intercultural approach of new curricula

Intercultural education is not addressed solely for children with migrant background but also for the majority of children. Hence, the MoEC recognizes that the development of a comprehensive strategy for intercultural education also requires additional measures, such as the adoption of the intercultural approach to new curricula.

The policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture is expected to contribute to the attainment of the above objects, aiming at the same time at a holistic approach of the issues related to the integration of children with migrant background into the Cypriot teaching system.

II. Barriers to education faced by refugee children in Cyprus

The barriers to education for refugee children are multifaceted and interlinked. 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 the school environment. The issues identified include absenteeism, language barriers, adapting to the new learning process, the relationship between the parents and school community, and racism. This section summarizes the main barriers that were reported by participants during data collection:

- ❖ Although primary and secondary education is free in Cyprus, other costs such as stationary, uniform and transportation costs can make school inaccessible for refugee students. In some cases, financial constraints may force refugee households to prioritize school-age children's engagement in paid work over education to contribute to household incomes and cover basic living costs. Engagement of children in the labor market occurs more frequently for children aged 16+.
- ❖ Refugee children residing in Reception Centers or temporary Housing face many constraints related to their education, such as lack of appropriate study rooms and school equipment, as well as no access to a PC or internet.
- ❖ Access to pre-primary schools (kindergarten) is limited for refugee children below the age of 4 since most nursery schools have fees. As a result, parents are excluded from the labor market due to the need to care for their small children.

- ❖ The induction period for refugee children appears to be limited in duration and in context. In particular, the induction period does not include elements such as, familiarization with the host culture's traditions, customs as well as a thorough introduction into the educational system. Equally important is the fact that during this period the psychosocial specificities of each child are not taken into consideration during educational planning.
- ❖ The lack of an interpreter throughout the phases of induction and integration of the refugee child into the classroom is another significant barrier as it inhibits the child from comprehending instructions and delays learning new concepts taught in the classroom. This also relates to the communication with the child's family, who remain uninformed about the educational process. Furthermore, parental involvement and partnerships to migrant communities are not explicitly included in measures for the inclusion of migrant pupils in the educational process.
- ❖ Exams and tests given to refugee children are standard for all refugee children and are not tailored taking into consideration their individual needs and background as well as previous educational experiences. This practice puts children in a position to score lower and thus, either fail or repeat a grade, which subsequently decreases their motivation to continue with their studies.
- ❖ Teachers are perceived as not being sufficiently prepared for teaching refugee children. This is often grounded in pre-service teacher training, where intercultural education still plays a minor role. A structured approach towards education of heterogeneous classes is missing in most cases. Linked to this, the challenge of developing a pronounced positive attitude towards diversity is identified. The perception among school personnel that a high proportion of migrant pupils in class lowers teaching standards seems to be common in Cyprus.
- ❖ There is an absence of more intensified, more structured, and more efficient targeted measures for the educational support and personalized learning of refugee students who are underperforming or have special needs.
- ❖ There is no monitoring of school performance and educational achievements of refugee children in Cyprus. For example, there is no data related to the number of refugee children dropping out of school and the reasons for doing so.
- ❖ In terms of language acquisition for refugee children in Cyprus, several arrangements have been put in place, however the quality of this support varies widely and is often insufficient.
- ❖ Refugee children who are underperforming in secondary school are guided to switch to technical school. This could be perceived as a failure for these children, who lose interest in attending school, and often continue to underperform in technical schools. There is a gap in early counseling measures, targeting at drop-out prevention.
- ❖ Teachers do not have sufficient support, supervision, available time, and training in handling racist incidents in school related to refugee children. As a result, these children often end up excluded and marginalized by their peer group.

III. Policy recommendations

- Create an informative program for asylum seeking and refugee parents with children at the pre-school age (e.g. parenting workshops, practical workshops to inform of choices and the Cyprus educational system).
- Improve refugee students' achievements by strengthening individual support, close collaboration with family or custodians, intercultural training, high numbers of mentors, intercultural mediators, as well as improvements in teacher training.
- Create certified accelerated educational programs for children and adolescents who have been out of school for several years and find the formal system inaccessible.

- Create methods to recognize prior learning activities which can then be recognized by higher education institutions as parts of study programs (in the form of credits, for example), which in turn can help students to complete their higher education studies.
- Fund research on refugee students' resettlement process and its impact on students' social, psychological, and educational wellbeing, and research examining the special needs of students leaving school at an early stage, the characteristics, the reasons and the dimension of drop-outs.

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