

A Fractured Education: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees' Educational Opportunities in Greece

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In the post-pandemic world, students have inherited a fractured education system that has failed to repair the damage of online learning and adapt to the new reality. Vulnerable groups, such as refugees, have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 policies and restrictions, which deprived them of significant educational opportunities. The goal of this research paper is to examine the obstacles that the pandemic posed on refugee education in Greece, its impacts on the academic and personal development of these students, and the coping mechanisms that refugees resorted to, to make up for the limited access to formal education. These mechanisms which were centered around a shift to non-formal education proved to be inadequate for the re-integration of refugees in the Greek education system. In the theoretical context of policymaking in crisis and its effects on vulnerable groups, this paper explores the extent to which policymakers in times of crisis often fail to cater for underprivileged segments of the population due to limited information and time constraints. Using the case studies of three refugee camps in Greece and drawing from the interviews of education coordinators and an NGO representative, this paper aims to explore the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of refugee children, both in terms of quality and access.

Introduction

In 2020, in the Malakasa camp, volunteers from the Ray of Hope project hosted a weekly book club for refugee students. In January of that year, ten children attended the book club every week with enthusiasm. Three months later, only two of them could sporadically attend the online Zoom meetings. The case of Malakasa is certainly not an isolated one; refugee formal and non-formal education in Greece has been “fractured” in most if not all camps.

The criteria set in this study to classify refugee education as “fractured” include structural quality elements and institutional factors. Specifically, “fractured education” is characterized by the inability of the education system to aid in the academic progress and prospects of children while simultaneously ensuring that it remains a positive environment in which their mental health is not jeopardized. At the same time, however, this “fractured” system fails to adapt to changing circumstances, namely the COVID-19 pandemic which greatly impacted education and has now led to a greater need for structural adjustments to facilitate the transition from online education to in-person schooling.

According to UNICEF, by August 2022, a total 22,000 refugee and migrant children were present in Greece, of whom 17,000 are estimated to be of school age¹. Although there was a relative decrease in the refugee population of the country after the lifting of the COVID-19 measures, this paper will argue that the quality of life of refugees decreased significantly as

well. This paper focuses on refugees, that is, according to the UNHCR, people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country². For the purpose of examining the overall situation in Greek refugee camps, this paper will also address asylum seekers, since in Greece holding asylum status does not constitute a prerequisite for accessing education.

In terms of the demographics of the refugee population of Greece, according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2022 report, there are currently more than 160,000 refugees living in the country, a 34% increase from 2021³. The majority of refugees residing in Greece come from Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria, with some recent arrivals from Ukraine as well.

The most common languages spoken in camps are Farsi, Arabic, and Ukrainian. What is more, men constitute a large majority of refugees living in Greece (58.1%), while children (21.1%) and women (20.8%) follow in that respective order.

At all three camps considered for this paper, from the end of 2019 and onwards, several changes were observed in the refugee student population. A great deal of mobility was evident with the arrival of new people of all ages, but also with constant departures. The number of enrolled students increased significantly before the outbreak of COVID-19, with the Reception and Education Classes (DYEP) established in 2016. The DYEP Middle School where 30 children were enrolled in June 2019 from Diavata camp, reached 52 children in December 2019. A similar trend was observed in the whole of Greece, with new

Nationalities of refugees residing in Greece

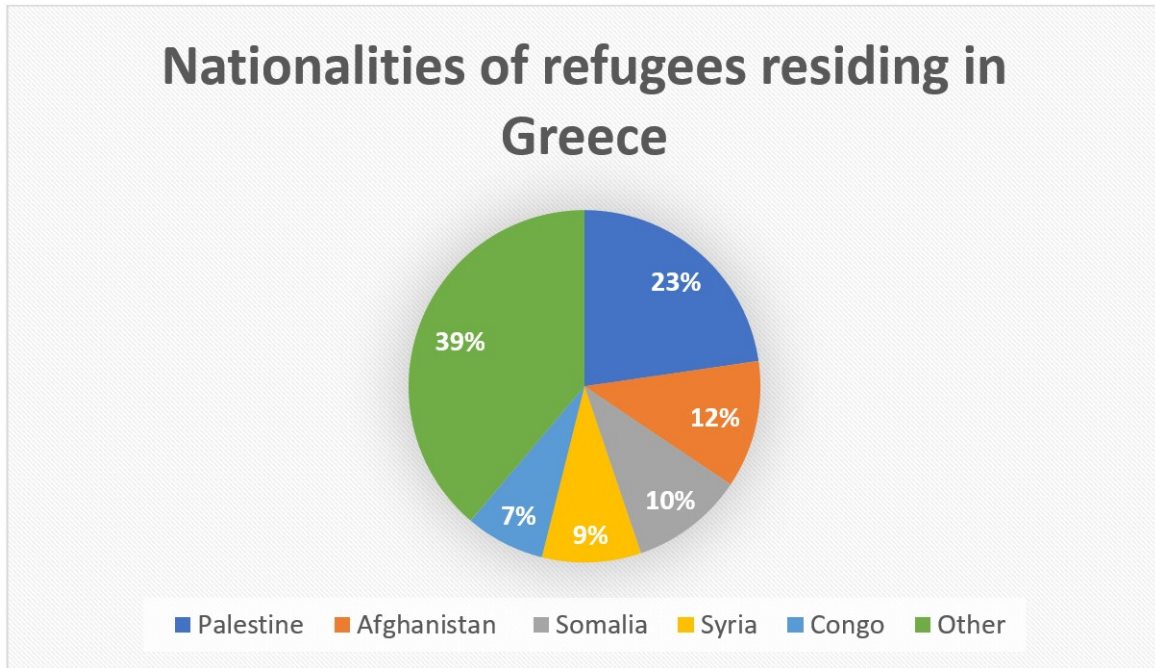


Fig. 1 Nationalities of refugees residing in Greece, Operational Data Portal (UNHCR)

