Education as a humanitarian response:
A critical approach to education at Greek first reception centres

Naomi Zangger

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School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg
Pedro Arrupe Human Rights Institute, Deusto University
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton
Department of Social Sciences, University of Tromsø – Arctic University of Norway

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Abstract

This dissertation delves into the availability and inner workings of the educational system provided to children living at Greek first reception centres. The aim was to address how the right to education can be promoted or hindered for these children, as well as the ability it can have to foster equity and human rights values. To this end, semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents, teachers, NGO workers and psychologists, as well as participant observation, during educational moments, over the course of three weeks, were conducted and analysed. A further discussion, through the lenses on the Critical Theory of Education, brought to light the fundamental role that education can have in promoting empowerment and social justice, particularly in refugee children. The findings revealed that the right to education is often hindered for children living at RICs and CCACs, highlighting crucial differences between formal and non-formal education, as well as the lack of mother tongue based teaching. A constant feature of the results was the eagerness which children and their family demonstrated towards learning. Lastly, it was recommended that further research should explore the educational system through the children's needs and abilities, as well as suggestions for the improvement of the current educational situation through policies and practices.

Key words: Education, Children, Human Rights, Migration, Equity, RIC, CCAC, Refugees.

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Abbreviations

CCAC - Closed Control Access Centre

CRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

EU - European Union

ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

ISCED - International Standard Classification of Education

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

RIC - Reception and Identification Centre

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN - United Nations

UNCRSR - United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1. Introduction

At the end of 2022, there were 108.4 million forcibly displaced people in the world, out of which 40% were children (UNHCR, 2023a). These numbers were the result of the largest yearly increase in forcibly displaced people, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereafter referred to as UNHCR), and the number continued to rise in 2023. The existing data indicates that over 50% of all refugee school-aged children are not enrolled in school, translating to more than 7 million children with no access to education worldwide (UNHCR, 2023b). The disparity between enrolment rates of refugee and host countries' children is of over 40% for primary education. Additionally, primary education represents the highest enrolment rates of refugee children at an average of 65% in 2022, while secondary and tertiary education only reached 41% and 6%, respectively (UNHCR, 2023b).

The core of humanitarian responses is based primarily on three pillars: food, shelter and health, while education is often not a priority (Mackinnon, 2014). Though the right to education is one of the fundamental rights included in the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter referred to as UNCRSR), under article 22, it is still questioned and deprioritized in the context of humanitarian aid (UNHCR, 2010). Since 2012, UNHCR's educational strategy has focused on promoting the inclusion and integration of refugees in the national education system of the host country (UNHCR, 2012). However, in practice, this inclusion is not a linear practice and entails a collective effort from communities, governments, organizations and the UNHCR itself (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). In 2019, an updated version of the educational strategy for refugee children was published, with objectives to meet until 2030 (UNHCR, 2019). Nonetheless, the objectives and expected outcomes continue to be highly focused on enrolment rates and access to education, with reduced focus on the quality of educational opportunities.

1.1. Problem formulation and justification

Education is a crucial part of any human being's development and linked to poverty reduction, stability, economic growth, and better lives for children, families, and communities (UNHCR, 2011). Further, it improves our capacity to mitigate conflict without resorting to violence, making

education in emergencies a critical contribution to the protection of human rights. For instance, it has been seen that, in the case of boys, for every additional year of formal education undertaken their risk of involvement in conflict is reduced by 20% (Mackinnon, 2014). And, in the case of girls, primary education has been shown to increase their lifelong income by 15% (Mackinnon, 2014).

The increase in number of refugee camps at the external borders of the European Union (hereafter referred to as EU) has brought the concept of *education in emergencies* to Europe (Agier, 2014). Nonetheless, research is still very restricted and does not take into account the complex context that refugee and asylum seeking children are subjected to (Idrac, 2022). While I will discuss the existing literature on this topic, most of the available research was performed in camps outside of Europe and there is a lack of knowledge on how the existing educational policies are translating into practice at European refugee camps (Idrac, 2022). Within Europe, the geography of Greece places the country in a pivotal location for the movement of people, even before the 2015 refugee crisis (Stivas, 2023). The past 10 years of increased refugee flows into Europe, have highlighted the strategic position of Greece as an entrance point into Europe and many discussions into the measures being enforced have been raised (Cabot, 2023). Although Spain and Italy are now an important part of the literature (Cabot, 2023, p. 29), I choose to focus on Greece, given its long-lasting key role in the migration flows.

1.2. Aim and research question

With my research, I have looked into the availability and inner workings of the education provided to children living in Greek first reception centres, both at Reception and Identification Centres and Closed Control Access Centres (hereafter referred to as RICs and CCACs, respectively). For this context, the differentiation between the legal status of children residing in the camps (refugee, migrant or asylum seeker) will not be highlighted, as regardless of it they all have a right to education (UN General Assembly, 1989, article 28). Additionally, it has been shown that the distinction between these categories is ambiguous and can lead to counter-productive measures (Schuster, 2022), a matter which I will further discuss in chapter two. To better understand the reality of the educational system for children living in Greek first reception centres, I conducted

participant observation and in-depth interviews at one location. I have analysed the data collected and compared it to international documents protecting their rights, as well as discussed under the critical theory of education.

Thus, the main research question I aim to answer with this dissertation is: *How can the right to education be promoted or hindered for children living in Greek first reception centres?* My secondary research question will address education from a critical perspective: *In what manner is the educational system in Greek RICs/CCACs fostering equity and human rights values?* Accordingly, I will explore to which extent the education provided, be it formal and non-formal, corresponds to the needs and expectations of refugee children, considering their specific contexts, origins and future aspirations; and ascertain the impacts it might have on children's development, not only by assessing the existence of an educational system, but mainly the content of the curriculum and the teaching methods being used.

My dissertation will be organised into seven main chapters. After this first introductory part (chapter one), I will present the legal framework of the right to education (chapter two), as well as the relevant literature and the theoretical approach through the critical theory of education (chapter three). I will then explain how I performed the data collection and processing, including the considered ethical issues (chapter four). I will present the data and discuss it in chapters five and six, first through the legal framework and secondly through the critical theory of education. Finally, in the last chapter I will include some concluding remarks and recommendations for further research, and policy and practice improvements (chapter seven).

2. Education as an international human right

The right to education has been enshrined in human rights documents since 1948, with the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter referred to as UDHR) (UN General Assembly, 1948). In article 26 of the UDHR, it is declared that education should be accessible for everyone, and free and compulsory for fundamental levels. Further, it must be "directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights" (Article 26 (2)). Educational values such as tolerance, friendship and empathy are also mentioned as fundamental to ensure peace. Although not legally binding, the UDHR was adopted in a United Nations General Assembly with Greece, a founding member of the United Nations (hereafter referred to as UN), voting in favour (*183rd Plenary Meeting (A/777)*, 1948).

The first binding document to address the right to education, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereafter referred to as ICESCR), was ratified by Greece in 1985 (UN General Assembly, 1966). Focusing on topics already present in the UDHR, this covenant was an important achievement by laying out the foundation for other documents and making the signatory states committed to these rights. The importance of education for the promotion of peace, and principles that lead to it, are again highlighted and placed at a central point of the full attainment of this right (Article 13 (1)). Article 13, paragraph 2, lays out specific steps to the full realisation of the right, from free and compulsory primary education for all, to available and accessible secondary and higher education, and the promotion of fundamental education for citizens who have not received primary education. Although more generally phrased, and not restricting the right of education to children, article 13 does mention the right of a parent to choose their children's school, in accordance with their educational standards and religious and moral beliefs.

Outlining the adoption of the ICESCR into national legislation, article 2, in particular paragraph 2, states the importance of countries to guarantee the application of all rights present in the covenant without any kind of discrimination "as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, *national or social origin*, property, birth or other status" (UN General Assembly, 1966, art. 2(2), my emphasis). When associating this article to what is subsequently laid out in article 13, it is unequivocal that the provision of education for every person must be done in a non-

discriminatory way. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (hereafter referred to as UNESCO), adopted a Convention Against Discrimination in Education, in 1960, and Greece has yet to ratify it (UNESCO, 1960).

2.1. Education as an individual right of the child

The child's individual right to education is further declared in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as CRC), particularly in articles 28 and 29 (UN General Assembly, 1989). This is the most widely ratified human rights document, presently by 196 countries, which translates into all the states with the exception of the United States of America (UN, 2024). As Greece has ratified the CRC in 1993 (UN, 2024), it is binding, and the rights enshrined in it should be fulfilled by the state. Under this convention, everyone under the age of 18 is a child, unless the applicable law to the child dictates that majority is obtained earlier (UN General Assembly, 1989, art. 1), which is not the case in Greece.

