

## **School and social integration of refugee and migrant adolescent students in Greece. Contemporary insights and trends towards upper secondary education**

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### **Abstract**

It is estimated that more than 20,000 refugee and migrant population in Greece are children (0-17 years old). As many of these children have been in the country for more than one year, access to education is a key area of concern. According to national legislation, children are entitled to education irrespective of their legal status. Yet, access to education including formal, non-formal and informal, remains a challenging issue. The data on refugee and migrant children's access to educative structures as well as data on access rates, dropout rates, and barriers to education, is limited. Greek state and society as a host country of the latest migrant/refugee 'wave' from Syria and Middle East was not ready in multiple stages for integrating such numbers of children and youth of different origins, cultures and backgrounds in the Greek society, education and reality. This paper is a presentation of the contemporary insights and trends towards adolescent refugee and migrant prospective students of upper secondary school level in Greece.

**Keywords:** refugees, integration, school, social, upper secondary education

### **Introduction**

According to the Mediterranean data from the UNHCR portal, refugee sea arrivals in 2014 were 215,000, in 2015 there was a huge leap in refugee sea arrivals to over 1,000,000, whereas refugee numbers fell to 360,000 and 170,000 in 2016 and 2017 correspondingly (UNHCR Operation Data Portal, 2018b). Similar to the Mediterranean pattern, UNHCR Greece statistics show (UNHCR Operation Data Portal, 2018a) that the sea arrivals of refugees peaked in 2015 to 860,000 and in 2016 and 2017 numbers fell to 170,000 and 30,000 refugee entries respectively.

A recent European report 'Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe: Overview of Trends 2017' published in May 2018 by IOM, UNICEF and UNHCR, claims that in 2017 33,000 children arrived in Greece, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria, of whom 20,000 (60%) were unaccompanied or separated children (UASC). Arrivals of children overall in 2017 decreased by 67% compared to 2016 (100,264). Nevertheless, the proportion of children arriving unaccompanied or separated has increased from 34% in 2016 to 60% in 2017 (UNHCR, UNICEF, & IOM, 2017). In 2017, 11,032 children arrived to Greece by sea, including 1,458 (13%) UASC. This is an 83% decrease compared to 2016 (63,920). The majority of children arriving to Greece by sea were from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, Afghanistan or Stateless. Most common nationalities of UASC were the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNHCR et al., 2017).

This paper presents the current trends and insights of educational and social integration of migrants and refugees adolescents in upper secondary education (either general/theoretical or technical vocational) in Greece. Considering the fact that in the last 4 years (since 2014) Greek society encounters the refugee crisis effect as a country of first

asylum for mainly Syrian population after the ongoing conflict at the area, the aim of this publication is to explore the societal and school integration of refugee newcomer adolescent students in Greek society and educational system at the stage of upper secondary (high school or lyceum) level.

### **Materials and methods**

The literature was searched for reports and studies of educational and social integration of the migrant and refugee adolescent students in the Greek educational system. The resulting papers were considered to identify/discuss the latest ideas, trends and insights towards the educational and social challenges of modern western societies and their educational systems to accept, include and integrate successfully migrant/ refugee adolescent students. Also research suggesting ways to overcome these barriers and challenges by policy making and governmental/state intention to amplify the social and educational grounds was included.

A search of the latest literature has been conducted in this field on national (Greek literature) level in Google Scholar, ERIC, EKT database, International Institutions as United Nations (UNHCR), Institution of Migration (IOM), Migration Policy Department and additionally examined the list of references in the identified articles for further relevant publications. The search strategy included the aforementioned key words found in the abstracts of the included articles and not only in their study titles. The same key words translated in Greek language were used as keywords in the same databases so as to find relevant data, research studies, reports and conference papers written in Greek.

### **Results**

Interdisciplinary- sociolinguistic and anthropological- research on refugee education in Greece was conducted within a project called PRESS (Provision of Refugee Education and Support Scheme) (Δασκαλάκη και Ανδρουλάκης, 2017). PRESS project generally aimed at intervening toward the refugees' educational support and their long-term educational empowerment. Specifically, the project aimed at producing ethnographic insights on the educational, linguistic and communication needs, priorities and expectations of refugee children, youth and adults currently residing in Greece (axis 1 of the Project) that would feed back into a series of educational actions and integration interventions (axes 2 and 3 of the Project) (Δασκαλάκη και Ανδρουλάκης, 2017).

