



## The Integration of Refugee Children in Education and the Contribution of the Family Environment, According to Social Work

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### **Abstract**

The inclusion of child refugees in the school environment is a complex endeavor. This research will cover the matter of social inclusion of child refugees, in the school community. More specifically, it is conducted with the purpose, of showing aspects of every way, in which the home environment can assist the service of social workers. It concerns a qualitative research, that sampled social workers, educators and other individuals in charge-coordinators, who had previously worked in the field of child refugee education. The results of this research reveal useful intervention techniques, as well as details that have to be taken into consideration during the planning, but also the realizations of such actions.

**Keywords:** *Refugees; Social Integration; Family Environment*

### **Introduction**

Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and others, who belong to the so-called vulnerable social groups, experience discrimination and social exclusion in their daily lives, while seeking for a better quality of life, for themselves and their families (Loescher 1999, Ife 2008). The deprivation of basic human rights of vulnerable groups, does not only affect the groups themselves, but it is also reflected in the civilization as a whole, the social justice and social rights of a society. Child refugees and their families are treated unfairly and with discrimination, which brings major obstacles to their smooth inclusion into society, as well as their personality development. In the past ten years the number of refugees in Greece has increased dramatically, mainly because of the war in countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This fact, in combination with central and north Europe's negative mindset about welcoming refugees, found the country underprepared to deal with this new reality. The role of a professional social worker requires further research on the factors, that form the cluster of social bonds, aiming to develop a professional relationship, based on understanding, respect and the acceptance of the culture, brought along by refugees (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). In the same sense, social workers are expected to utilize suitable methods, in order to fight off discrimination, but also encourage social solidarity (aside from the field of education), ease people's access to the job market, as well as create a discrimination-free social consciousness.

This research will focus on the way the domestic environment of child refugees is formed and how it affects their school integration and by extension their inclusion into society. Simultaneously, the

meaning of this environment for social work, will also be examined, but in a broader sense, for all educators, who occupy themselves in this very field.

### ***Theoretical Context-Literature Review***

The definition of a refugee, according to the Geneva Convention is the following: <<a refugee is someone, who is unable or unwilling to return to his country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion<sup>1</sup>>>. As reported by 1951's UN agreement, regarding the refugee status, a refugee is defined as an individual, who is unable to return to their country of origin, due to a reasonable fear of persecution, because of their religion, nationality, or membership in a specific social group, or political views. Apart from the 1951 UN agreement, there is also the 1967 UN protocol concerning the status of refugees, which determines their rights and obligations, while including provisions about an array of topics regarding their everyday life, such as the right to work, education and life. Another important matter, is that refugees should be treated equally as the citizens in the host country.

Additionally, UN high level committee's latest report on refugee education (2017) <<left behind: refugee education in crisis>>, states that school-age children normally spend two hundred days a year in school. However, 3,5 million school age refugees, were unable to attend school in 2016, by command of the UN High Level Committee. This is quite an alarming matter, as school is one of the basic stability factors for refugee families. The UN High Level Committee's report makes a case for education, reminding, that << it amounts to an investment in the future creating and nurturing the scientists, who will rebuild and revitalize their countries, once peace is restored and they are able to return>>.

However, there are minimum bibliography references about this subject<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, there are not enough reference sources, regarding the way, that the school community <<accepted>> this situation and elaborated their current attitude. However, a recent study initiated by the Ministry of Education (2017)<sup>3</sup>, showed that among some of the basic traits of student refugees, was the need for psychosocial support for themselves, as well as their families and also the need for measures capable of intervening in refugee accepting environments. This action can prove quite challenging for social work, as it is a field of intervention, which may later offer substantial results. Besides, the International Federation of Social Workers highlights the fact, that the psychosocial needs of refugees should be prioritized, as they represent a fundamental right of the human existence. For social workers, working on the refugee project is a complicated task, for which common ground is hard to find and although it is a worldwide phenomenon, nonetheless understanding its unique attributes could offer useful observations (Robinson 2014). According to McBride(2018), studying the international bibliography showed, that the holistic approach may be the most essential method of intervening in the child refugee issue, which examines the environment, where a child lives and focuses on the fulfillment of their complex needs, accountable for their personality development. This requires the interference of social workers in education, health, as well as community associations and generally in all the organizations involved. At the same time, he emphasizes the distinctive role of education in a child's skill development, which may also lead to banning any kind of social exclusion. Taylor and Sidhu (2012) agree with this observation, emphasizing the importance of a welcoming environment for refugees, the control of racist behaviors, which are based on ignorance and the fear of the unknown and lastly the treatment for trauma, that refugee children could possibly be carrying from the country they fled. Butler (2007) and Robila (2018) adding to the above mentioned point, state that working-specialists, professionals who engage with refugees, have to handle