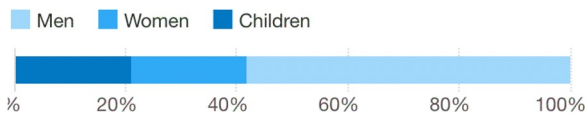


Fig. 2 Demographics of refugees residing in Greece, Operational Data Portal (UNHCR)

reception classes being created and more students enrolling in public school. This exponential growth of DYEP classes continued until 2021, when dropout rates reached their peak and the true impact of COVID-19 started to transform refugee education.

Academic Year	Number of DYEP classes
2016-2017	19
2017-2018	112
2018-2019	137
2019-2020	138
2020-2021	169
2021-2022	110
2022-2023	88
2023-2024	48

Table 1 Number of DYEP classes each academic year (2016-2023)

As DYEP classes continued to increase, so did the enrollment rate. Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that enrollment in middle school and high school rose over the academic years following 2018, which reveals an underlying incentive of more parents and children to join Greek education. Yet, due to constraints posed by the pandemic that will be analyzed in this paper, high enrollment percentages were not followed by high participation rates.

This study contributes to the literature examining public policy making during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges in the policymaking process, calling for urgent and unprecedented means to address the populations' needs. This "transboundary crisis" raises questions on whether patterns of public policy-making change in crisis situations and how policy theories can account for this development⁴. The uncertainty about the effectiveness of the solutions proposed, the limited information, and the time constraints, render policy-making in crisis an important topic of investigation in Public Policy studies.

To analyze the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees' educational opportunities, this paper will briefly examine the time frame of 2020-2021 and focus mostly on the period after June 1st, 2022, when the final COVID-19 restriction was lifted. The paper will examine the main limitations that COVID-19 posed on refugee formal and non-formal educational opportunities and analyze the impacts of a fractured education during the pandemic. In the results section, this paper will consider the pre-existing limitations of refugee education, the

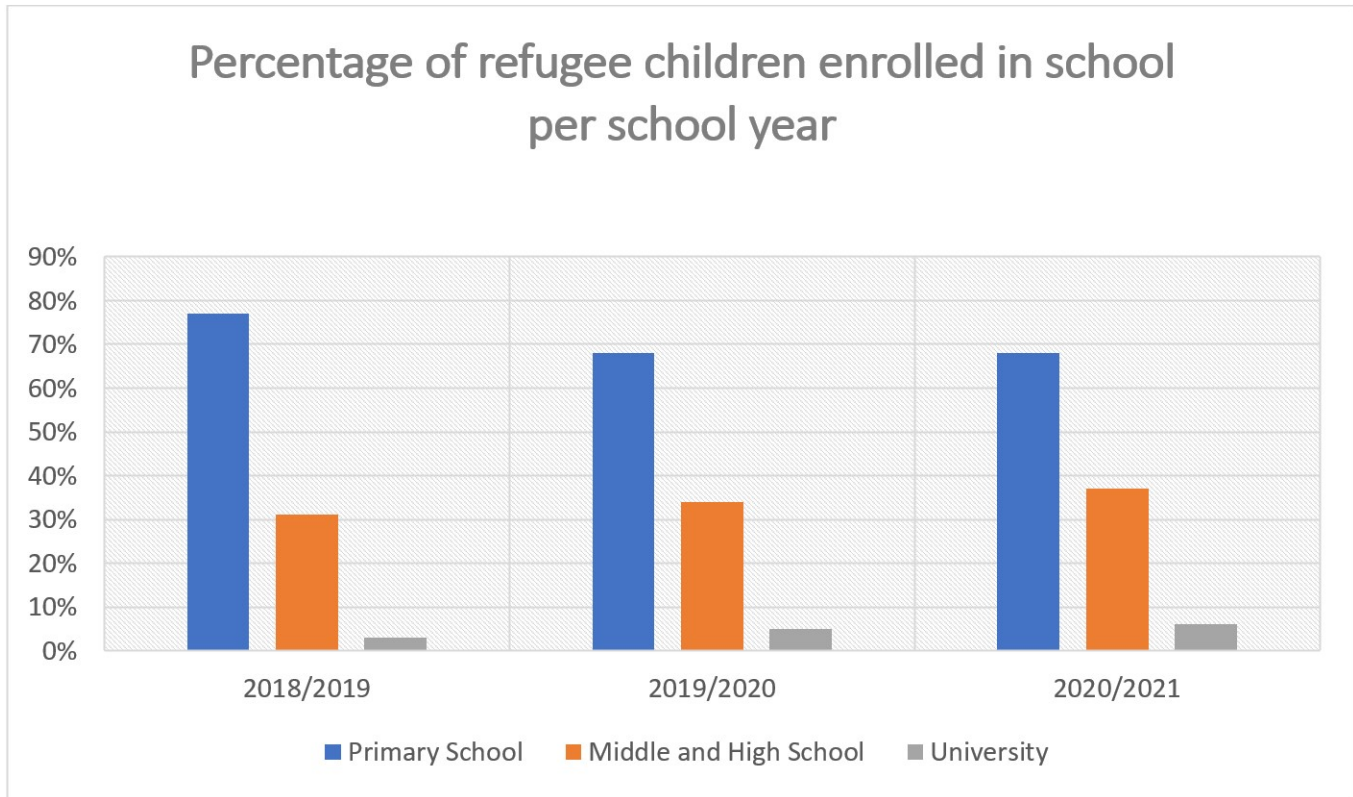


Fig. 3 Percentage of refugee children enrolled in school per school year (2018-2021), created by the author using data from the UNHCR.