Axis 2 aimed at the linguistic and cultural adjustment and integration of refugee children, youth and adults through non-formal and informal learning interventions and axis 3 focused on raising awareness, provision of support services and targeted interventions for the long-term educational empowerment of refugees in Greek society. The research was ethnographic material produced through eight-month fieldwork in refugee camps and residencies as well as in-site/off-site non-formal classes, language courses and informal educational activities in three different geographical areas in Greece: Lesvos, Attica and Thessaloniki (Δασκαλάκη et al., 2017). The research focused on refugee children, adolescents and adults mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and North African countries, who were in a transitional, temporary and unstable condition, called transit condition or transit. This study focused on the choices that those people made while attending formal and non-formal education, in terms of social, linguistic, and educational integration, taking into account that the non-formal education is organised under mobility and fluidity conditions in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. The age group of interest in this presentation and of the PRESS project as well, was refugees adolescents between 13 and 17 years old, who participated in formal and non formal education activities inside and outside of the refugee camps and residencies (Δασκαλάκη et al., 2017).

It is well known that the different background of the refugee people of all ages towards education (formal/compulsory and informal), depends on the legal status, the national

origin, the social class, the gender, the literacy level and the expectations for their future relocation (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). PRESS researchers observed that the time spent at the transit condition depending on the social, educational background of the young refugees, of both genders, was either perceived as 'lost time' of social integration that must be 'gained', or as 'inactivation' feelings that must be reversed, or as a need for feeling the sense of 'normality' that must be accomplished through the participation in any educational activities (Δασκαλάκη et al., 2017).

In Greece the most systematic way for the school age refugees to be part of the compulsory education is through the Reception Structures of Education for Refugees is an established programme of afternoon preparatory classes (called *Δομές Υποδοχής και Εκπαίδευσης Προσφύγων*, ΔΥΕΠ, in Greek and translated in English as DYEP). DYEP is a program implemented in public schools neighboring camps or places of residence, issued in August 2016 as a ministerial decision, for all school-age children aged 4 to 15 (AIDA, GCR & ECRE, 2017).

PRESS project showed that for the families of the refugee school children this structure (DYEP) assured the feeling of 'normality' in everyday life and the feeling that their children even at the transit condition did not miss vital time of socialisation. However families of single- or one- parent or other relative accompanies of the children, made the situation more complex and difficult for the children to participate at formal school education (Δασκαλάκη et al., 2017). The main finding of this PRESS study was that the behaviour of the refugees towards socialisation, and educational integration is very dependent on the fact that they live on a transit condition which might be a barrier towards societal integration of them and their children (Δασκαλάκη et al., 2017).

A study by Πέντζη (2017) investigated the need for development of strategic action plans by school leadership, for the inclusion of refugee children in Greek schools. The latest mass influx (2015-16) of migrants and refugees in Greece has shaped the contemporary Greek reality made up of groups with particular national and cultural characteristics. To this direction, it is urgent for the educational system to find effective ways to include and educate refugees, in a proper multicultural environment and teaching in classrooms. For this reason, it is imperative for the school leadership to develop strategic action plans. The strategic plan is a natural document for an organization, which incorporates its orientation and mission within a local and national perspective of development.

Πέντζη (2017) suggested strategic planning by school leadership for including refugee children at schools included 5 stages: First stage is about the Headmaster to envision the creation of 'One school for all children'. The author suggests that this could happen by implementing an educational program with equality, chances for all students, and development of a collaborating network of all relevant sectors. Second stage is about the Headmasters' understanding of the inner and outside environment of the school unit towards the implementation of the strategic action plan. At third stage the school 'mission' was suggested to be the meeting point of civilisations, in such ways that barriers of cultural exchanges are overcome and at the same time multicultural exchange provides enrichment of the endogenous Greek culture, taking into account the educational level of all students separately and their unique cultural identity, into the educational programs. At fourth stage the school board should develop three strategic aims: I. Creation of school culture (social, lingual, religious, cultural), II. Inclusion of educational specificities in the education program, III. Creation of integration programs for the refugee families in collaboration with the Parent-Teacher Association. This would result at the school opening towards the society to the direction of gradual societal integration of the refugee pupils and their families (Πέντζη, 2017). At fifth stage all the strategies should be planned in part of the European Union planning. The educational policies according to the writer (Πέντζη, 2017) should be aiming to:

- The development of multicultural school culture. The ‘reconstructive style of leadership’ would enhance educational intercultural programs in and out of the school unit, and in which the participation of the refugee/ migrant families would be essential. A supportive school library including bibliography written in international languages rather than Greek, and also suitable technical infrastructure would help the school unit to develop multicultural culture. UNESCO, European and International Organisations have developed multicultural education material incorporated in pioneering curriculums. The teachers could realise themselves as active ‘vehicles’ of the cultural interchange process by encouraging communication between students of all national backgrounds, creating happy learning atmosphere and expressing special skills and interests. In such ways subjects such as geography, history, social and political sciences, religion, literature and foreign languages could gain multicultural dynamic and potential.
  - Specified school programs including the special educational needs of migrant and refugee school children.
  - Creation of integration programs for the whole migrant/refugee family towards the formulation of family multicultural education. In this sense, school activities could be based on traditional customs of the countries that the migrants/ refugees originate, financial relief events, and classes of learning the language of the host country for the families of the migrants/ refugees could be organised by the schools in collaboration with local authorities, voluntary offering of teachers, parent’s associations and other local organisations.

This study concluded that it is urgent for the Greek educational system to upgrade schools of all levels in order to face socio-economic and multicultural challenges of the 21st century such as the constant flow of migrants and refugees (Pέντζη, 2017).

A report by the Greek Scientific Board for support of refugee children, under the umbrella of Greek Ministry of Education, written in April 2017, had the general title ‘The work of educating refugees’ and was divided in two parts (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017). The first part was an evaluation report of the work done for integrating refugee children in education referring to the period between March 2016 and April 2017. The second part was a report of ‘scenarios’ for educating refugee children during the academic year 2017-18.

Statistics and quantitative data showed that in Greece in May 2016 the refugee children age 0-18 years old were 13,677 at hosting structures. The school age children (who are offered compulsory education) were 8,000-8,500 as shown in Table 1. The unstoppable mobility of the refugee population was and is making it difficult to estimate the numbers of child population that is expected to be included in the educational structures. This fact also has a negative impact on the planning and implementation of the educational program run by Ministry of Education (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017).

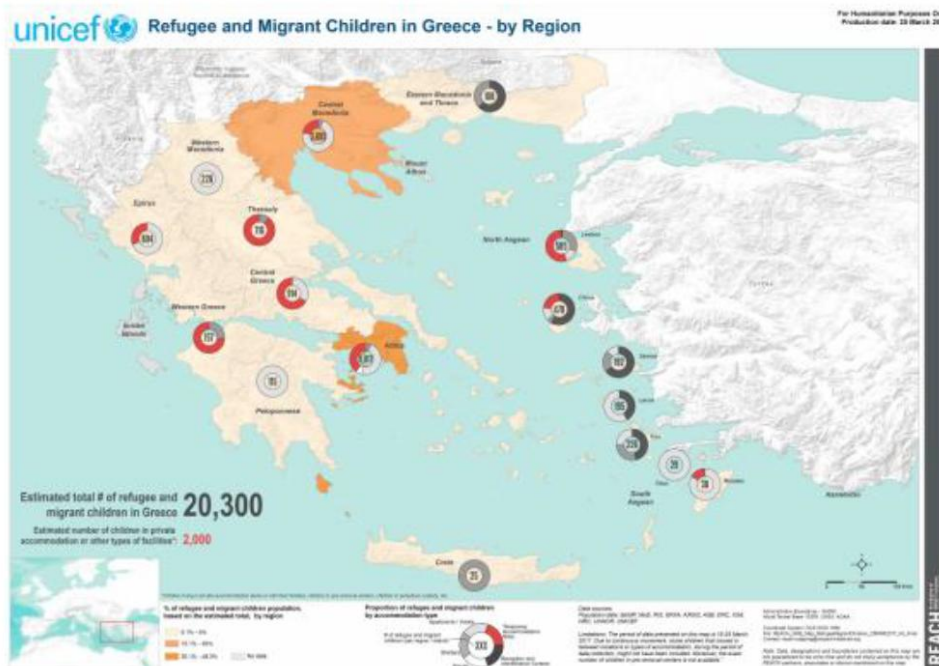
**Table 1: Ages and percentage (%) of children refugee population apart from the hosting structures, in the whole country of Greece. (March, 2017; Source: Unicef) (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017)**