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ger.gr/el/>. In this current study the term refugee also includes <<asylum seekers>>.

<sup>2</sup> Mostly regarding social work, within the field of education and child refugees from a professional point of view (moderators, social workers, educators). There is not enough information about such programs designed by the Ministry of Education, either.

<sup>3</sup> The Refugee Education Project-Scientific Committee, Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs-April 2017.

extremely complex issues, that include multidimensional aspects, regarding financial, educational and health factors, as well as social structures, which is why they need special training-specialization in this particular field.

According to Fong (2004) taking the ecological model of social work into consideration, social workers must probe into the family environment of refugees, the cultural profile of their country of origin, but also their traumatic war experiences, such as torment, the loss of close family members, mental and physical suffering. A refugee-person's connection with the environment they exist in is formed over time in association with the experiences, values and the dynamic of the family setting they live in. This very connection establishes their morals, behavior, as well as perspective on the political and psychosocial environment, they currently exist in.

Therefore, as mentioned by Snyder, May, Zulcic and Gabbard (2005) any attempt by social workers to group or classify the attributes of refugees and their families, under the ecological approach, includes the potential danger of overlooking the unique ways, in which each family functions and impacts its members. Also, according to Maluccio, Pine and Tracy (2002) collaborating with the family is a very important task to social work, in order to analyze the school environment of children. It is essential, that any intervention in the school environment is created in a joint effort between the social worker and the family, in order to set a common action plan.

Okitikpi and Aymer (2003) are also on the same wavelength, mentioning, that creating new and specific communication tools for refugees and their families, is crucial to social workers. Specialized interference in this topic requires a unique perspective, in order to be able to perceive the form of intervention utilized by social work. Social workers, on the other hand, need to reevaluate their set of knowledge and skills, in a way that suits the needs of refugees and their families. Meanwhile, according to Nash, Wong and Trlin (2006), adopting new skills, when working with refugees, is a requirement for social workers. Specialized forms of collaboration with individuals and their family environment in micro, meso and macro level (regarding time and geographic range) could prove quite effective in their social integration in refugee accepting communities. Balgopal also points out something equivalent, stating that the majority of refugees have to deal with a common set of challenges, which include language barrier issues in the host country, trouble in socializing, issues with family functions (separation-further immigration) and experiences of racism, discrimination and oppression. These specific fields require social workers to be qualified with specified knowledge and skills (Balgopal 2000). Then she continues by adding, that through the prism of social work, cultural pluralism is necessary, as it helps bring out recognition of the unique identity, carried by different refugee cultures. In a way, it acknowledges the values, principles and moral included in those civilizations. Such topics could simultaneously challenge social workers to take action. Furthermore, considering the abilities of refugees, which may critically contribute to their socialization, as well as developing new skills, are subjects of intervention covered by social work.

Within this meaning, diversity could be interpreted as a strong advantage, rather than an exclusion triggering weakness. Moreover, social work could play a dynamic role, acting as the catalyst, when acknowledging the fact, that humans possess dignity, which is based on their values, morals and traditions. For instance, the way that those people process the idea of valuing life and enjoying the small everyday things in times of peace, could be considered a positive factor, contrary to the modern western world and lifestyle, which is heavily focused on consumerism. Developing bonds of communication within the neighborhood and community, after dealing with nests of xenophobia, could bring new information, which will eventually improve the cultural level of the entire society.