limited connectivity, the constraints to the freedom of movement during the pandemic, and the post-COVID requirements. In the discussion, therefore, these factors will be analyzed with their subsequent impacts on mental health, academic performance, and future prospects of refugee students. Finally, the paper will examine the coping mechanisms of the refugee population and will argue that they have produced a suboptimal outcome.

Methodology

The sample that I have used to draw conclusions consists of three refugee camps in different geographical areas, namely Schisto, Diavata, and Polykastro. All three camps host a large number of refugees, with Diavata having the largest student population and Schisto the smallest. The camps have different internal compositions and ethnicities as well as different administrative structures. Nonetheless, a common pattern is the lack of proximity and connectivity. That is, the three camps (and most camps in Greece) are situated in remote areas and do not have close and systematic communication with local communities. The sampling strategy used for this paper was the most different-case design; the case studies selected have very different characteristics and thus the conclusions are likely

applicable to most refugee camps in Greece. By using camps in both urban and rural areas, this study attempted to maximize the degree of representativeness of the sample. Although, due to limited access, the study does not include camps located in islands, Polykastro camp is a fair proxy. As per Table 2, the camp is isolated, far from the closest city center and the public school that the residents attend. My volunteer work has given me access to the three camps used as case studies, yet access to refugee camps in Greece is generally restricted, rendering it difficult to include more camps in the sample.

I have used quantitative data to construct descriptive statistics with regards to educational opportunities for refugees. These statistics will be used to analyze the measurable impacts of COVID-19 on refugee participation in education. I collected this data by reaching out to camp coordinators of the three representative selected camps that constituted my sample. By conducting online semi-structured interviews of both education coordinators and NGO representatives, I collected qualitative data that will be used to compare the case studies of camps but also the conditions in each camp before and after the pandemic. Due to ethical concerns, interviews with the population of interest, refugee children, could not be carried out. As such, education coordinators and NGO representatives were selected

	Schisto camp	Diavata camp	Polykastro camp
Distance from the closest city center (km)	17	10	60
Camp capacity	1250	2500	1500
Distance from the public school that the residents attend (km)	1-3	7-12	30

Table 2 Characteristics of the selected camps, data provided by the interviewees.

as interviewees because of their leadership responsibility in the sector of education which gives them direct contact with refugee children. Education coordinators are concerned with all matters of formal education, while NGO representatives organize non-formal educational programs within the camps. Even though both education coordinators and NGO representatives have access to refugee camps, they are not medical practitioners and therefore still sometimes rely on anecdotal evidence to draw conclusions on issues such as the mental health of students. This limitation is partly due to the lack of mental health experts in camps and public schools; thus education coordinators are the only representatives that could discuss such issues.

The interviews were transcribed and used to conduct document analysis. Utilizing an inductive method, categories of recurring themes were created. The information was then further categorized into “Constraints” and “Impacts” of COVID-19 on refugee education. The constraints were then placed in the “Results” section, and their further analysis which allows us to deduce their impacts was placed in the “Discussion” section. Before delving into the results, the following section will provide a short overview of literature on the societal role of refugees and the impact of the pandemic on educational outcomes in the broader population.

Literature Review

Public Policy as an academic discipline gives careful consideration to the circumstances under which policymakers act during emergencies. Particularly, scholars have argued that ambiguity, time constraints, and information overload which may not be entirely accurate, leads policymakers to shift their attention to some policy-relevant issues and ignore others⁵. That is, they may take into consideration factors from the distanced context, such as societal demands or socioeconomic developments, to minimize the harms of flawed information and pressure. Nonetheless, from a policy-seeking point of view, some argue that ideology still matters: In a crisis where actors have to decide on complex matters with high uncertainty and time constraints, they may be led to trust only their most deeply entrenched political values⁶. Thus, crisis situations could result in policymakers, deliberately or accidentally, capitalizing on the problematic circumstances to push their own ideologies. This creates a major concern: Can policymakers address crises while simultaneously catering for vulnerable populations?