Age range	Number of children	Percentage of children (%)
0-3 years old	2,223	28
4-5 years old	982	12
6-12 years old	2,845	35
13-15 years old	1,024	13
16-17 years old	962	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,036</b>	<b>100%</b>

In March 2017, 20,000 children were recorded as refugees/ migrants in Greece ( **Picture 1**). Of those 8,000 lived in hosting structures ( presented at Table 1), 8,000 lived in reception centres by UNHCR, 1300 children were unaccompanied, and 2000 children lived with their families in places outside the official structures.

Approximately 7,700 children fell within the primary and secondary school education. Because of the fluidity of the refugee population, and their change of residencies within Greece, and because of the fact that the numerical data is incomplete and unreliable, the planning of education by the Ministry of Education for academic year 2017-18 was really challenging and difficult to prepare and deliver (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017).

Also, under these circumstances it is essential for the special ‘Management Team’ which is responsible for issues of refugee education, to be administratively more flexible and independent so as to respond faster and better to integrating refugee children to education for academic year 2017-18, since the year 2016-17 had a lot of practical difficulties in applying the designed educational plan for refugee students both in DYEP and morning schools (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017).



**Picture 1: Distribution of refugee children by area and type of reception (Source Unicef; March 2017) (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017)**

An assessment of accessibility to formal education for unaccompanied children (n=604) in 29 shelters (11 transit and 18 long-term) conducted by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) members of the Children on the Move Network (ARSIS, Metadrasi, SOS villages, PRAKSIS, Save the Children), took place from April to May 2017 in Greece (Children on the Move Network, 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative information from a questionnaire was collected, focusing on the profiling of children accommodated in shelters and their educational needs, namely access to education, the main reasons that hindered their access to education, as well as the factors that promoted access to schools and regular attendance. Furthermore, the assessment aimed to identify how activities outside school and informal education could support the educational needs of children and further promote their enrolment and integration into formal education. An important point of this assessment is

that the majority of children were between 16 and 18 years, corresponding to upper secondary level formal education whereas the main limitation considered is the continuous movement of unaccompanied children (new arrivals, relocation, family reunification). The key findings regarding school enrollment was that of the 44% of children enrolled in schools, 89% were included in secondary education. Among the children enrolled in secondary education 12% were not attending regularly, and 33% had stopped school. In all shelters that were included in the assessment, informal learning activities were offered, such as language lessons, art therapy and computer learning.

Another study conducted by Education Section Working Group (ESWG) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (March 2017) (UNICEF & REACH, 2017) on children's access and participation rates in informal and formal education classes, as well as school attendance rates for children living in a selected sample of apartments, hotels, and shelters for unaccompanied and separated children, indicated 58% of assessed children to be attending education activities, including formal, non-formal and informal education, administered in the assessed locations or nearby, while 41% did not attend any type of education. Among the children attending any type of education activities, only 22% were attending formal education (UNICEF & REACH, 2017).

In April 2017, 111 DYEP with 145 classes (both in refugee reception centres and schools) were functional all over Greece. The operation of DYEP had two main problems. The first issue was operational problems of DYEP and the second issue was the school attrition rates. In terms of the operational problems- as described in the report (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017) these were:

- Problems having to do with the continuous change of teaching personnel.
- Teaching personnel with very little experience at refugee education matters.
- Issues of miscommunication between the central administration of the Ministry of Education regarding administrative and pedagogical issues that came up all the time.
- Problems regarding the real age of the children, the main factor that determined the education level they were placed in.
- Unsuccessful co-operation between DYEP and formal morning schools in terms of administration and pedagogy.