Immigration is a rising, but common occurrence in today's societies. The existence of this situation redefines the meaning of civilization and socio-economic transition. The aforementioned phenomenon acts as a catalyst for the immigrants themselves, as well as for the society, that takes them

in. The ecological approach of social work focuses on the importance of action beyond the individual level. Especially, intervening in the family, communal and in a broader sense cultural level, in fields, that affect social function. Focusing on the complex way of assessing and intervening in a situation, is essential to the ecological approach. At the same time, it is an assertive process, as it is based on an empirical background of sciences such as social work, anthropology, sociology and psychology. In other words, human nature and the broad spectrum, in which it is formed is an ever changing condition for social work. Theorists like Germain (1973), Hartman (1976) and Siporin (1980) state, that social work must create interventions and political actions at a broad level, aside from the traditional individual psychotherapeutic form of intervention. As theory researchers of the ecosystemic model of social work, they pay great attention to the environment, where an individual resides, for example the family. According to Berger, Federico and McBreen (1991), every habitat forms an exceptional way of combining biological, psychological, social, economical and political factors. Social workers need to adopt a holistic approach of the human behavior, in order to be able to comprehend the way, that the environment affects social functionality.

Accordingly, as mentioned by Rosenberg (2009) the most essential part of a social worker's intervention is the holistic approach. Utilizing and coordinating all the organizations involved, in micro, meso and macro level, should be considered key element. When it comes to school-based interventions, the community and family environment should work together at the same time, especially in the very space, where students reside. The range of action in education must be multidimensional. Additionally, the fields regarding social integration and the elimination of exclusions vary.

Bibliography references, related to the course of action of social workers in a school environment is limited and contrary to conventional social works services, such as the Ministry of Welfare, cooperating with other departments, for example teachers and professors is considered a necessity. Something also pointed out by Gibelman (2001), as well as Suppes and Wells (2008). Especially, Suppes and Wells focusing on the service provided by social workers in an educational facility, state that majoring in this very subject is essential. Acknowledging the cultural background of students, of their parents and teachers is a crucial condition, while practicing social work. According to Rosenberg (2009) through this perspective, social workers are asked to build bridges between the school, local society, departments and families, in order to improve the quality of life for students. At the same time, including the activity of social workers in the education timetable of each school facility is equally important. According to Lynn Bye (in her interview with Rosenberg), social workers are assigned with the challenging endeavor, of gaining the genuine trust of the families, both guest and local. In order to achieve that, an honest and customized approach towards each family is required. Even the specific time of visiting each family setting, could be relatively demonstrating this approach. When it comes to education, approaching each individual with respect and acknowledging their human dignity, is a prerequisite for the profession of a social worker.

According to Collette (2004) the adaptation of refugees to the new society, where they are required to exist, is affected critically by their post-traumatic stress. This is an issue, that needs to be approached and handled by social workers, on a regular basis. The susceptibility of refugee mothers, which is derived from their cultural profile, heavily influences the social adaptation of their children. Moreover, in cases where parents are separated, because of the asylum denial for either of them, complicates the situation furthermore, especially for children.

Particularly interesting, is Potocky-Tripodi's (2002) opinion, which states that social workers and all professionals, who engage in the refugee social integration field, are asked to investigate their own beliefs and views. It is essential, that they explore their own cultural background in terms of values and beliefs, as well as the way it affects their professional identity, in order to be able to show the proper sensitivity towards refugee culture. Social workers and professionals of the same industry should express their wish to alter their own thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards their area of expertise, in order to

prove affective. Stereotypes and prejudice, that hinder the practice of social work, constitute a primary issue. Social work is the pursuit of lifelong learning, which requires professionals to take on a constant acquisition of the refugee-lifestyle, as well as their own.

