***Good Practices in an Intercultural School for a Smooth Transition of Refugees***

What follows is my experience as headmistres in an Intercultural school.

The school was founded 30 years ago to cater for the Greek emigrants. The students were mainly children of Greek emigrants from the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa returning to Greece. During the 1990s there was an increase in the emigration of Greek expatriates from the eastern countries of Europe. At the same period there was a considerable influx of migrants from Europe, Asia and Africa.

The main targets of the school were:

• The elimination of any kind of separation or exclusion. The offer of equal opportunities to all students as the ones given to the Greek native student population.

• The incorporation of all the students to the pedagogical, social and cultural environment of their new country and the catering of the school to the individual, social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive needs of the students while always respecting their cultural heritage.

• The cooperation with the parents and guardians of the students and their support in various domains.

The school followed the curriculum that all Greek state schools did. The difference is that Greek is taught as a second/foreign language. The limited Greek linguistic competence of the students demands adjustments. In parallel the English and French language were also taught.

The students were:

• Children of Greek emigrants returning to Greece.

• Children of migrants in Greece from various social strata working in Greece and seeking a better future.

• Refugees, unaccompanied teenagers protected by the Greek government from countries that suffer from wars and conflicts.

• Students from marginalized groups encountering financial and other problems, like Romas.

In the year 2016-17 in the school there were about 300 students from 36 different countries speaking 28 different languages. They come from Russia to Australia and from Paraguay to China. The geographical territory of the school was open, transcending the limits of any particular municipality. The school functioned in a multiplicative manner in the southern Attica region.

The profile of the student population was characterized by a great diversity from year to year and was affected by the international situation. The main trait of the students in the last school years, and very likely to be effective in the future as well, was the high percentage of the refugees that has led to the increase of the student population by 50% in relation to previous years. These particular students had a different cultural, social and school identity. Their main characteristics were:

* Significantly higher numbers of boys than girls.
* Higher average age than the one in the mainstream schools.
* Refugee students have been attending religious schools in their homeland or they have not received any kind of formal education before, especially the girls.
* Large number of unaccompanied teenagers residing in hot spots, hostels and other types of accommodation.

This demands for a continuous reshaping and adjustment of the school to the current and upcoming conditions. The state and its decision to upgrade the intercultural schools into experimental ones confirms the forth-mentioned statements. According to the new recent Greek law, the experimental schools of intercultural education are seeking cooperation with universities to implement experimental and innovative programmes relating to the intercultural education and to deal with the prevention of pedagogical and social exclusion due to race and ethnic origin. The plan is to extend this application to the other schools afterwards.

This is what the state has planned. Still a lot of details has to be worked out and to get implemented.

Coming to the school environment now….

All the teacher personnel were highly qualified and were trained in Intercultural Education. The expertise and experience of the staff created a fertile ground for immediate and effective response to the new conditions. However, the simultaneous need for training in new methods and techniques and cooperation and exchange of good practices with organizations facing similar challenges was necessary. The particular - fragile psychological profile of the refugee students created different teaching circumstances.

Generally, for refugees, life entails continuous exposure to overcrowded and inadequate housing, a lack of access to adequate [nutrition](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/diet) and medical care, severe poverty, [social isolation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/loneliness), [discrimination](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias), value and language degradation, heightened family violence, sexual assault in and around the camps, separation from relatives left behind, the loss of social networks and a chronic sense of uncertainty regarding the future and especially indefinite detention while their applications for asylum are pending. These stressful conditions are powerfully linked to depression, anxiety, and trauma. They also depleted people’s psychological resources for coping with war-related [traumatic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/trauma) experiences.

Coming to the people reaching the European Union through the gateway of Greece, they are a mixed group of refugees/immigrants encompassing people of different ethnic, religious and socioeconomic background, language and education. Moreover, for the great majority of them, Greece is a transit country and hopefully they believe their staying here will be short. Therefore referring to adolescents, school attendance is most likely not linked to any of their future plans.

The school’s first task was to establish a safe and supportive environment for the newcomers. The Implementation of school regulations and appropriate social behavior were necessary precondition to create an environment where everybody could operate. Then the adaptation process to the new setting (the school, the language, the society, the way of living etc) had to get started through immersion activities and lessons, like Art and Mathematics.

The students shared the same facilities, the same classrooms, the one next to each other daily, based on the principles of non-exclusion (in regard to any racial, gender, religious or other discrimination). The common ground of reference and contact was the Greek language and the Greek civilization. Within the framework of the school’s aims, a number of supportive actions had been undertaken in cooperation with various organizations. The school welcomes the students and their families and supports them for a smooth transition to their new life.

On a yearly basis, a number of national and European programmes took place that related to the following:

-The promotion of good health of the students (anti-smoking campaign, seminars about drug usage, sex life and protection, leisure activities, psychological support intervention programmes and others)

- The social inclusion (students took part in the writing of the school and classroom rules and it was translated in their languages, actions against bullying, etc.)

- Discussion on the principles of democracy and human rights and proper social behaviour (they get acquainted and informed of their personal and social rights and responsibilities, etc.)

- A holistic approach education (astronomy lab, rhetoric workshop, science lab, creative writing seminars, competitions, for example Erasmus European Competition and Francophonie etc.)

- The school was a member of the UNESCO school network and the students participated in the UNESCO conferences every year. Finally, within the territory of the school a number of seminars and workshops were completed.

A number of exchanges of good practices had been achieved. Feedback was given and received to authorities and institutions on a local level but also in a wider environment (schools abroad, the Greek Ministry of Education). Furthermore Greek and foreign media had often supported this exchanged in the broader settings of national and international horizon.

This process required a social, cultural and intercultural understanding on both sides. This lead to an authentic intercultural interaction, a dialog.