In recent years, there has been a growing interest amongst scholars in the potential of refugees, and specifically their contribution both to the country of origin and the hosting country. The argument that “refugee is as much a development issue as a humanitarian issue” has led to the development of policy suggestions that “focus on restoring refugees’ autonomy through jobs and education”⁷. From a developmental perspective, refugees can contribute economically to the host societies “as workers, innovators, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, consumers and investors.” As active and critical members of the workforce, they can help to create jobs, increase local worker productivity and wages, improve capital returns, encourage international commerce and investment, and boost innovation, enterprise, and growth⁷. When allowed to develop, refugees stimulate consumption, triggering a supply response leading to investments in trade and transport and a subsequent boost in GDP⁸. However, a prerequisite for real development is improved educational opportunities, that is, access to adequate education for all citizens without discrimination. As Saiti and Chletsos point out, education “should aim to remove any barriers to accessibility, have a humanitarian orientation, and ensure equality”⁹. In the context of entry and host countries for refugees, educational opportunities are integral in the process of maximizing their potential for growth. Thus, their contribution is largely contingent on receiving quality education.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which fits the definition of transboundary crisis, has disrupted access and decreased the quality of education for everyone, and especially for vulnerable groups. A transition between the different modalities of school and remote education has had an impact on the psychological wellbeing of students around the world as well as their academic performance. Harvard University professors Jones and Hanno share that “families reported a rise in temper tantrums, anxiety, and a poor ability to manage emotions, especially among the young elementary-aged children during remote learning”¹⁰. Not only did students experience a significant lack of focus, but they also felt that the lack of socialization impacted their mental health. The lack of motivation of the students was topped off with infrastructural problems and digital illiteracy which rendered online education ineffective. Therefore, emphasis has been on the importance of social-emotional learning as a way of overcoming the hurdles posed by COVID-19 on education. That is, how students can adjust to the new digital reality and try to reverse the ramifications of remote schooling.

By April 2020, an estimated 1 billion students had their ac-

cess to education completely disrupted, most of them due to technology barriers. This phenomenon was a bigger strain for students with added vulnerability, such as refugees. Their legal status is uncertain, their freedom of movement is constrained, and education for them is particularly important as it constitutes a tool that might help them build a better future. The UNHCR highlights that “quality education is the anchor that will keep children in school” and thus its discontinuation further perpetuates refugee children’s absence from formal education¹¹. To extract the full potential of refugees, quality education must be a guaranteed right; the added vulnerability of refugees renders their access to education particularly important.

In this context, this research paper aims to explore the long-term impacts of the lack of adequate schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also its direct aftermath. Academic literature on the humanitarian impact of the pandemic is scarce, as relevant and accurate data is limited on the subject matter. However, evaluations of the legal context are ample, including critiques of the recent EU Migration Pact and IOM Reports, which constitute significant grey literature used as a basis for this paper. It has been argued that the impact of the recently introduced legal framework for refugees in the EU has perpetuated the challenges posed by the pandemic. In addition, academic literature has focused on the securitization of migration and refugee flows in the discourse of entry countries, particularly by scholars such as Elias Kondilis and Dimitris Papamichail, with an emphasis on Greece¹². They examine how prolonged lockdowns and restrictions to the freedom of movement of refugees led to substandard living conditions and were used a pretext for continued restrictive measures. Although literature has focused on the impact of the pandemic on asylum-seekers and asylum procedures, limited research has been conducted on the effects on the quality of life of refugees. Nonetheless, this research paper will shift the emphasis on education, investigating the impacts of policymaking in crisis on a vulnerable population.

Results

To investigate the true nature of the impacts of COVID-19 on refugee education, it is necessary to highlight the restrictions posed by the pandemic. To do so, this section will outline the aspects of the lives of refugees that were affected by COVID-19, as was presented by the interviewees, while also distinguishing the already existing limitations of refugee education.

Pre-existing Limitations

Since 2016, refugee education in Greece has been integrated in a legislative framework that mandates multicultural schools with reception classes. At the same time, education coordinators were introduced in every camp and were rendered responsible for monitoring and organizing formal and non-formal refugee

education. Later, the state established Refugee Education Support Structures (RESS) which provide afternoon classes and activities to facilitate the smooth transition of refugees into the Greek public school system. Although this paper aims to examine the restrictions and impacts of the pandemic on refugee education, it is necessary to also highlight the already existing limitations of the Greek system. Certain practical insufficiencies in the education of refugees have been present since 2016 and must be distinguished from the effects of COVID-19. One of the practical limitations of refugee education is the lack of teachers for the reception classes. Specifically, in the municipality of Piraeus, during the academic year of 2022-2023 there was a need for 10 teachers to work with refugee students, yet only three were appointed. Even the teachers that were finally appointed to teach those classes often get transferred to other schools during the year, thus making it difficult for students to form connections with their teachers. On top of this, there is a noticeable disruption the flow of the lessons, as the process of substitution takes months.

Apart from teachers, there is a lack of psychologists and social workers in Greek public schools. Almost half of the refugee children population experiences severe post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety, often leading to mental illness. However, schools have yet to find a mechanism to support these children and facilitate their integration into Greek society. Every school only has one psychologist and one social worker for one day per week, who is expected to cover the needs of more than 400 students¹².

Finally, the language barrier is a significant hurdle for the education of refugees. Although the role of reception classes is by definition to familiarize refugees with the Greek education system and language, there are no translators to aid the communication between teacher and students. Certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Metadrası provide translating services and programs but only upon reservation. Such programs are unable to cover daily needs but can respond to emergencies by sending a translator to the camp or school. Alternatively, telephone lines have been set up for translation and are used by camp and school personnel only for a few minutes. Nonetheless, these services do not suffice for the large number of refugee children and depend on NGOs, rather than the state.

These pre-existing limitations have impacted the three refugee camps alike, with Polykastro having what the education coordinator called “an inherent disadvantage” because of its lack of proximity to a city center and the school that the residents attend¹³.

Connectivity

When, in March 2020, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs introduced online learning through the Webex platform, many families in Greece were faced with practical concerns.