According to Valtonen (2001), issues regarding the practice of social skills, learning the language and professional integration are essential elements of intervention, for the social involvement of refugees. Social work can detect cases of oppression, that may appear in the aforementioned fields and intervene accordingly. The workplace draws attention, as it can showcase the dynamic that quite a few refugees carry, depending on the skills they have developed in their country of origin. Even though it is challenging for refugees to find jobs equivalent to their skills, in many occasions they seem willing to work even in less prestigious jobs. By focusing on the professional integration of refugees, social work is the field, that could help eliminate social exclusion, with the use of intervention strategies. Several difficulties, that may occur in every refugee-hosting society call for a personalized way of detection, planning, intervention and action. In this context, experts could choose a coordinated holistic way of action, which may bring notable results.

According to Mirza (2011), refugees with disabilities in developed countries experience a particular exclusion, compared to the rest of them. Apart from the fact, that there is a persistent lack in recording their special attributes, at the same time their disability excludes them from essential social involvement actions, designed especially for refugees. In refugee reception centers, there are no significant initiatives, that encourage individuals with disabilities to participate to social integration programs, equally as the rest of the refugees. Even in cases, where a basic record of disabled individuals is kept, listing their skills is overlooked. The issue obviously intensifies, when approaching the subject of disabled refugees with mental disorders, or learning difficulties.

Acknowledging the refugee culture and specifically comprehending the contribution of elements, such as individuality versus unity, religion, the significance of family and the values that affect it, the meaning of human existence, the sense of belonging and generally the sense of national identity and how it influences the relationships of refugees with others, are important matters for social workers, who work in the field. Studying the strong attributes of refugees, but also observing and prioritizing their needs, is the baseline of a social worker's service.

As stated by Balgopal (2000) a social worker can also play the role of a cultural mediator. Besides, it would not be the first time that the social worker appeared in the form of a mediator in bibliography references. Moreover, social workers mediate the individual social responsibility between the parts of a group and the systems, that affect them. These interaction systems are known to show differences in both power and value, which is what makes the aid of a mediator essential. When in this position, a social worker helps the client and the social system communicate with each other, in more realistic, rational and mutual ways, through the cooperative skills of mediation, persuasion and negotiation. Essentially, they function as cultural mediators. The cultural mediation process includes the recognition of national components, as well as the application of a multilevel setting, which incorporates the complexity of appraising the values of a nation's culture.

### ***Research Methodology***

The present study concerns a research, which took place in the region of north Greece and specifically of central and east Macedonia, in 2019-2020. The sample consisted of fifteen professionals, who worked in the field of child-refugee education, such as schools, but also refugee reception centers. Specifically, these professionals were social workers, education coordinators and teachers. Basically, this study covers a qualitative research, which included semi structured interviews with open ended questions. Its purpose was to study the way, that the family environment is formed, but also how it influences the

school, as well as the social integration of refugee children. Through this perspective, the role of social work in the education field was investigated, considering the collected data.

### **Result Analysis**

In the framework of this research, concerning the inclusion of child refugees both in education and in the host country's society as a whole, several main points are presented, regarding the importance of a child's family environment, which are used as a reference point by social workers, who perform in the field.

Constantly shifting social problems are impossible to be handled by inadequate or idle programs, that do not seek for new ways and methods of intervention. Respondents highlighted in an interesting manner, the fact that cooperation among all the experts involved, in a holistic intervention framework, is requested. Furthermore, collaborating with a child's family environment is mentioned as key element: <<including diverse professional spheres, is a vital component of an intervention's success. For example, jurists, teachers, social workers, psychologists. Particularly important, is the process of interpretation. Substantial communication is based on proper interpretation. A specific example of this is the communication built between child-refugee parents and the local parent-teacher associations. In various cases, children themselves took on the role of the interpreter. Acknowledging the rights, but also obligations of refugees, is closely related to the interpreter and their expertise on legal matters>>. (1<sup>st</sup> interview, social worker, female). The reason for this occurrence may be the significance of a refugee's primary connection with the locals, in order to diminish the fear of the unknown and at the same time build communication bridges and create the potential for deeper bonds. Social work can play a mediating role in this endeavor, by confronting any possible upcoming challenges. For social workers an intervention may include, on one hand a coordinated involvement of every department and on the other hand the interference in the development of relationships between refugee and local families.