Article 28, of the CRC, lays out the basic principles of accessibility of education for every child, reinforcing what had been previously stated in article 13 of the ICESCR. It highlights, in paragraph 3, the importance of international cooperation for the full enjoyment of the right to education, especially as a way to support the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy. It is in article 29 that a more qualitative view of education is outlined, with five aims in paragraph 1: a) holistically develop the full potential of the child; b) cultivate the values of human rights; c) enhance the respect for their own and other's cultures; d) prepared them to responsibly live in a tolerant and accepting society; and e) nurture the respect for the environment. This article is fundamental in reinforcing that the child's right to education is more than access to it, it is important to consider the content and how it is being delivered. As was written by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, para. 2):

> *The education to which every child has a right is one designed to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child's capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values.*

While elaborating on article 29 of the CRC, general comment no. 1 affirms that child's rights do not exist in a vacuum, they are not detached from each other and must be seen as a whole within the convention (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, para. 6). Principles present in the CRC such as non-discrimination (art. 2), protection of the best interest of the child (art.3) and the child's right to express their opinions (art. 12) are fundamental to the full attainment of the right to education. The individuality of each child is brought to the discussion as an important feature, not only in the preparation of the curriculum, but also in a pedagogical manner. The child's social-cultural and economic context, as well as their needs and individual particularities, should be considered in the establishment of educational systems; aiming at educating for literacy and numeracy, but also life skills and abilities that give children the tools they will need in their life (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, art. 9).

The child's human right to education also stems from article 29 of the CRC. In general comment no.1, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, points out how human rights education for children in situations of conflict or emergency can even be more important, as it promotes an environment of tolerance, peace and mutual understanding, leading to a decrease in violence and conflict (Education for All, 2000, as cited in UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, art.16). Children should not only learn the content of human rights documents, but also experience the implementation of human rights values in practice in their surroundings.

Under article 3 of the CRC, it is declared that every action taken concerning children, be it by a private or public institution, or a court of law, or administrative and legislative bodies, the first consideration must always be the best interest of the child (UN General Assembly, 1989, art. 3). General comment no. 14 (2013), expands on this and explains how this right must be seen in connection with the right to education. Access to quality education is seen to be in the best interest of the child, as it will enhance their ability to overcome their weaknesses, give them a sense of fulfilment and improve their future. The availability of free non-formal and informal education is also mentioned, as well as the need for states to train teachers, and other education professionals, in appropriate teaching methods and environments.

The provision of training for teachers is also mentioned in general comment no. 12, on the right of the child to be heard (CRC, art. 12), as a core obligation of the state, particularly in the practical applicability of right of the child to be heard at all levels of the educational system (UN Committee

on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The Committee describes the expression of children's views as *fundamental* for the full realisation of their right to education. Not only does it allow for the inclusion of their life contexts and opinions, but also promotes an active and participatory role in society. This right is also extended to non-formal and informal education, encouraging states to consult children on all aspects of the educational system.

Article 22 of the CRC ensures that the state must protect the rights of children seeking asylum or those who already have a refugee status. Whether the child is unaccompanied or not, the state has to protect the rights present in the convention, as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance. To further protect unaccompanied minors, a particularly vulnerable group, and even more those that are girls, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published in 2005 the general comment no. 6 on their treatment outside of their country of origin. Full access to education should be provided during all stages of their displacement and regardless of their status, without discrimination and, particularly girls, must be ensured equivalent access to formal and informal education (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). The registration with the school is to be done as soon as possible, and their culture and values should be allowed, including the maintenance and improvement of their mother tongue.

The UNCRSR (1951) was the first legal document to establish the definition of *refugee* and the subsequent rights they are entitled to. Together with the Protocol of 1966, they provide the current legal definition of *refugee:* a person who, due to fear of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, social or political group membership, is unable to return to their country of origin (UNHCR, 2010).

Under article 22 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, it is stated that refugees have the right to the same level of public primary education as nationals from the receiving country. In regard to other levels of education, refugees must be provided with at least the same access as non-citizens in the country of reception, and it must be the best possible given the context. Although this is a legal document written over 60 years ago, it is until now the most effective tool on protecting the rights of refugee people. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this convention does not provide protection to people during their asylum seeking process, which is the case of most people residing in Greek RICs and CCACs.

The distinction between migrants, asylum seekers and refugees is one often debated. On the one hand, policymakers defend that this separation is necessary to ensure the protection of refugees (Schuster, 2022, p. 342). On the other hand, migration routes are taken by mixed categories of people, and academics also argue that migration should be understood as a continuum - on one end proactive people and on the other those that are reactive (Richmond, 1994 as cited in Schuster, 2022, p. 342-345). Most migrants would most likely fit somewhere in the middle of these extremes, being forced to leave due to political, social or similar reasons, while still having to engage in the decision process. The emphasis on the separation of different groups of migrants, has the added pressure of legitimising those considered victims (refugees)*,* while de-legitimising all the others ("illegal" migrants) (Scheel and Ratfisch, 2014). Given that the reasons for the movement of people are irrelevant for this research, and to maintain the aim of it on the right to education of each individual child living in Greek first reception centres, no differentiation will be made based on the children's legal status.

3. Education at refugee camps

In the particular context of refugee camps, their temporary and yet long lasting role, uniquely impacts the provision of education to refugee children. It is neither a place where people live within a host community, nor a space where they only experience their own (Turner, 2016). In 2020, one of the first studies assessing all schools providing primary education at Kakuma refugee camp, in Kenya, compared their literacy outcomes to those of children attending the national Kenyan schools (outside the camp). It was concluded that, even though the literacy rates in Kenya were already very low, the data from the camp yelled even lower literacy outcomes (Piper *et al.*, 2020). This research highlighted the influence that the country and language of origin have on educational outcomes and how the current Kenyan curriculum is not tailored to the needs of refugee children. Further, it was noted that the marginalization caused by the differentiated schools exacerbated the difficulty in achieving a quality education (Piper *et al.*, 2020).

Kakuma refugee camp has been the focus of various studies on refugee education, as it is one of the largest and oldest refugee camps in the world. The dichotomy between studying outside or inside the camp has been described as integrating "up" and integrating "down", respectively (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019). Attending schools outside the camp is often related to integrating the society and pursuing further studies, but it entails the payment of "tuition fees" (in public schools, teachers require parents to pay to ensure the quality of education). In fact, some Kenyan families end up sending their children to camp schools, as they do not have the financial means to support the tuition fees. A key difference in school systems is the engagement of teachers, for those teaching in camp schools there is no professionalization and no salary, only an "incentive", leading to a lack of commitment and will to teach with quality (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019). Even though Kakuma camp is the focus of various research projects which point at similar problems, the focus is still on comparing to the national educational system as opposed to assessing the necessities of refugee children in that specific context. This will be one of the key points which I will emphasise throughout the data analysis, highlighting the specific contexts of children living in Greek refugee camps, and the ways in which the educational system should be built around them.

Within Europe available literature on the topic is recent, limited and mainly focused on didactic issues (Idrac, 2022), or through the teachers' perspective (Palaiologou, Fountoulaki and Liontou, 2019). In Greece, the ministry of education created specific programmes for the integration of refugee and asylum seeking children in the national education programme, mainly to teach Greek (Simopoulos and Alexandridis, 2019). Despite legal differences between the mainland and the islands, the current system provides that all arriving asylum seekers have access to education, either through non-formal education provided by non-governmental organisations (hereafter referred to as NGO) or through integration classes in the formal education (Simopoulos and Magos, 2020). These integration classes occur in the afternoon, after the regular classes for Greek students end, and are structured to teach the Greek language to all students before they can be included in the morning lectures. Consequently, since these classes are conducted outside of the normal schooling schedules, there is little interaction between students living in the camps and local students. It was observed that the separation of refugee children, within a single public school, led to an increase in xenophobia and violent reactions (Simopoulos and Alexandridis, 2019). This, coupled with the difficulty in achieving learning outcomes, has led to an increase segregation of the camp community and a perpetuation of misconceptions (Simopoulos and Alexandridis, 2019).

3.1. Different forms of education

The distinction between formal, non-formal and informal education has been discussed since the 1960s, but recently a consensus into the definitions of formal and informal education has been reached (ISCED, 2012; Johnson and Majewska, 2022). When it comes to non-formal education, the current understanding is that it is a hybrid between the other 2 forms of education, although the characteristics of it still fluctuate between authors. One of the first thorough explanations into the differences of all 3 forms of learning was given by Dib in 1988 (Grajcevci and Shala, 2016). It is explained that formal education is generally happening in schools and training institutions, informal education is linked to settings such as family and friends and non-formal education is connected to community and organisations (Dib, 1988). For the purpose of this research I will use the concepts defined by the UN in the International Standard Classification of Education (hereafter referred to as ISCED) in 2012, as these are the international references for educational data.