The school dropout rate of Syrian refugee students, in countries neighboring Syria has been recorded 48-78%. The reasons alluded to dropout were economic and social, stigmatism, lack of funding and infrastructure. In Greece, in order to examine that issue, data from 5 refugee reception centers of mainland were analyzed (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017). It was observed that the percentage of refugee school-children was fluctuating because of constant mobility of the refugee population resulting in unstable attendance and non systematic presence of school-population at school. Factors recorded to affect attendance and dropouts were (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017):

- The perspective to stay at or leave from the host country and their plans for relocation. The rating of relocation is very low but still maintains the prospects of the Syrian refugees for leaving Greece in the near future.
- The preference (for those that want to relocate) for their school-population to attend language lessons (such as English and German) offered by NGOs that would be more useful in future life rather than the Greek language.
- The feeling of being in a temporary/ transit status does not let them participate in any stable frame such as everyday school normality.
- Organization and operation of DYEPs: the teachers' proper training and re-education on refugee education learning methods, tools and techniques, and also their constant support by a suitable structure.

The proposed scenarios for educating refugee children 7-15 years old (formal education) were for all school age children to be integrated in normal classes of elementary and secondary day schools, since they all have an adequate level of Greek language. This proposal required: creation of introduction classes for refugee school population, support of the refugee children with classes for enhancing Greek learning and transportation of the children to and from schools to their residencies (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017).

The suggested scenarios by the Greek Ministry of Education for educating refugee children over 15 years old (non formal education: high school- technical and vocational education) were planned for the academic year (2017-18) and were focused on integrating adolescents over 15 years old in relevant structures of education.

The proposals were the following (Επιστημονική Επιτροπή για τη Στήριξη των Παιδιών των Προσφύγων, 2017):

- i) Intense Greek summer lessons.
- ii) Distant learning options (via special internet platforms) for learning the Greek language.
- iii) Reception and introductory classes at all secondary education structures (technical high school, academic/general high school, day and evening schools, apprenticeship schools, schools of second chance). To be organized flexible and versatile reception classes giving the opportunity to go faster from one level to the next, and finally getting a secondary school or high school diploma.
- iv) To organize and facilitate matching of school certificates from the refugee school children already obtained at their country of origin.
- v) Exams for getting secondary school diploma and diploma of Greek language.
- vi) The creation of professional orientation and guidance programs and familiarization with Greek and European history and cultures.
- vii) To promote Greek learning thought all modules.
- viii) To organize pilot programs of technical and vocational training run by Greek Universities, such as school of agricultural sciences and polytechnic schools.
- ix) To organize special programs of formal and informal education at structures outside schools like vocational training institutes.
- x) To organize special music and art education programs.
- xi) Re-education of teachers working at secondary level and high school education.

Regarding adolescents, in January 2018, the Ministry of Education together with the Ministry Migration Policy announced a pilot program of Greek language courses funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), targeting asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection over the age of 15 years old. A group of 2,000 people between the age of 15 to 18 and 3,000 people over 18 would be able to participate in the program in 2018, as announced (Ministry of Migration Policy & Ministry of Education, 2018).

The latest report by ESWG in collaboration with Greek Ministry of Education published online on 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2018 depicts the most up to date situation of formal education for refugee and migrant children (Ministry of Education & ESWG, 2017). In total, with the support of the 23 agencies participating in the assessment, data was collected for 4,704 children 5-17 years old. Data collection took place in December 2017 and aimed to assess the numbers of children residing in accommodation programs and unaccompanied children shelters (n=2,707 enrolled in schools throughout Greece), open accommodation sites (n=1,630 regularly attending morning or afternoon reception classes and n=248 enrolled in open site kindergartens). This data showed that 55% of children 5-17 years old are enrolled in schools, of which 90% of them are enrolled in schools on the mainland while

10% in schools on the islands (Northern Aegean and Crete) (Ministry of Education & ESWG, 2017). Out of all 4,704 children assessed 51% originated from Syria, 22% from Afghanistan, 11% from Iraq, 4% from Pakistan, 2% from Iran, while 10% originated from other countries including Stateless children (Ministry of Education & ESWG, 2017).