In another part, especially interesting is an educator's opinion on the "normality" of children's lives. <<Same issues, common elements with other vulnerable groups, such as Romani people, Albanians etc. The children come from diverse backgrounds, depending on their family of origin. They cannot adapt to life's normality, simply because their life is not normal. It can change at any moment! >> and proceeds: <<there was backlash, as there will always be. For instance, some locals chose to enroll their children in schools with no refugees, therefore the target group is children from general schools>>. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview, teacher, female). At this point, the importance of the family environment, where children come from, is emphasized. Experts, who engage in education and social integration of child refugees, are able to perceive a child's profile better, when comprehending their family environment and the way it has been formed and functions, to this day. Then, she adds: <<for example, I remember a kid, who was a torture victim, that behaved in a violent manner. That was reasonable, considering that the whole family was suffering ...>> or <<R. was a third grader. He was lonely and needed special support, as well as the collaboration with many departments. There are many children, who have no choice, but to wander. In every case, the language is a very important issue>>. At this stage, two facts are emphasized: on one hand the dysfunction of the entire family, because of the issue their child was struggling with and on the other hand, how the absence of a family environment influences the way, in which children try to survive everyday life. For social work, this means that a special treatment and method of approach for those child refugees is requested.

Moreover, another social worker mentions the unique value of every child refugee, <<there are many common ways to communicate, as long as we try to find them..., being a refugee doesn't mean, that all you are is a legal subject>>. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview, social worker, female). <<The courses, along with the social integration form a dynamic process. Equally important is the educational level of refugees, the type of area they come from, for instance urban, suburban, rural area, because this is reflected in their ability to

adapt to the host-country>>. This specific way of approaching challenges, illustrates an optimistic professional attitude, which represents the values embodied by social work, to the fullest extent.

Interesting is also the opinion of an educator, who works as an education coordinator: <<the main difficulty lies in the language. When it comes to communicating, you have to find methods, such as sign language, body language, drawing. After all, the most challenging part is not the language, but rather the fact, that many of those children did not attend school in their country of origin, so they're unaware of how they should behave. They cannot comprehend the way, that the so-called school functions...They don't know>>, <<...young kids learn the language very easily. Young students are capable of communicating within 6 months>>. <<Unfortunately, though there are children, who need support, case by case. That is more challenging, because they don't see school as a getaway... in that case, more patience is necessary... maybe because of their family>>. (4<sup>th</sup> interview, education coordinator, female). Here, school is mentioned as an escape from problems, a safe environment, though the case is different for some children, who face individual issues in their family. A particular strategy of approach and cooperation with the family is necessary, in order to change the life of these children. Furthermore, she states: <<...There also situations that may come up, that catch you off guard. For example, I've had somebody draw decapitated people, when asked to draw anything of their choice... You have to know how to react and not show that you are shocked, or surprised...>>. At this point, the need for special training or even support from other experts, so that educators are prepared to handle such incidents effectively, is emphasized. Joining forces with a child's family environment, is a basic requirement for dealing with such situations.

In another part, a positive example of cooperating with a child's family environment, is mentioned. <<There were a lot of parents, that stood out...more specifically, they signed their kids up for groups, in order for them to connect with the rest of the people...>>(6<sup>th</sup> interview, educator, female). An encouraging attitude shown by their family environment, could be a determining factor for a child's social integration. In addition, cooperation between social workers and those who are willing, but also capable of helping, in combination with assistance from educators, may bring notable results.

Especially worth mentioning, is that a teacher mentions the demand for in-school social workers: <<in every school there is a need for a social worker and a psychologist. They are essential and not just a single social worker performing for many different schools. Every school needs its own, so that they can truly contribute>>. (7<sup>th</sup> interview, teacher- education coordinator, female). Here the quality of service, that a social worker needs to and is capable of offering, is illustrated in a remarkable way. Being employed in many school facilities at the same time, prevents experts from providing the requested high-quality service, the same applies for social workers.