Formal education – is institutionalised, deliberate and organised by public or recognised private bodies. In its totality, it comprises the formal educational system of a country and is recognised as such by the competent authorities. Designated educational institutions provide full time education for the students, on a continuous manner, up until their initial entry into the labour market. All qualifications obtained through formal education are recognised and certified. (ISCED, 2012, para. 36-38)

Non-formal education – considered to be institutionalised, deliberate and organised by an education provider. However, it is recognised as a complement or alternative to the formal educational system and "provided in order to guarantee the right of *access to education for all*" (ISCED, 2012, section 4 (39), my emphasis). It offers learning opportunities to people of all ages, although not necessarily in a continuous manner, and can be of short duration and/or low intensity. Mostly does not lead to recognisable qualifications, or equivalence to a formal education qualifications. The national context has a key impact here, as non-formal learning opportunities arise from particular needs in that context, it can contribute to adult/youth literacy, *out-of-school children's education*, and even with small, focused programmes on life or work skills. (ISCED, 2012, para. 39-42)

Informal education (or informal learning) – type of education, which is deliberate, but not institutionalised. It is less organised or planned than the previous 2 types of education, and it can happen in various settings, as within the family, at the workplace or the local community. It should not be confused with accidental or random learning, which occurs as a consequence of day-to-day activities and interactions that did not aim to provide any kind or learning opportunities. (ISCED, 2012, para. 43)

The current focus of educational policies is on formal learning, overlooking the potential that non-formal and informal modes have on the system (Grajcevci and Shala, 2016). Formal educational systems are failing to meet the needs of children and societies, raising the urgent need to create a link with non-formal and informal education (Grajcevci and Shala, 2016). Additionally, an overlap of the various modes of education, putting into practice their complementarity, has been shown to lead to improved learning and positive cognitive impacts (Scribner and Cole, 1973 and Krishna and Chetry, 2024).

Regarding children living in refugee camps, the importance of using the complementarity of educational forms is even higher. While there is a focus on including children in the formal educational system, non-formal education has been shown to promote integration of migrant children (Lipnickienė, Siarova and Graaf, 2018), and their empowerment (Yeasmin, Uusiautti and Määttä, 2020).

3.2. Education: a tool for social change and transformative potential

Education has been a stagnant concept for hundreds of years, used as a tool to shape individuals to fit into society since the Roman Empire (Kellner, 2003). It is described by Freire as a form of indoctrination and social reproduction, where students are lead into submission by oppressors, the teachers (Freire, 1970). Nonetheless, as previously stated in this dissertation, it is also a very powerful tool of empowerment and personal growth that must be looked at as such. To be able to do so, I will discuss the collected data through the lens of the Critical Theory of Education (Kellner, 2003). Drawing on Paulo Freire's and Henry Giroux's works, I will explore in chapter six underlying power structures, inequalities and institutional barriers which affect the provision of education for children living in Greek first reception centres. The critical theory of education develops on insights from multiple researchers and looks at education as a tool for social change, towards a fairer world (Kellner, 2003). By drawing on critical pedagogy, while engaging with critical theories of gender, race and sexuality, it offers a broad approach to my secondary research question, allowing for more extensive and comprehensive results.

On the one hand, Freire emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness and dialogue in the educational process as a tool for liberation (Freire, 1970). His emphasis on the need for education to empower individuals to critically analyse and challenge oppressive structures aligns closely with the objectives of my research within the refugee camp context. The concept of *conscientization*, or raising critical awareness, is particularly relevant in understanding how education can be a catalyst for social change, especially in marginalized communities. Furthermore, Freire argues that true literacy is not merely reading and writing abilities, individuals must also be aware of social and power dynamics shaping their lives (Freire, 2011).

On the other hand, Giroux highlights the need for educators to not only transmit knowledge, but most importantly to encourage students to question and challenge social norms, inequalities, and injustices (Giroux, 2011). Education is shown to have a transformative potential in shaping individuals into informed and active participants in society, capable of challenging oppressive structures. His emphasis on the educator's role in fostering critical consciousness, promoting social agency, and advocating for democratic educational practices aligns with the objectives of understanding and improving educational opportunities for refugee populations.

Based on the works by Freire, Giroux and other academics, Kellner (2003) developed a critical theory of education, linking education to evolving social interactions towards equality and social justice. Applying the critical theory of education to my research will allow me to argue for the transformative potential that education can, and arguably should, have (Strunk and Betties, 2019), particularly in the context of a refugee camp. By critically examining the existing policies, practices and systems, I will seek to identify areas of improvement and advocate for reforms which foster inclusivity, empowerment and equity in refugee education. The critical theory of education can emphasise the voices and agency of individuals living in first reception centres, highlighting their experiences and needs, that are more often than not overlooked and marginalized in educational studies.

4. Methodology

In order to better understand the inner workings of the educational system inside Greek RICs and CCACs, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork. This qualitative research method can be seen as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of methods used to study cultures and societies in their natural settings (Kirsch, 2001). In the case of this research I have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews participant observation, spanning over the course of 3 weeks, between March 18th and April 5th, 2024. In this chapter I will explain in detail how each of these methods were instrumental in collecting the necessary data for this research, and ethical and other important considerations.

The combination of semi-structured interviews with participant observation is a research design often used in social sciences research, as it enhances the depth and validity of the research findings, leading to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research problem (Johnson and Hruschka, 2015). Participant observation allows for an immersive, first-hand experience into the social context, conversely, interviews create an opportunity for a more unbiassed reflection on the issue. Additionally, the bond and trust created through participant observation is also an asset when conducting interviews, possibly leading to more in depth answers (Johnson and Hruschka, 2015). The complementarity of these 2 methods ensures an increase in validity, replicability and generalizability of this study.

4.1. Participant observation

One of the main research questions that I aim to answer is how the right to education is being practiced in Greek refugee reception centres, going beyond the legislation and capturing the reality of the service being provided to children living in RICs and CCACs. By conducting participant observation, a method within ethnographic research, the researcher is provided with a deeper understanding of cultural norms and practices within their research focus (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p.2). Through observing and taking part in daily activities, ethnographers are able to collect data on the behaviours of a community and analyse them. This can be very useful in understanding the dynamics within any educational setting inside the CCACs/RICs or in any local classroom, be it between students, with teachers or anyone else involved. It enables a further understanding of

the socio-cultural context through the interactions (Nolan, 2017), that, in this case, I, as a researcher, have with the participants, namely children.

A characteristic of this method that was instrumental for this research is its ability to foster new research questions based on daily observations (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011. p.10). As previously mentioned, the existing literature on education provided to refugee and asylum seeking children in Greece, does not include an in-situ research and is mainly focused on the existing policies and not their outcomes. For this reason, the possibility to observe and take part in the school system was instrumental in guiding my research theme.

As I will discuss further in this chapter, one of the challenges to overcome was obtaining access to educational activities with refugee and asylum seeking children. To be able to attend the classes being provided to children living at RICs and CCACs, I decided to focus on NGOs which provide educational activities to them. After contacting NGOs working within the educational field in Greece, I got a positive response from an organisation and was able to take part in their classes and day to day activities. This NGO is operating since 2009, providing support to unaccompanied minors, interpretation at various refugee settings and non-formal education for refugee children and adults. The fieldwork took place at a Closed Control Access Centre (CCAC), in Greece, every morning, during the three weeks mentioned before, in non-formal educational activities for children between 6 and 14 years old and in other complementing activities. As an outsider to the community, I took a role of "participating observer" (Bernard, 2018, p. 276), participating in the activities as much as possible, while observing and taking notes of the behaviours and interactions. The NGO selected and the location of the CCAC will not be disclosed, to ensure complete anonymity, and because the results will be applied to the Greek context, and not to a particular camp.

4.2. Semi-structured interviews

To gather additional perspectives from key stakeholders and enhance the validity and reliability of the data, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with teachers, NGO workers, parents and psychologists. I conducted the interviews on-site, during the second half of the fieldwork period, allowing me to first integrate in the educational setting and identify the more appropriate interviewees. Personnel from the organisation I was working with, introduced me to other NGOs

and key actors working at the CCAC, which in turn enabled me to create a connection with them and conduct the interviews.

I choose semi-structured interviews due to the flexible nature of this method. The researcher is able to guide the conversation through the explored topics, while also allowing the interviewee to build on the issues and bring forward what they find essential (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p.1002). In comparison to structured or unstructured interviews, this method allows for space so the topic can develop to different directions, while maintaining the consistency of the study. This method adds on to the ethnography, given its knowledge production potential; interviews have an inherent purpose that frames the discussion, which is not the case in day to day conversations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p. 1003). To produce more in-depth responses, the goal was to conduct all interviews in person (Robson, 2024). However, as some participants were not located in the research site, I conducted their interviews either by Zoom or WhatsApp video call.

By only conducting the interviews after a week and a half of observation and interaction within the educational system, I was able to add practical knowledge to the theoretical and legal framework I was already aware of. The in-situ interviewees were already accustomed to sharing their daily lives with me and the interview guides were narrower and more focused than initially planned.