Moreover, the Site Management Support (SMS) agencies are collecting information on a monthly basis on the site profiles (n=33) all over Greece, and that information is displayed and available on UNHCR Operation Data Portal (UNHCR, DRC, & ADRA, 2018). Regarding education, the following data is updated monthly that refers to the following information: 'non-formal education activities', 'recreational activities', 'appropriate spaces available for non formal education/recreational activities', 'children also attend Greek formal education', 'proportion-children attending formal education' (UNHCR et al., 2018).

Other than the research studies and the reports reviewed above, there are also available and accessible websites and electronic platforms related to migrant/ refugee education and integration to the Greek society. <http://www.unhcr.org/gr/ekpaideysi/> links to the website of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Greece about education issues of refugees in Greece. "PYXIS" intercultural center under the umbrella of the Greek Council for Refugees (<https://www.gcr.gr/el/>) has scheduled Greek classes and organizes actions for refugees. Information is available at <https://www.gcr.gr/en/pyxida-multicultural-center>. <http://www.keda.uoa.gr/index.php> links to the website of the 'Centre of Intercultural Education in Greece' (KEDA) under the umbrella of University of Athens, School of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology. [www.diapolis.auth.gr/](http://www.diapolis.auth.gr/) links to the website of a program ran from 2008-2014 for migrant education in Greece by the EU called Diapolis in which teaching tools and material is available.

### **Discussion**

Refugee and migrant children (here focusing at the adolescents) share the same needs, barriers, and challenges towards school, education, language, academic/professional future and societal inclusion.

On national level (in Greece) the data referring to children and adolescent migrant/refugee school and social integration is inconsistent and limited. The strategic planning of educating Syrian refugee children was existing but the implementation was difficult to be delivered due to many barriers (Greek language difficulty, dropout rates, real age and education level mismatch, transit condition, deficient teaching personnel, teachers without proper multicultural education and re-education).

Globally the statistics from the refugee/ migrant population that manage to attend secondary schools and from those the percentage that completes upper secondary education (high schools) is disappointing (UNHCR, 2016) and is revealing a problematic common area to be dealt with and resolved. Such national data is not yet available. A main issue that emerged during the process of writing this paper was the difficulty to gather information since there are many bodies on different levels (Greek, European, NGOs and International) involved in refugee/ migrant education in Greece.

There are crucial issues to be tackled so as for migrant children to be gradually and smoothly integrated in the formal educational Greek system and in the Greek society. There are numerous barriers to be confronted at many stages (political issues, lingual, cultural, personal, and practical) such as unavailability of places in schools, unavailability of reception classes and the unwillingness of children to enroll to upper secondary education. The main reasons not to attend schools were expectations of relocation/family reunification in the near future, insecurity on what they will face within the school environment and other psychological reasons. The main reasons that affected attendance to formal education was language, lack of reception classes at secondary education, the distance between the shelter and the school, and expectations of relocation/family reunification in the near future.



Therefore, all involved stakeholders should be immediately, appropriately and adequately informed of the existing (2017-18) regulatory framework on access to formal education for migrant and refugee children, so as to avoid any additional (mainly administrative) obstacles and/or delays that prevent children's access to education. Reception classes should be established also at secondary education level with a special focus on the higher classes/high school. Informal education could be used complementary to formal education with aiming to support children's regular school attendance (remedial education, reinforcing children through the participation in various learning activities). Specific issues concerning children older than 15 years should be taken into account, such as the absence of classes appropriate for older children who have not completed primary school, as well as the extra need for enhancing access to night and vocational schools.

To conclude, societal integration should and could be achieved through education. Especially for refugee/ migrant adolescents suitable and upgraded, multicultural upper secondary schools can provide to them a plethora of tools to 'unlock' most of the challenges and barriers they might confront so as to have equal chances to reach their full potential in their future.

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