### ***Conclusions-Discussion***

Training in cognitive subjects, which draws the attention of children, but also of their family, is necessary for the improvement of their relationships with others. In other words, adapting the education to a social skill level, for instance on how to behave in situations, where they receive a negative feedback, such as racism, or on how to express their feelings in a socially accepted way. In these fields, social workers, or other comparable departments, specialized in handling similar situations, may prove useful.

Moreover, a child's family also needs to be educated on similar subjects. That way, a shared vision for intervention can be achieved. It is essential, that a child's education proceeds even during off-school hours. Cooperating with the family environment requires its suitable preparation in a bounded, but methodically organized framework. For instance, studying the culture of the host country, in order to be able to distinguish, what is considered socially accepted and what is not, as well as the type of behaviors

that an individual can adopt, may bring significant results, when applied on children, but also on the adult members of a family.

A holistic intervention lays the foundation for the effectiveness of the educative process. In other words, joining forces with all sectors and other departments, for example local community, associations, recreational areas etc. shapes a cohesive and structured intervention framework. A coordinated service by experts offers a thorough environment of support, while minimizing the disadvantages caused by fragmented initiatives.

What is more, a proper training for educators is essential, so that they are able to handle especially challenging cases, for example managing children, who suffer from PTSD, after experiencing traumatic events, in order to support them accordingly, or to refer them to suitably designed departments, when necessary. In addition to that, planning and incorporating special-educational programs for the rest non-refugee students, could have a positive outcome, which could prove beneficial for the students' education as a whole, in any case

Evaluating the intervention programs and constantly redefining initiatives, could critically contribute to eliminating any obstruction of a refugee's the social integration. A basic condition for this venture, is to preset clear goals for every intervention in a way, that defines quantitative measurable individual goals. Along these lines, an evaluation of what went well and what did not will be possible, which will help reestablish the planning and execution of every intervention. An assembled evaluation, not as an uninspired conventional process, but mainly as an attempt to estimate the situation, could assist the composition of a complete picture, while its conclusions may lead to beneficial practices.

Of course, we must not exclude the care for students with special learning needs or disabilities, as well as the support of their family environment. Unfortunately, supporting the more vulnerable and weak comes in second, something that happens in this case too. This is an occurrence, which confirms the common fact of oppressing the ones, who already face additional problems, in other words the weakest. For example, refugee students of the autism spectrum, or mentally disabled ones, unfortunately come in second, regarding the support and distribution of equal opportunities, in order for them to reach their highest potential.

The principles of intercultural intervention can be applied by optimizing experiences from past interventions of similar cases, for example immigrants from Albania, school dropout prevention programs in Russia, school integration programs for Romani people, etc. Failing to utilize the results of other interventions, deprives the application of notable and successful practices and leads to repeating mistakes of the past. A fragmented intervention, that does not take similar past or present initiatives, from other countries, into consideration, is limiting the accomplishment of fast and notable results. Taking into account social work's ecological model of intervention, there are factors, capable of bringing notable results, which are associated with the examination of relationships formed in every family environment, in combination with the service provided by social workers, while interfering in it. Analyzing the profile of social functioning in children's families, as well as in other environments, such as friends and their social circle during off-school hours, may offer the chance for new fields of intervention for all departments, including social workers. The above mentioned conclusions set a framework approach for this subject, on which the ecological model of social work may cause positive effects. Through the spectrum of this specific theoretical approach, individual ascertainments may showcase new visions of intervention, offering experts the potential to handle the challenges, they face differently.



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### **Internet Resources**

[http://www.unhcr.org/gr/yliko\\_gia\\_themata\\_prostasias](http://www.unhcr.org/gr/yliko_gia_themata_prostasias)

[www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/greece-refugees-disabilities-overlooked-underserved>.

(at: *Immigration is a Social Work Issue*, John Collett, Rochdale Asylum Seekers Team, *Social work, immigration and asylum debates, dilemmas and ethical issues for social work and social care practice / Debra Hayes and Beth Humphries [editors]; foreword by Steve Cohen.— 1st American pbk. ed.p. cm. ISBN 1-84310-194-7 (pbk.)*)

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