4.2.1. Sampling

When designing this research, I had two, equally important, main priorities: 1) reaching a deeper and more realistic understanding of the educational system for children living at RICs and CCACs; and 2) contributing to the existing debate with the necessities and wishes of the affected humans, the children. Since the beginning, the goal of my thesis has been to build on existing literature with practical data that reflects how educational and migration policies are being implemented in-situ, while neither neglecting nor deprioritising the key beneficiaries.

To tackle the first priority, it became clear that I would have to consult experts on this topic, with experience from working within the educational system at RICs and CCACs, such as teachers and NGO workers. People working in schools with asylum seeking and refugee children have an inside perspective of the current educational system and interact with the children’s reality in their daily

life; the data gathered from their interviews will be more thorough and representative of the larger group. Teachers were then able to provide a more direct experience on the educational moments, the curriculum and the children's response to it. NGO workers added on to the data with a more organisational and technical perspective on the issue. Some of the interviewees have been working in the field for many years, which contributed to this study by allowing me not only a view on the current situation, but also the evolution of the right to education for these children.

Given the time constraints of this master's dissertation, designing a research which involved interviewing children was not feasible, as I will elaborate on further on this chapter. The alternative that I found, was to interview parents and/or legal guardians of children currently enrolled in an educational setting and living inside the CCAC. This approach made their perspective on the opinions and feelings of children accessible, while also diving into the parents' points of view. To complement, I also interviewed psychologists to scientifically elaborate on the advantages of education, possible consequences that the lack of it might have on children, and the effects it might have when implemented as soon as possible. Although, child psychologists with experience in refugee settings would be ideal, this proved to not be possible, and so I opted to separate the areas of expertise and contact trauma psychologists and child psychologists separately.

As mentioned above, I conducted the semi-structured interviews during the fieldwork in Greece, and online through video calls. I performed a total of 14 interviews, with an average duration of 40 minutes and maximum of two hours. Four interviews were conducted through video call and all others were either at the CCAC educational centre or at neutral locations in the closest city. The initial participants were selected by me, after the first week of observations, and from here a snowball sampling started, where I selected participants after recommendations from previous interviewees (Richards and Morse, 2013).

4.2.2. Participants

For anonymisation purposes, I coded all interviewees' names according to their sampling category: NGO workers, teachers, phycologists or parents. I interviewed a total of 15 participants (one interview was conducted with two participants), divided into the subsequent categories:

- *Four NGO workers* – Current and former staff at organisations directly or indirectly connected to the non-formal educational activities provided at the CCAC;
- *Four teachers* – Formal and non-formal education teachers, working with children from 3 to 17 years old;
- *Four psychologists* – Psychologists with experience with people who are refugees or asylum seekers, working both in the public system and within the NGO field;
- *Three Parents* – People with an asylum seeking status, residing at the CCAC and with children currently attending formal or non-formal educational activities.

The interview coded as "*Teacher 3"* had two participants, on the request of the participants they were together to be able to overcome some language difficulties and feel more comfortable. Joint interviews, when one researcher interviews two participants, have the potential to produce more comprehensive data and to give a voice to those who could have otherwise be silent (Arksey, 1996). In this case, my choice to conduct a joint interview was based on the participants request, and, as they were colleagues, it allowed me to also explore their differences of opinions during the interview.

To increase the comprehensiveness of this study and collect wide-ranging data, the interviewed parents were from different countries of origin, spoke different languages and identified in different genders. However, these categories of personal data will not be disclosed to protect the anonymity of the participants. For these 3 interviews there was a need for translation, provided by interpreters from the organisation that was supporting me during the fieldwork.

4.3. Data analysis

Allowing for an analysis independent from theory and more flexible during its process, thematical analysis is often used to analyse research data in qualitative studies. This method is used to identify, analyse and describe patterns/themes found in the collected data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The scope of thematical analysis is extensive, but, given that this study is focusing on an under researched area, I decided to approach it from an inductive way, where the identified themes are strongly connected to the data, as opposed to being created in an attempt to fit into a pre-existing frame (Patton, 1990, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 12). Additionally, I endeavoured to

provide a fuller and richer thematical depiction of the entire data set. I applied this method to analyse both the data collected during participant observation and from semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, I transferred the field notes from participant observation to a computer file, organised, codded and sorted them into themes. Also, listened to all voice recordings from interviews, transcribed, codded and organised them into themes.

I conducted analysis during and after the data collection, for both methods, but particularly during participant observation there was a constant analysis of the data being collected. Conducting an analysis during the data collection allows the researcher to guide the research in new directions that arise during the fieldwork and is a common practice in qualitative research (Sarantakos, 2012). Nonetheless, it is also a useful practice to analyse all data after the fieldwork is finished, using audio and/or video recordings. For this thesis, I have used both techniques. As mentioned before, I only conducted the interviews after half the participant observation period was over. This resulted in new inputs and ideas to the pre-existing interview guide, making them better suited to the community and the educational setting. All interviews were voice recorded, allowing me to be fully focused on the development of the conversation and the interpersonal connection (Robson, 2024). I then transcribed and pre-analysed them during the day they were conducted, leading to a more robust idea of the data already collected and the direction the research was taking. As is argued by Sarantakos (2012), combining the practice of analysing during data collection, and after it, is frequently done and may lead to a more efficient starting point to the researched issue. Having previously analysed the data during the collection period, when I started the thematic analysis post-fieldwork, I already had a general idea of the data and was able to connect the themes in a more efficient and quicker manner.

4.4. Ethical considerations

Every research project involving people implicates a number of ethical issues for the researcher to consider. Participants should join voluntarily and freely, and their autonomy and freedom respected. Steps to ensure confidentiality and anonymity must be taken and all potentially harmful consequences must be prevented (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). To ensure that all issues were handled in an ethical manner, I submitted this research project to be evaluated by the Norwegian

Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt). All measures taken, and explained here, were approved by Sikt and in accordance with the applicable legislation – project reference number: 555179.

Focusing on the participant observation portion, the people I engaged with were for a vast majority children, with the increased vulnerability of being refugees. To guarantee that every participant's confidentiality and anonymity was protected, I did not collect any of their personal data, i.e. name, country of origin or video recordings. I made all field notes on a notebook, with no reference to individual or identifiable characteristics. Only I, the researcher, had access to this notebook and when transcribing to computer documents all files were stored in a password protected server. Consent was given by the NGO with whom I conducted the fieldwork, and in every class, I was introduced to the students and explained my role as a researcher. In all activities that I participated in outside of a classroom setting, the people involved were informed of my role and accepted my participation. Authorisation to enter the CCAC was also provided by the CCAC manager, through the supporting organisation.

Regarding the interviews, I subdivided the samples into various categories and used different legal basis for the processing of personal data. I provided all participants with informed consent forms, however, as the parents are currently part of a vulnerable population, and to prevent any potential harm, their information sheets were grounded on the basis of public interest (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). The decision to interview a vulnerable population, such as refugees or asylum seekers, was conscious and only taken under the conditions that all data collected would have no impact on their asylum process or endanger them in any way. Additionally, I highlighted that this research addresses their concerns and that their voices are important (Harrell-Bond, and Voutira, 2007, p. 290). The interview questions were solely focused on their children's education and, as previously mentioned, I coded all personal information and stored in a secured server, ensuring their anonymity.

I audio recorded all interviews through Nettskjema – a Norwegian web-based tool which allows for collected data to be directly stored in a secure server. I informed all informants that they had the autonomy to decline participation at any moment, their consent was always voluntary and can be removed at any given moment. Only I had access to the recordings and, as they were transcribed,

I anonymised all personal data to ensure confidentiality. I have deleted the recordings and codification sheet after this research was concluded.

4.5. Limitations of the study

During the process of designing this research, one of the main limitations I found was the short time frame available to complete it. Carrying out an ethnographic research that involves interviewing children leads to more complex ethical concerns and would require a longer fieldwork period. Through parents and psychologists interviews it was possible to overcome it, but, particularly, through participant observation I was able to observe and interact with these children. For this research, the initial plan was to conduct fieldwork for 4 to 6 weeks, however, given the delay in obtaining all the necessary authorisations, it was only possible for a total of 3 weeks. Nonetheless, the data collected during the 3 weeks provided a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the educational system at the CCAC and hints at opportunities to improve it.

Additionally, as a white woman that is an EU citizen, I have never faced the struggles experienced by the populations that live in Greek RICs and CCACs. I acknowledged my background through the process of this research, particularly during the field work, and I am not attempting to speak on behalf of their community. During participant observation, my gender was potentially an asset, as all teachers and workers at the NGO with whom I partnered with were women, allowing for a quicker integration into their daily lives.