Having the ability to provide one device for each child was a prerequisite for the participation of children in remote education. Additionally, online learning in Greece started off with significant issues; teachers and students were unable to join the platform and thus lost many days of school. On top of all of this, the conditions of connectivity in refugee camps with no internet and no computers made it impossible for more than a few students to join online lessons. Out of the three sample camps, none had adequate infrastructure and tools to facilitate online learning. Education coordinators from all camps noticed that a few families had smart phones or even mobile data to connect to the internet. Yet, these phones were almost exclusively programmed with Arabic software, making it impossible for them to connect to the Greek Ministry's program. Even if students had access to mobile devices, all three camps had connectivity issues, thus hindering online learning. Both at Schisto and Diavata camp, there were only a few outdoor spaces with relatively strong Wi-Fi connection, which children could not access due to weather conditions. These conditions led to virtually non-existent online education for refugee children. At Schisto, out of the 300 children that resided there, only one or two were able to join online lessons, and even then, they were unable to participate consistently.

Freedom of Movement

The freedom of movement of refugees living in camps is limited by the restrictive nature of these structures; camps are becoming increasingly isolated environments. During the pandemic, Greece experienced two main lockdown periods: March of 2020 to May of the same year and November of 2020 to May 2021. Citizens were allowed to leave their houses only after sending an SMS, justifying their need to exit quarantine. During that period, refugees were not allowed to leave the camp under any circumstance, not even with the use of the SMS. This meant that they couldn't go to the pharmacy or the supermarket, leaving them unable to satisfy their basic needs. Lockdowns were even extended at refugee camps; even when the Greek government declared the end of a lockdown, the freedom of movement for refugees was up to the camp administration's discretion. The extended lockdowns were attributed to the unsanitary nature of camps that could lead to an even greater outbreak of the pandemic.

Inside camps, the sanitary conditions were relatively under control due to the presence of doctors and the National Public Health Organization (NPHO). After the first period of crisis, the authorities were able to contain the virus and limit its spread inside camps. The number of cases was low compared to the severe outbreak and crisis in Greece. However, a racist narrative prevailed in many Greek communities, characterizing refugee camps as contaminated spaces, and protesting the return of refugee children at school. A case in point is the 860 chil-

dren residing at Ritsona camp who were not allowed to go to school after the municipal council voted against their return in February 2021. This was justified by an increase in the cases of COVID-19 in the camp, reflecting the increase of cases in general, but also the protests of Greek parents. This led to an even more marginalized community of refugees that, during the pandemic, was unable to enjoy even the basic privileges that Greek citizens could. These significant limitations to the freedom of movement did not allow refugees to engage openly with their neighboring communities, access basic social services and economic opportunities, and therefore develop for their benefit and that of the host country.

Even in certain intervals when children returned to in-person learning during the pandemic, refugees were still not allowed out of the camps. This was particularly important because it exacerbated the impact of the lack of online education on refugees' mental health and academic performance. Not attending in-person school even for a few weeks further perpetuated the difficulties of adjusting after the pandemic but also augmented the impacts that will be discussed later in the paper. In the year 2020, refugee students only went to school for one month. The following year, 120 students from Polykastro camp were registered in Greek schools, yet they only went to school for nine days. This happened due to a lack of means of transportation, which became an increasingly important problem after added COVID-19 restrictions. In February 2021, although Greek students had gone back to in-person school, refugees from Diavata camp were unable to attend because of an extended lockdown in the camp. While the Ministry of Migration and Asylum allowed refugee students to attend school, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs did not approve that instruction. Therefore, refugees missed three weeks of school because of a discrepancy between the two ministries, and even the few children that had access to the internet, were unable to join, since there were no Webex meetings.

Post-quarantine Requirements

Returning to school both at intervals when COVID measures were lifted and after the pandemic was on the wane brought some practical restrictions for refugees. Every student in Greece had to complete regular COVID-19 self-tests and provide documents to the school. Although the government provided free self-tests for students, which they could get from pharmacies, the same was not applicable to all refugees. To get these tests, students or parents had to declare their Social Insurance Number (AMKA), which refugees do not have in the case that their asylum application has been rejected. So, even though the asylum status of the parents does not deprive the right of a child to education, it affects their access to pharmacies and medical services¹⁴. As such, many refugee students were unable to procure regular COVID-19 self-tests and thus did not fulfill the

requirements to go back to school.

The issue of COVID-19 vaccination, although controversial in Greek society, was not made mandatory for children to attend school. However, it allowed them to undercut the aforementioned procedure of self-testing and thus was preferred by many parents. For refugee children the vaccination process was hampered by practical restrictions. At the same time, many Greek parents pressured school administrations to make vaccines mandatory for refugees, given their living conditions. Certain mechanisms were put in place for free vaccination, yet this was not always possible due to proximity and lack of information; vaccination centers were far away from camps and refugee parents were not adequately informed.

Discussion

The already existing restrictions for refugees, topped off with the practical concerns and limitations to connectivity and freedom of movement, had significant impact on their education. The recurring themes of the interviews were mental health, academic performance and future opportunities as the key areas that were affected by the pandemic. Although long term impacts cannot be definitively outlined yet, this section attempts to predict potential consequences based on the existing results.

Mental Health

“Being away from the school environment for such a long-time impacted refugee children more heavily than any other group,” said the Education Coordinator of Schisto camp¹². On top of the prolonged lockdowns in all Greek camps, the residents did not have an internet connection, television, or any contact with the world outside the camp. This meant that children had no stimuli and thus experienced their time away from school differently. Teachers soon noticed a shift in children’s behavior or what they call “institutional behavior”. They describe it as a change that leads to outbreaks of violence, failure to socialize, and extreme anxiety. As a direct result of the pandemic, many refugee children show signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), according to the Education Coordinator of Polykastro camp¹³.