5. Findings on education at Greek RICs and CCACs

To provide a fuller and more contextualised view on the promotion and hindrance of the right of education for children living at Greek RICs and CCACs, I will begin this section with a description of the current educational system. This initial analysis is prominently based on data I have gathered during participant observation, through conversations, interactions and direct observation. I will, subsequently, present the three themes I have found through thematic analysis, relaying on data from both participant observation and interviews: variations between the different forms of education, eagerness to learn and the obstacles faced, and language barriers.

5.1. Current educational system for children living in Greek refugee camps

The current system providing education for children living at RICs and CCACs is a combination of non-formal and formal education. While it is being managed by the Greek ministry of education, the first introduction to school is provided by NGOs through non-formal educational activities. Upon arrival, all children are registered by the migration service and receive their asylum seeking identification documents. The processes of arrival and registration can take up to two or three weeks, during which families are placed in their housing unit and given clothes and other essential items. It should be highlighted here that RICs and CCACs are first reception centres. Therefore, the amount of time people spend in them can vary between a few weeks and over a year, although the average time most families now wait is of about three months.

After registration, all parents and legal guardians are informed of the existing educational opportunities provided at their RIC or CCAC, initially through NGOs, and that they should register their children at the school's office inside the camp. The NGO non-formal schools are usually located inside the camp and are solely for the attendance of refugee children. The decision to direct children to NGO-led schools inside the camp is based on two main reasons. Firstly, there is the requirement that all children must be vaccinated according to the national health requirements before engaging in formal school, with local students. Secondly, public schools have a limited

number of positions for children arriving to Greece. The number of positions is estimated every May for the following academic year (September through June) and also establishes the number of teachers needed for integration classes. This difference in treatment of refugee children is in contrast with what is stated in article 22 of the UNCRSR (1951), the primary public school provided to Greek nationals it not the same, or equivalent, as that provided to children living at RICs and CCACs.

Integration lectures are the initial classes offered to children at public schools, where they are taught the Greek language and prepare to join regular classes the following year. These lectures happen during the afternoon, with a duration of 3 hours, after Greek students have finished their classes and are not in school anymore. The exception to this is kindergarten education, where, in many cases, the ministry of education provides a facility inside the camp, so as to allow the parents to take their children to and from school. In the case of integration classes, buses are provided to drive the children from the camps to the schools in the nearby villages, and back after their classes. The limited number of positions in integration classes reflects on the amount of time that students spend at non-formal education inside the camp. Depending on the camp's capacity and on the number of residents and new arrivals, children stay in non-formal education between one and three months.

The main goal of the non-formal educational activities is to teach children the concept of school in Greece, and to a broader extent, in Europe. Many children arriving in Greece have never been to school, while others were able to attend school in their home country or in any of the countries that they went through. This leads to children of similar age to have various levels of knowledge, including not being able to read or write, even in their mother tongue. One of the NGO workers, during an interview, described this in the following manner: "We are talking about children that do not have the frame of a school. You have to show them the notebook, the pen…", while an NGO worker from a different organisation complements that:

> *We only have [the students] maybe for a month, maybe for three months, maybe less than that. And so we try to put as much in them as we can so that they'll be successful in whatever country they go to.*

Multiple organisations are currently providing non-formal education at Greek RICs and CCACs. The activities of each organisation vary according to their aim, but there is constant communication

among them to ensure that their activities are complementary. The NGO with whom I conducted most of my participant observation provided two hours of lectures to each class, with trained teachers and a very similar approach to formal school, though usually with a lower number of students, varying between seven and twelve. One hour was always focused on the Greek language, while the second hour was either the English language or Mathematics. Classes were organised by age ranges of two or three years variance, although after the teachers got to know the students some of them were changed according to a better fitting level. Nonetheless, the intersection between the different ages, languages and previous school experiences was one of the most prevalent challenges I found during my research, as I will further on analyse. This organisation also provided students with sporadic activities that included geography lectures, science experiments, visits to local sites, or simple conversations on cultural matters.

A second organisation, working at RICs and CCACs in Greece, mainly volunteer based, had a stronger focus on teaching English and various other activities. Also providing two hours of educational activities for their students, their approach to education was less focused on the classroom setting and added activities involving arts and sports. Additionally, during the afternoon, their volunteers were going through the housing units, getting in touch with children and having almost informal educational moments with those children that were not enrolled in school. Other organisations present in the camps had more narrow focuses, such as the German language.

5.2. Theme one: Divergences between different forms of education

Formal and non-formal education have two noticeably different contexts. The root of this difference can be traced all the way to the people involved in both systems. On the one hand, formal education, or as I also mention in this paper, the public school system, hires teachers on a yearly basis and through a public tender. During the month of August, the teachers wishing to apply to work during the following academic year must fill out a form, stating their preferred level of education and geographical area. In this application form there is an option to state whether or not you wish to be considered for a position working in integration classes. The selection of this option is the only requirement that public school teachers have to meet to be eligible to work with children with a refugee context. There is no requirement that these teachers have training in teaching Greek

as a second language, or on pedagogical strategies directed at refugee children and their context. Additionally, these contracts are yearly based and there is no assurance of continuity.

On the other hand, with non-formal education the hiring process can be very distinct, as some NGOs work on a volunteer basis, while others are able to hire trained teachers. Regarding the volunteer based NGOs, their main struggle is the rotativity of their volunteers, given that their visa limits their stay in Greece for a maximum of three months. There is an initial period of training with any newly arrived volunteer and every morning they have a staff meeting, as described by this NGO worker in an interview:

> *All the volunteers from my organisation, we get together and we discuss what the policy is in the camp, some things that have come up that we need to make sure we know about. We talk about if there's an emergency in camp or something like that, how everybody can protect themselves, maybe evacuate the camp, report it, things like that.*

Concerning organisations hiring teachers and administrative staff, there are requirements and a preference for people with previous experience working within the refugee field. Hired teachers have previous knowledge on how to teach Greek as a foreign language and during their contracts have regular training sessions on the educational needs of their students. The interviewed teachers, as well as those I interacted during participant observation, had all prior interactions with refugees. Those that were living in arrival zones during the years where the influx of refugees was at its highest reported witnessing multiple arrivals and rushing to provide help. One of the teachers shared this moment:

> *[Unnamed coastal village] has a very little harbour and very nice taverns, and we were having lunch in one tavern. And as I saw boats arriving with refugees, it was shocking. It was shocking. We were having three, four dishes lunch. And those people were exhausted, very thirsty, with three or four children, stepping out of the boat.*

The teacher continued by mentioning that for her the most appalling fact was the indifference showed by some people, continuing to have lunch and not providing support to "people that left everything behind, all their life [was] a small backpack". Experiences such as these were shared by

most people working within NGOs, and were the driver for their current profession, usually starting on a volunteer basis. One teacher reported:

> *I lived this refugee crisis; I was there where the first refugees came from Syria. And during that time, 2018, [unnamed place] was full of refugees. You could see tents almost everywhere, on the streets, near the sea, near the market. And I realized it would not be difficult that I could have been in their position. So I started helping. In the beginning, as I said before, I went voluntarily. For one and a half years, I worked voluntarily with refugees. And afterwards, I started working as a teacher.*

I also noticed a similar demonstration of empathy when interviewing public school teachers, and the interviewees had also previously volunteered within the refugee field. The experiences lived by the teachers was one of the strongest links between the two forms of education. Even with a different hiring process, the decision to apply to work with refugee children is constantly coming from a feeling of empathy and willingness to help them. Notwithstanding, the remarkable difference between formal and non-formal education, when hiring teachers and administrative staff, is the existence of requirements that ensure that they are able to deal with the context of these children.

The stability that some NGOs provide also allows teachers to develop language skills in their student's mother tongues, i.e. in Farsi and Arabic. Requirements such as proper training for a refugee context and on teaching Greek (or English) as a second language, are steps to ensuring that all measures taken have the best interest of the child as a priority, as is required under article 3 of the CRC (1989). Particularly, the provision of training for teachers, by the state, so as to provide appropriate teaching methods, is further mentioned in general comment no. 14 (2013). The lack of specific training for teachers working with refugee children can be seen as a form of discrimination and reaffirms the disparity from the public education provided to Greek nationals.

The appropriate training and experience of the teachers at NGOs is translated into the curriculum being taught to the children. The curriculum followed by the teachers within non-formal education was created by them as an outcome of their experience, but the characteristic that was most important during my research was the adaptability that it allowed. Most study materials were prepared by the teachers, specifically for the classes with refugee students, and eventually turned

into books that are now given to students when they first arrive at camp schools. Despite the existence of these books and curricula, NGO teachers expressed that learning outcomes are secondary to them, in comparison to the children's happiness and feeling of safety, as this teacher explained:

> *We have also [at the NGO school] a curriculum. The most important for us is to understand what our students need. So we have a curriculum, but we are not so strict about this because the most important thing for us is for these students to feel good in our classes. So this is the first one. And after, about the curriculum […] So we have to slow down. […] My goal is, first of all, to make them feel happy, to make them feel safe, to make them feel that they are in a place that for two hours they forget these big problems that they live all day long and all these years.*

When comparing to their experiences and knowledge of the public school system in Greece, this was the answer from one informant:

> *In educational system in Greece, there is not this opportunity. The educational system in Greece, they don't care about if some students have difficulties. You have to follow the curriculum. And you have [consequences] in public schools if you don't follow the curriculum. The headmaster will come and tell you "why you don't do this, and you have to do the same things with others. And you have to run to finish this part until Christmas, this part until Easter. Because after we have exams and you have to do, do, do..."*

The wide variance of ages and levels of literacy is present in both forms of education, however, it is only addressed and taken into consideration by non-formal educators. There is a curriculum, but it is merely a guideline and allows teachers to adjust to any situation that arises, to introduce school to their students and to, first and foremost, make them feel comfortable. Most of the classes I attended during the three weeks of field work had a change in the original plan, either because the students present that day had a different level of knowledge, or because a conversation with the teacher sparked in them a particular curiosity, or simply because the students would ask to construct puzzles at the end of the class. One teacher described the way in which adaptability was needed in most of her lectures:

The problem is that between 9 and 11 [years old] in one class, you can have some illiterate students, and you can have some students who have been to school because their parents could afford that. So I make a preparation, but sometimes, often, I would say, when I enter the classroom I face different students, new students, the old students didn't come. So I must adjust all the time.

The teachers interviewed and those I observed demonstrated a comprehension of the children's context that shaped the way in which education is seen, going further then analytical outcomes and emphasising compassion, human rights and respect, in line with the aims that education must have according to article 29, paragraph 1 of the CRC (1989). The feeling of safety was also pointed out by parents, explaining that they felt relaxed leaving their children at the NGO schools as they could see that they felt safe and comfortable with the teachers. One parent stated, "When the kids are safe in the school, it's the important thing", while another reinforced that:

They feel comfortable with the teachers, obviously. They like the teachers, that's why they're excited to come to school. Otherwise, if they didn't like the teachers, they wouldn't like to come to school.

The subject of accessibility is also a defining difference between the two forms of education. As was seen in the previous section, public school has a limited number of positions available for refugee children that can only be defined on yearly basis, regardless or the number of arrivals. Access to free primary education is, according to the mentioned covenants and conventions ratified by Greece, the individual right of each child and must be promoted by the state. For children in need of community aid, such a limitation represents a hinderance to their right of education. Furthermore, there is a strict rule that once a student is accepted into formal education, they cannot attend any further non-formal educational activity (OECD, 2020). This is stipulated by the ministry of education, even though NGOs have shown availability to continue teaching those students, and their schedules do not overlap. The sole focus on teaching Greek at integration classes could also be complemented if children were able to attend non-formal educational activities. One of the NGO workers summarised the difference between the two forms of education in the following manner:

These kids are not [public school's] priority, because when you have all of the Greek population and some migrant refugee kids, they don't come first. They should be

equal. I don't know, I'm not blaming them, they are trying to do everything at the same time. But definitely, they're not a priority. Whereas non-formal education is just for them.

5.3. Theme two: Eagerness to learn and the obstacles faced

From the first day of the participant observation field work, the most constant and remarkable observation I made was the enthusiastic manner in which children learned. They arrived at school with a smile on their faces and never in a rush to go on their break or leave school. Any exercise they were asked to do was immediately started and they had a need to show the teachers so they could correct it. One of the teachers in the classes I attended compared their excitement to that of Greek students when playing a game, perceiving their engagement as a response to a challenge that was given to them. However, I perceive their engagement as being to a great extent due to their thirst for knowledge and genuine enjoyment of learning. This was something expressed by children of all ages, although with different manifestations.

During language classes, the teacher would write the new words and expressions being taught that day on the board, while also orally mentioning other words that were merely important for context. Students would repeatedly request the teacher to write all of these secondary words so they could note them down in their notebooks. A similar attitude was taken during lectures when tablets were used for educational activities, where multiple students would have their notebook next to them so they could write any new word or terminology. During these technological based classes, there was a constant murmur in the room, as all students would quietly read the exercises out loud.

The various levels of knowledge that students had in each classroom, although a challenge for the teacher's organisation, were particularly useful when explaining new concepts. Either by self-initiative, or by the request of the teacher, students with more capacity to comprehend the new topics would translate it into a common language, usually Turkish, and explain it to their colleagues. One of the teachers explained it in the following way:

If I know the class and I know the students for a month, for example, and I can be sure that someone can explain to the others. Well, I use a student, but only for lesson. Not for an advice, of course. For example, for mathematics, I usually use a student because he can explain something in their own language, and it is much easier for them to understand.

During my field work, children started considering me as their teacher, which allowed me to interact and participate more in their lectures. They would often request my help, particularly the children aged nine to eleven years old, to understand any exercise or even just to assure them that their answers were correct. In mathematics classes, the different levels were more noticeable but easier to address, by providing students with extra exercises. In one lecture, one student called on me to correct their addition exercises, after which I was asked to write some multiplication exercises. After two other students realised this, they also approached me with the same request and both of them made sure I corrected their answers even after the lecture was over. Although they had both finished their assignment and could have enjoyed the time left with any recreational activity inside the classroom, they both requested to be challenged and given exercises with a higher level of difficulty.

A particularly highlighted interaction for me took place at the end of a lecture with a fifteen year old student. The teacher had handed out some homework exercise sheets, which although optional most students accepted, and we were both organising the classroom while the students were heading outside to play during their ten minute break. As we started heading out, we noticed a student still sitting on their desk and working on the homework. We encouraged the student to go outside and enjoy the break, and the answer was that staying inside and doing the homework was *more fun* than going outside to play with other children. This was a student that would consistently offer help to explain concepts to others, always show the answers of exercises to the teacher and have a smile on their face every class.

So as to understand this engagement and eagerness to learn shown by the children, I enquired psychologists during the interviews as to what effects education can have on children's development. One of the psychologists interviewed stated that:

Educational activities either formal or non-formal, give children the ability, chance to socialize, to interact with other children, to be in a process in which they will have inputs, new data, new knowledge and all this is very important for developing the abilities which each child has.

Acute stress, post-traumatic stress and developmental disorders were some of the most common mental health issues reported by the interviewed psychologists. Particularly regarding developmental disorders, education was stressed as an important step towards overcoming problems regarding socialisation with other children and providing a feeling of comfort in new environments. Furthermore, both parents and children with whom the interviewees had interacted, had expressed the importance they give to education:

I've noticed, maybe almost 100% of parents that come and share with us their dreams and their priorities, education of their children is at the top of priorities. I see they have it as a top priority in their mind. But maybe the barriers that they face every day make them lose their motivation on that.

By barriers, the informant explained they meant the asylum process itself, all the procedures and the lack of governmental support after receiving a positive reply to their asylum claim. Congruently, the parents I interviewed had all recently arrived at the RIC/CCAC and showed a deep wish for their children to receive education and how content their children were with the NGO school:

I don't know how to describe the excitement of the kids, they like very much what they do in Greek, English and Mathematics. Also, they like the teachers very much. […] I'm happy and see that my kids can speak Greek although they started only 2 weeks ago.

The interview with this parent took place at the beginning of my third week of field work and their children were some of the students whose classes I was regularly attending. Curiously, I got to observe their development throughout their initial weeks of classes, specifically when it came to the English language, and it was overwhelming the amount of information they accumulated during

that short period. Moreover, I was able to observe as they became more comfortable answering questions from the teacher during the lecture, as well as posing their own doubts.

Despite this, a different parent highlighted the importance of other subjects being taught as well:

> *I want my child to learn the languages, whether Greek or English. I do not know what other subjects will be taught here. But a child needs an art education, physical education.*

This informant had faced difficulties in enrolling the children in school, sharing that the public school office did not inform them about non-formal education, and that they were in the camp for two months before being contacted by the NGO school to enrol the children. This outreach is occasionally done by the NGOs, when they are made aware of newly arrived families and realise they are not registering their children. In this case, the parent showed a deep gratitude to the teachers that went to their housing unit informing them about the in-camp school. Regardless, the focus on the quality of the children's education was the interviewee's sole concern, even mentioning that, being a single parent, their whole life revolved around the children and ensuring their safety and happiness was the only concern. Within this educational system, there is a lack of opportunities for parents to decide or voice an opinion regarding their children's school. This is in direct violation of paragraph 3, article 13 of the ISCESCR (1966), that protects the right of parents and legal guardians to choose their children's school, further hindering the child's right to education.