With more time being spent at home, camp coordinators also noticed a measurable rise in reports of domestic violence or abuse of children. The Education Coordinator of Diavata camp mentioned that “schools provided a space for young refugees to learn and socialize, away from their otherwise harsh living conditions”¹⁴. Although, due to privacy concerns, specific information cannot be provided, interviewees pointed out the value of school as a safe space for children and the subsequent negative impact on family relations during quarantine.

Academic Performance

In terms of academic performance, not only do young refugees demonstrate less motivation but also a failure to follow a program and focus. After the flexibility of non-formal education in the COVID-19 era, their attitude towards school has changed. Specifically, “their attention span seems to be getting shorter, as their gap with Greek students seems to be getting wider”¹². This provokes feelings of frustration and disappointment, which disincentivize them to attend classes. As a result, the drop-out rates of refugees are higher than ever, and even the students that remain at school are unable to readjust and perform well. All three Education Coordinators noted the importance of self-confidence for the active participation of refugee students at school.

Additionally, language acquisition of young refugees relies heavily on their relationships with their host-country peers. The development of these relationships was disrupted by school closings, limiting the linguistic advancement of refugee students. This enhanced the already existing language barrier that has made the process of integration particularly difficult and has led many young refugees to experience psychological stress¹⁴.

Future Prospects and Opportunities

The chances of a refugee child going back to school after COVID-19 are thought to be very low. This can be attributed to both the mental health impacts of the pandemic and their declining academic performance¹⁵. Although there is no quantitative data yet to support this, the anecdotal evidence collected from the interviews points to the same direction. Refugee children that leave school for an extended period of time are significantly less likely to go back after the time of crisis¹³. So, a group with an added vulnerability that needs quality education to flourish has now the highest dropout rates recorded.

The change in asylum procedure in Greece could provide an alternative explanation to COVID-19 restrictions for the high dropout rates. Since December 2021, bureaucratic procedures have been significantly accelerated, thus more refugees are getting travel documents to leave the country. When arriving in 2015 and 2016, refugee parents knew that they would stay in Greece for at least four years, therefore rendering it a long-term place of residence. Sending their children to school was a priority for every family, something that is emphatically demonstrated by the almost 0% dropout and 100% registration for school rates at that time. In 2021, a large portion of refugees were authorized to leave the country and advance into European countries such as Germany. So, the refugees that remain in Greece or have recently entered view it as a temporary situation with their minds set on leaving. They have lost interest in educating their children or helping them socialize, as they are not only mentally fatigued from waiting but also more hopeful

that they will leave Greece soon. This has led to almost 80% of refugee children dropping out of school or never registering in the first place in 2023. The period after the first quarantine, i.e. the 2020-21 academic year, coincided with the issuance of many positive decisions for the granting of asylum and travel documents. Schooling, thus, was negatively affected, as younger students on one hand lost their focus and on the other hand were afraid of getting sick and having their trip postponed. The older students (aged seventeen and over), who had either been granted asylum or were waiting for it, decided to work in order to raise money for plane tickets.

Coping Mechanisms

Apart from formal public education, the Greek government and the European Union have made efforts to establish non-formal educational settings in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations¹⁶. Attending in-camp informal education centers or youth spaces can be a great way for children who are not enrolled in Greek schools to find the structure, stability, and socialization chances that regular schooling provides. However, because they operate outside of the traditional school system, these facilities frequently lack staff, funding, and resources. More specifically, the lack of personnel and the cutting down on the humanitarian funding does not allow non-formal education initiatives to replace formal schooling. On top of the already existing practical issues, non-formal education does not adhere to the mandated Greek curriculum, and therefore is not recognized as equivalent to a Greek graduation certificate¹⁷. This can potentially harm a refugee's future prospects and employment opportunities, placing them at a disadvantaged position due to the lack of recognized certification. At the same time, non-formal education does not provide refugee children with the chance to socialize and interact with their Greek peers. That leads to an even greater feeling of marginalization from Greek society and constitutes a hurdle for the integration of refugee children. Therefore, although non-formal education is widely considered by the refugee population a coping mechanism, it cannot match the opportunities that formal schooling provides.

The substandard conditions of non-formal education were exacerbated by COVID-19. The NGO representative that was interviewed highlighted the impacts of the pandemic on non-formal education and on refugee children accordingly. During the first quarantine, NGO volunteers and representatives were not permitted to enter the camps under any circumstance. Later, volunteers, on their own initiative, handed out worksheets and held online lessons. Yet, the participation of children was relatively low and depended on the willingness of the parents to lend them devices and purchase mobile data. Since there were no government provisions for non-formal education, it was inconsistent amongst organizations and heavily reliant on

volunteer's initiatives. The already existent lack of personnel was worsened, as heavy restrictions were placed on the number of people allowed to enter camps. Until the 14th of August 2020, by decision of the directors of each camp, non-formal education operations were suspended. Since then, the NGO's employees worked in rotation in two groups that did not meet with each other for easier tracking of possible cases in the event of a COVID-19 case in the camp. This reduced the number of courses they provided, which anyway had not fully started since March 2020 when they had been suspended. Thus, at a time when children were isolated and most in need of a support system within the camp, they did not have access to non-formal education. This enhanced the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of refugees, as non-formal education constituted an integral part of their learning and socializing processes. Even after the COVID-19 restrictions were fully lifted in Greece, on the 1st of June 2022, NGOs were unable to return to camps with the full capacities of the pre-COVID era.