In the case of unaccompanied minors, one of the psychologists emphasised that the children's willingness to learn is even higher than of those arriving with their families. The informant went even further, mentioning that education was a main factor driving them to leave their home countries:

> *They all, if you ask them, they will tell you that the main reason they left their country, the unaccompanied minors, not the children that came with their families, the unaccompanied minors will tell you that the main reason they left is the lack of education.*

Similarly to previous statements, the interviewee went on to explain that, shortly after arriving, education ceases to be a central issue in their life. External factors and concerns surrounding their asylum application take up the majority of their worries, leaving little room for education.

A different perspective was expressed by an NGO worker regarding unaccompanied minors who are wrongly registered as adults upon arrival. When arriving at the reception and identification centres, many unaccompanied minors later report to be registered as adults, a practice which, according to this informant, is common at RICs and is directly proportional to the total number of arrivals. All those reporting this situation and requesting support were promptly informed that the request for a change of age would delay their asylum process, but, in addition to safety reasons in their housing units, their main answer was that they wanted to continue to study. The NGO worker added that:

> *Sometimes, we even had to tell them to be careful, not to say in their asylum interview that they had come to Europe to continue to study, because that would obviously lead to the rejection of the asylum application*.

These children were consciously deciding to move forward with their process to change their legal age, while being aware that this could mean a delay in their asylum process, undergoing a second interview and possibly risk the outcome of their asylum claim, because they wanted to study, and they knew the chances of that were much higher if their real age (which would be as low as 14) was recognised. This administrative error completely deprived those children of their right to education, protected under article 28 of the CRC (1989), while further unprotecting asylum seeking children and going against the recommendations made on general comment no. 6 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005).

5.4. Theme three: Language barriers

The children attending classes at the school in the RICs and CCACs have multiple nationalities and multiple mother tongues. During the period in which I conducted my field work there were a majority of Farsi speakers among the students, a language which most teachers had some

knowledge on. Depending on the amount of previous experience teachers had, the levels of Farsi were very distinct. One public school teacher explained, during the interview, how having most students originating from one country, or with one common mother tongue, eased their learning process of the language:

> *The majority of the population are from Afghanistan. So it's easier for us. You know, if you learn some basic words and you repeat it every day, you learn it. But if you have only two children in the length of six months that speak Arabic, you cannot learn these basic words.*

Another informant, a teacher at the NGO school that had been working with refugees for several years, reported that even with a high degree of Farsi knowledge, body language is still an important skill:

> *I can speak some Farsi, I have been taught Farsi for some time, so I know the basic, I can communicate. And I know some words in Arabic. That's helpful too. But body language… you should improvise every time. It's difficult.*

A common characteristic most students share, is their sole knowledge of the orality of their mother tongue. As they were not able to attend school in their home countries, and many have spent their childhood on the move, their language skills stem from informal education and they are not able to write in their mother tongue. Teachers with a higher degree of Farsi or Arabic skills would often write the translation of new words in their mother tongue, but this would prove to be ineffective, as explain by one teacher: "Because they cannot write in Farsi. Sometimes I try to write a word in Farsi, because I can write Farsi, and they say, 'we cannot read it'". The interviewed psychologists reinforced the importance of children maintaining their knowledge of a mother tongue, expressing that their classes should be taught in their own languages, possibly through cooperation with the adult population of the camp. One psychologist pointed to the improbability of this within the Greek system:

> *[Learning their mother tongue] would be important, but because I am a very realistic person, it will not happen in Greece. Because Greeks tend to force people to get used*

to the Greek way, they should learn Greek, they should learn how to behave as we behave.

This imposition of not including the children's language in the curriculum is in direct violation of article 29, paragraph 1, of the CRC (1989), regarding the child's right to an education that promotes their full potential and a respect for cultures. Furthermore, unaccompanied minors have the added pressure of not having a family environment in which they can speak their mother tongue. A psychologist with previous experience working with unaccompanied minors explained:

Now for unaccompanied children, it is an obstacle. And in my previous job I have seen that with unaccompanied minors, many of them started to forget their mother tongue. [...] A little by little. They are losing it.

A curious manifestation of these children's past is their knowledge of the Turkish language. Children living at RICs and CCACs in Greece have a fluency in Turkish that allowed them to communicate, even between those whose mother tongue was not the same. One teacher commented that the children were able to speak Turkish due to their time spent in Turkey and because there was not a flexibility by Turkish speaking people to talk in a different language. As mentioned in the previous section, the students that were more comfortable with different languages, would use Turkish to translate from English or Greek and explain particular topics to their colleagues. The mentioned teacher explained during the interview:

In Turkey, English is not spoken, and they need to communicate. So they learn Turkish. Of course, their Turkish is not good, they make mistakes, they have grammar mistakes, but they can communicate. Sometimes I say something in English, and they explain to each other in Turkish even though they are both Afghans.

Their strong understanding of the Turkish language, connected with their mere oral knowledge of their mother tongue, leads children to communicate with a mixture of languages. Parents reported that the situation intensifies when arriving at the camp, to a point when they cannot understand their children:

About the language, they're mixed. Because we were in Turkey, they learned a couple of words in Turkish. Here they learned a couple of words in Greek, and they learned English as well. So when they're speaking, they're mixing everything with Farsi. So we cannot understand what they're saying.

I enquired informants across all categories about the focus that is given to teaching the local language, in this case Greek, and a common response was the uncertainty that asylum seekers experience, unsure of their final response and in which country they will be settled in. A teacher at the camp school shared:

I understand that they are in Greece, and they have to learn Greek language because they will stay in Greece. But will they stay in Greece? I'm not sure if the Greek language is the perfect for them. For someone that wants to stay, of course. And they understand this very much, of course. But I think most of them, they want to go. To go to Europe, to go to America. I'm a Greek teacher. I teach Greek to them. But inside of me I don't think that it's what they need.

Although some informants expressed the need to learn Greek so as integrate in the community, their overall opinion was still that English was necessary to ensure maximum opportunities at a moment of unsureness. One of the participants pointed out that English can also be an integration tool in Greece: "Even if you are in Greece, many people we know, they integrate with their English in the beginning and after they learn Greek". While an NGO worker explained to a broader scale why they believe English to be the best option:

It's very important that the refugees have English because it's an international language. Wherever they go, whether it's England, whether it's France, Netherlands, wherever they go, they will need that English. Yes, they're going to learn the language of the country that they finally settle in, but English will help them to integrate well. And so especially if the children know English and the parents don't know so well, when they get to the new country the children will be able to help the parents to integrate.

This feeling was also demonstrated by a parent during an interview:

Because they know Farsi, so they know how to speak Farsi, my focus is on English. Because we don't know where we're going after here, so it's better to learn English at least, they can use it.

The cognitive abilities of children, leading them to a quicker learning process, was highlighted by psychologists during interviews, also mentioning the key role that children might end up having as “mediators” for the integration of their families. Nonetheless, the cumulative factor of multiple languages being learned simultaneously, particularly without a thorough knowledge of their mother tongue, was mentioned as having a negative impact of the children. One NGO worker emphasised: “It's very difficult, for example, for a 6 years old child speaking Farsi to at the same time start learning English and Greek, it's not that effective”. A teacher expressed that, in their opinion, the lack of knowledge of the mother tongue was one of the biggest barriers in teaching new languages:

[The mother tongue should be included in the educational setting] because most of our students don't know how to write their mother tongue. We expect them to learn English and Greek at the same time, and they don't know how to write Farsi or Arabic. It's absurd.

6. Critical view of education at Greek RICs and CCACs

The findings presented in the previous chapter, the result of a three week field work in a Greek first reception centre, provide a comprehensive insight into the educational system and the suitability it might have for the children benefiting from it. To understand how the education at RICs and CCACs is potentially fostering equity and human rights values, in this chapter I will apply the critical theory of education to the themes and findings analysed. The view of education as a tool to empower children to participate in the transformation of the world (Freire, 1970) is particularly interesting in this context, as it could provide refugee children with the agency needed to escape their situation and possibly strive to change it.

Beginning with a topic explored in the last section of the previous chapter, the lack of mother tongue based teaching, represents a feature which could possibly be one of the primary sources of inequalities faced by the children. Various levels of failing to include the mother tongue in school can be seen in different forms of education, although I did not observe any lectures where the children's mother tongue was the teaching language. In non-formal education, the use of their native languages, or other common languages, is often encouraged and even used as a strategy for better communication by the teacher. However, in formal education classes, the sole focus on the Greek language, to ensure integration, as well as the teachers' lack of knowledge on the students' first languages, diminishes the use of mother tongues, creating a stronger barrier between educators and their students, possibly leading to negative feeling towards school. This difference could perhaps explain why many students express a desire to continue attending non-formal education, even after they are enrolled in formal school, which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is not permitted. Congruently, Palaiologou, Fountoulaki and Liontou (2019), had found that the use of various languages within non-formal education prevents oppressive feelings towards learning from appearing among the students. Additionally, if refugee children realise that the Greek students are able learn in their mother tongue it might induce in them a feeling of inequality, hindering the power that education can have in promoting social justice (Giroux, 2011).