Even though the conditions of non-formal education are deteriorating, education coordinators noticed a peculiar trend; after the pandemic, the participation of children in non-formal education rose significantly in all three camps. The post-quarantine requirements for children to go back to school, such as COVID-19 rapid tests and vaccines, acted as a deterrent for many parents. In non-formal education, these measures were more lenient and thus parents preferred non-formal education above regular schooling. As participation in non-formal education rose, the number of children going to public school decreased drastically¹⁸. As such, education coordinators have deemed this to be a factor for the recent rise in dropouts and have highlighted the potential long-term effect of this phenomenon. That is, refugee children will remain unable to recover academically and mentally, leading to an even further decrease in enrollments and a serious harm in their future prospects. This coping mechanism, therefore, had a suboptimal outcome that may perpetuate the effects of the pandemic. The long-term effectiveness of this coping mechanism is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it would be an interesting matter to do further research on.

Conclusion

The data collected from three Greek camps and the interviews of all education coordinators, and an NGO representative demonstrate the significant impact of COVID-19 on refugee students. The three case studies analyzed constitute a diverse sample that allow for the extraction of certain general conclusions. On top of the already existing problems of formal refugee education, such as the lack of personnel and the language barrier, COVID-19 posed additional hurdles to refugees' access to schooling. These were categorized in this paper as limitations of connectivity, constraints to the freedom of movement, and post quarantine requirements. These factors not only made online school virtually

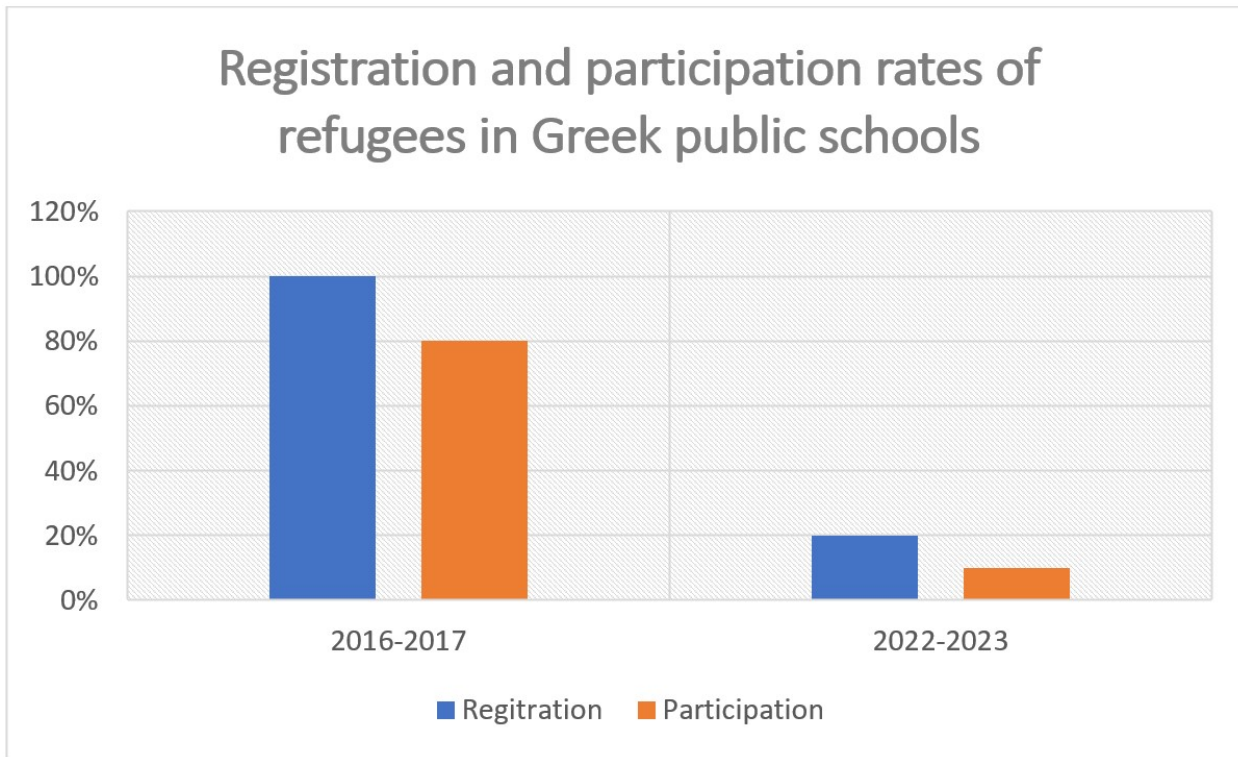


Fig. 4 Comparative percentages of registration and participation of refugees in Greek schools in the academic years 2016-2017 and 2022-2023.

impossible to attend for refugee students during the pandemic, but also deterred many from returning to school once restrictions were lifted. The impacts of the substandard conditions of education before and during the pandemic were evident in the students’ mental health, their academic performance, and the low likelihood of their return to school. Arguably the most important impact of COVID-19 was on refugee children’s future prospects and opportunities; their inherent vulnerability renders education particularly crucial for them. While it constitutes a temporary coping mechanism, non-formal education cannot provide a suitable alternative to formal schooling. Although recognizing their value as safe spaces for children, non-formal education settings acted as a coping mechanism with suboptimal outcomes at the time of the pandemic. The long-term impacts of the flawed and, at times, non-existent refugee education of the past two years are yet to be revealed but are predicted to significantly harm the students’ progress. Even though the precise number of refugees affected by these closures is still unknown, UNHCR believes that the educational disadvantages that refugee children already disproportionately experience have only gotten worse.

This paper relied primarily on qualitative data due to the lack of quantitative information about the impacts of COVID-19. The long-term effects cannot be easily assessed, and thus are

not thoroughly discussed in the study, which shifts the emphasis on short-term ramifications. Access to the population of interest is limited due to ethical concerns, therefore there was a need for mediation. Overall, this paper takes an exploratory approach to the potential impacts of COVID-19 on refugee education. Each impact outlined above should be investigated in depth at a larger scale.

The camp coordinators that were interviewed proposed a common direction on what the next steps should be. They placed the emphasis on helping refugee students to catch up, claiming that it is necessary to adapt education to the needs of these children and not make them adapt to a system they can no longer follow. The international community is now faced with the additional difficulty of identifying and eliminating impediments brought on by the pandemic, even though important pre-pandemic concerns related to refugee education, such as enhancing accessibility and educational quality, remain. From the analysis of the findings presented above, it can be inferred that a greater focus should be placed on school rather than non-formal educational opportunities. It is imperative that children return to school; NGOs must collaborate with the Greek government and refugee camps to ensure that public education will receive adequate financial support in an attempt to fill gaps in access. Different stakeholders need to work together in the years to come to min-

imize the pandemic's long-term effects on refugee education while augmenting the quality of both formal and non-formal education.

The issue of refugee education is more pressing now than ever. The ratio of 2/10 students from Malakasa camp who were able to participate in the online lessons should alarm policymakers and leaders. Although COVID-19 fractured education worldwide, the other 8 enthusiastic refugee students who were not given access to education during the pandemic arguably needed it more than Greek high school students. This should motivate decision makers to prioritize this issue and facilitate the rehabilitation of education post-COVID.

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Appendix

Interview Questions (translated from Greek and adjusted based on interviewees' answers):

1. What were the educational conditions at the camp before Covid-19?
2. How many children residing in the camp went to school?
3. Were there regular problems with transportation before quarantine?
4. What were the provisions by the Greek government for remote schooling?
5. How many students were able to virtually attend classes?
6. How are the conditions of connectivity in the camp?
7. How content were children with online schooling? How did remote schooling impact their mental health?
8. What changed after Covid-19 restrictions were lifted?
9. What are the obstacles that you have faced either in enrolling children in school or in allowing them to actively participate in classes?
10. Did you notice an impact on students' academic performance once they were re-integrated at school?
11. Do you think anything changed after Covid-19 in the education of refugee children?

Summary of Key Responses

	Mental Health	Academic Performance	Prospects
Education coordinator of Schisto camp	Emphasized the pre-existing limitations to refugee mental health, noting that public schools are under-resourced, with only one psychologist and one social worker. PTSD and anxiety were already common amongst the refugee population, but COVID-19 impacted them more heavily than any other group. The interviewee also focused on the hurdles on refugees' process of socialization, noting that even when Greek students were allowed to go to school, refugee students were not.	The interviewee pointed out that on-line education was non-existent for refugees due to issues of connectivity. Simultaneously, limitations to the freedom of movement did not allow them to participate in classes even when these were held in person. Their attention spans progressively became shorter and their comparative weaknesses to Greek students disincentivized them. Particularly for high school students, they were forced to repeat grades.	The interviewee analyzed the phenomenon of dropouts, refugees not returning to school after COVID-19. They mentioned that most children lost their friends, teachers and most importantly their self-esteem. The new school year was not easy for them, as they had to start all over again. They chose to start working or simply stay at the container because graduating from a Greek school seemed unattainable to them after the pandemic.
Education coordinator of Polykastro camp	The mental health condition of children at the camp have always been dire. The local community is very conservative, and children were never entirely integrated into the education system. During and after the pandemic, they became increasingly marginalized. Many refugee children now show signs of ADHD, and their socialization process has been interrupted. Particularly due to the isolated location of the camp, school was their only interaction with the Greek community.	The interviewee noted that refugee students have not been able to follow the Greek curriculum anymore. The limited access to non-formal education has widened the gap to Greek students, leading to feelings of frustration.	"Refugee children that leave school for an extended period of time are significantly less likely to go back after the time of crisis," the interviewee mentioned. They also analyzed the lack of motivation both from the part of the students and the parents to register for classes. After the quarantine requirements were lifted, most children did not go back to school and it is unlikely that they will do so.
Education coordinator of Diavata camp	The interview emphasized the role of schools as a space for the socialization of young refugees, away from their otherwise harsh living conditions. They noted that cases of domestic abuse and mental health issues related to family rose significantly during the pandemic. Due to privacy concerns, the interviewee was unable to provide specific information, however they pointed out the negative impact on family relations during quarantine.	Quoted teachers and professors who report that there is a lack of discipline from the students due to the problematic conditions of education during the pandemic. The interviewee also mentioned the impact on language acquisition of young refugees which is heavily dependent on their contact with native speakers. That is, the already existing language barrier was enhanced, making the process of integration particularly difficult.	Noted that many refugee students were unable to procure regular COVID-19 self-tests and thus did not fulfill the requirements to go back to school even after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

Table 3 Summary of Interviews