The imposition to learn Greek, even for those whose status and future country of settlement is unsure, not only dismisses their agency with the removal of a choice, but also reinforces power structures. People residing at RICs and CCACs perceive their stay in Greece as temporary, as a

transit country they go through to get to Europe, and so, children want to learn English and often German (Palaiologou, Fountoulaki and Liontou, 2019). The sentiment given to me by the teachers was particularly consistent with this, as even Greek teachers would point out that they were aware the children were "not that interested" in learning Greek. Although not removing the importance of learning the local language to ensure that children are able to communicate and integrate into society, the point I raise here is the manner in which this obligation is being perpetuated. Children seeking asylum in Greece have already gone through a forced migration from their own country, and had many of their individual rights limited, not allowing them a choice as simple as the language they want to learn is an added level to the discouragement of their feeling of empowerment and agency.

Interestingly, as described in the first chapter, the trend in refugee educational policies has been towards a focus on the language and culture of the receiving country (UNHCR, 2012), in detriment of their own. While this has been a topic discussed for decades, the main guidelines have always focused on either home country culture and language, or the host countries' (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), without ever finding a balance between the two. Here there are two points which I would like to make. First, with the consistent removal of their ability to make decisions, particularly in the children's context at school, there is a decrease in opportunities to promote critical awareness and question social norms. And secondly, situations that cause the movement of people are unpredictable and the possibility to either settle in a host country, or return to their home country, should be safeguarded.

If we accept the premise of integration into the receiving country's society, education should be framed in a way that prepares them to live in an EU country. The Greek language, or even English in the case of non-formal education, is merely one part of understanding the culture and how to become part of it (Kramsch, 2014). Language should not be the only skill being taught to children living at RICs and CCACs, history and cultural awareness classes could lead students to a more comprehensive understanding about the country they are arriving in. Additionally, the manner in which the educators choose to teach such subjects can influence the outcomes of the learning process, even when cultural topics only arise through conversations. Very often, in English classes at the NGO school, the teacher would engage in educational conversations surrounding cultural contexts and challenge the students to accept the differences, while still discussing them. Strunk

and Betties (2019), describe these moments as parts of the *hidden curriculum,* a feature that allows teachers to impose ideological perspectives on the students. However, depending on the approach taken by the educator, the result can be very different. On the opposite side Paulo Freire (1970), argues that those conversations are crucial to achieving *true literacy.* By raising in the children the ability to critically analyse a society, whether it is their own or that of the place they wish to integrate, education can become an instrument of liberation and social justice.

Nonetheless, the premise of integration should not mean a total removal of the student's mother tongue and own culture, as it can be seen as severely hindering their right to an education that fully develops their potential and abilities, as required by article 29, of the CRC (1989). Studies performed both at Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya, have found that both teachers and students feel that the imposition of the national curriculum on refugee students does not reflect their needs and is not overall relevant (Mackinnon, 2014; Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019). Furthermore, as Idrac (2022) has argued, having a curriculum based on the child's identity and culture increases their interest and commitment to school. Particularly in the case of Greece, as mentioned in chapter 5, children are often illiterate when arriving to reception centres, without the availability of mother tongue classes their inability to write and read in their native language will be perpetuated.

More to this point, the interest in education is much higher when the children's interests are considered and given proper attention in classes (Idrac, 2022). The flexibility of non-formal education could be a factor leading children to request to continue attending their classes, even after joining formal education, and even, as teachers mentioned during interviews, express their preference for the NGO school. The teachers with training within the refugee field are not only better prepared to transmit knowledge to the children but are also able to understand the individualities of each child and address them during class. A low number of students, as was typically the case in the camp school, further enhances the opportunities for the educator to go beyond literacy teaching and promote critical thinking through the exploration of other subjects and conversations (Freire, 1970).

Although the teacher centred classroom was a constant characteristic among both forms of education for children living at RICs and CCACs, the participation of students, in the classes I observed, was always high and passionate, as opposed to what was described by Palaiologou,

Fountoulaki and Liontou (2019). Dynamics encouraged by NGO teachers, such as students translating between each other particular topics, or developing conversations on matters that challenge their preconceived notions of society, are examples of pedagogical techniques that impact the children's openness to learn and to begin to create a critical view of the world (Giroux, 2011). The flexible nature of non-formal education is one of its largest assets, closely joint by the experience and training of its teachers, providing a particular positive outcome in the short period of time that children attend it. All informants highlighted the importance of this initial introduction to education, while children are adapting to their new context. Reading that other researchers have found that educators in Greece support children's enrolment in formal education within one month of their arrival (Simopoulos and Magos, 2020), therefore surprised me. I would argue that non-formal education should not cease to exist, although the responsibility of it should be the state's, the structure of it should evolve from the current available NGO schools and ensure that children have access to education that promotes equity and critical thinking, as well as the values of human rights.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, my aim has been to explore the educational system being provided to children living in Greek first reception centres. Striving to understand, first and foremost, how the right to education can be promoted or hindered for these children, I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation, over a period of three weeks, at a non-formal school. The findings, subdivided into three large themes, have been presented and analysed in chapter five. Firstly, I addressed the divergences between different forms of education, particularly, the flexibility that non-formal education inherently has, as well as the lack of trained teachers in the context of refugee education within the formal education. Subsequently, I focussed on the eagerness to learn, not only displayed by children but also by their parents, as well as the obstacles they must overcome to continue to study. The third and final theme was the language barriers that children have to face in the educational setting, not only disregarding their mother tongue, while at the same time imposing on them the knowledge of the Greek language, at a moment when their asylum case is still being decided.

My goal when designing this research, was ultimately to look at the context of education at RICs and CCACs from the perspective of each child's needs and abilities, predominantly to understand how these individual characteristics can be developed to foster equity and the values of human rights. In doing so, I drew on the critical theory of education (Kellner, 2003), an approach that looks at education as a tool for social change and allows for the exploration of power structures and inequalities. Curiously, when looking at education through this lens, non-formal education was shown to be a form of education that, given its flexibility, allows teachers to introduce topics and conversations that promote cultural awareness and critical thinking. The focus given by formal education to the Greek language, on the one hand, is imposed on the children, and on the other hand, lowers the amount of time spent on topics that could be reinforcing the empowerment of each child. Additionally, the opportunities that non-formal educators create for their students to translate and communicate knowledge among them breaks the traditional power structure of a classroom and cultivates their empowerment.

Regardless of the differences found between both forms of education, the reality is that children living at Greek first reception centres are experiencing a reduction of their right to education,

upheld in multiple UN documents, particularly on articles 28 and 29 of the CRC (1989), as shown in chapter five. The education provided has a biased focus on integration, mainly through language classes, neglecting two main components of education. On a first level, if the goal is to promote integration, language ought to be only one of the components, there should be classes that give children a full idea of how it is to live in the EU, from simple tasks such as doing groceries, to the legal system and even society values. However, it must be emphasised that by fully overlooking the culture and language of the children, this educational system is depriving them of an option in this matter and leading to countless children being unable to read or write in their mother tongue.

While conducting this research I interacted with several people involved in the educational system, my greatest surprise, and possibly the hardest bias to overcome, was the complete joy of the children that were attending school. Their curiosity and will to learn is undeniable and should be nurtured in a manner that stimulates their critical thinking and awareness of the world. The existence of education in itself should not be the goal of any educational system, children that learn in an environment that upholds human rights will grow up to defend these same values in their society. The solution to a better future should not only be focused on solving imminent problems, but most importantly in preparing the adults of tomorrow to continue to implement the solutions for a fairer world.

7.1. Recommendations and suggestions for further research

» The rotativity of teachers, as well as the lack of specific training and experience in teaching Greek as a second language should be addressed by the government of Greece. Educators should be required to specialise in the field of refugee education, to understand their contexts and how best to address them. The annual public tender to hire teachers should be separate from the hiring process of teachers for refugee children, particularly for those working with children living in first reception centres. This separate hiring process should include specific requirements which ensures teachers are trained in teaching Greek or English as second languages, and the knowledge of the children's context, as well as pedagogical strategies to use in their classes.

» Ensuring that the children's mother tongue and own culture is included in the curriculum should be considered by all actors involved. This could be achieved by involving the residents of RICs and CCACs, potentially parents of the children attending school. Creating a hybrid system where children are learning the host country's language and culture, as well as their own, would provide them with a comprehensive education and possibly increase literacy levels. Further, the focus on the various cultures could inspire debates and conversations, fostering their critical thinking and social awareness.

» On a research level, there is a need for further investigation into the pedagogical component of the educational system, particularly from the perspective of the children's needs and ambitions. Performing an in-depth research, across multiple first reception centres, on the suitability of the current educational system for the children arriving, could potentially bring forward current gaps in the education provided and yield valuable suggestions to increase the quality of education.

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