



School integration of refugee minors: An analysis of the barriers to education quality and continuity in Italian and Greek school systems

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Introduction

Since the past decade, Europe has faced one of the most severe crises in the continent's recent history concerning migration and asylum flows and their management. Social and political upheaval (*i.e.*, the Arab Spring protests in 2010), civil wars (*i.e.*, in Syria), ethnic and religious conflicts (*i.e.*, in Afghanistan and parts of Africa), poverty (*i.e.*, in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia) and climate change (*i.e.*, in South-east Asia and Africa) have given rise to a dramatic displacement movement of people who aspire to a safer and brighter future in the European Union (EU). Moreover, the global health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian emergency in Ukraine after Russia's military intervention in early 2022 have significantly influenced migration movements. The number of displaced persons in 2021 increased by 8% from the previous year and doubled from 10 years ago, reaching 89.3 million people (UNCHR 2022b), and, in Europe, the number of Ukrainian refugees has exceeded 7.5 million people at present (UNCHR 2023). In this context, the number of both accompanied and unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, whose protection is framed within different sets of rules, was 166,760 in 2021, 31.2% of first-time asylum seekers registered in the EU (Eurostat 2023). These large-scale movements have a reckoning impact on host countries and pose significant policymaking challenges at both the supranational and national levels in Europe, which are exacerbated by the political contestation of migration flows in the growing public debate, mainly by the populist right. Another challenge relates to the coordination of the multiple administrative levels (European, national and local) and between governmental and nongovernmental institutions and organizations having varying degrees of autonomy in managing the socioeconomic incorporation of migrants and refugees in the destination countries. The education systems of most EU member states also face significant challenges of access, inclusion, opportunities for educational success and continuity in education of migrant and refugee minors¹ (Koehler and Schneider 2019).

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¹ The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child uses the term "child" to include anyone "below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (UNGA, 1989, p. 2). Because the use of the term "child" under this definition can cause confusion, we prefer to use the term "minor" to refer to refugee children and adolescents. In the case of children and adolescents "who are separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, has responsibility to do so" (UNHCR, 1987, p.4), we use the term "unaccompanied minors".

In terms of educational inclusion, the right to education for all, including refugees and asylum seekers, can be traced in several international agreements at the global scale, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and so on. Since 2009, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU has been enacted as an integral part of the Lisbon Treaty, and, at the EU and pan-European level, several recommendations (see for example Council of Europe 2019) and following policies have been decided to ensure the education of refugees and asylum-seeking children and youth (*i.e.*, the European Commission Action Plans) on the “integration of third country nationals” and on “integration and inclusion 2021-2027.” The EU Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (European Commission, 2016) identified education as one of the policy areas to be addressed for refugee integration, with special reference to promoting language learning and civic education, teacher training and refugee minors’ access to early childhood education and care. The Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020) widened the scope of education policies, to include interventions from early childhood to higher education, vocational training, and recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, the Communication from the Commission on the Protection of Children in Migration (European Commission, 2017), building on the Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014) (European Commission, 2010), calls for increased awareness on the protection and assessment of the needs of unaccompanied migrant and refugee minors and their immediate access to education upon arrival to a member state. In this context, EU member states, transnational, national and local authorities have enacted a wide range of initiatives and policies to integrate and include migrants and refugees, with help, expertise and support from international, civil society and nongovernmental organizations.

However, there is often a huge gap between national and supranational normative frameworks that respond to human rights ideals and refugee-focused policies and practices institutionalized within these existing frameworks (Taylor and Sidhu 2012). In such a context, notwithstanding a common concern throughout Europe and the ambitious goals which national frameworks set for protecting the best interests of the refugee minors, local regulations and practices do affect their access to quality education (Dryden-Peterson *et al.*, 2019).

The research presented in this paper focuses on refugee minors, with a particular attention on unaccompanied minors, who are considered a key target in Italian and Greek refugee youth policy. Its unit of analysis, then, is the school as a place of possible incorporation, normalization and stability for refugee minors being subjected to major disruptions in schooling and carrying potential traumatizing experiences. Drawing on international literature, policy documents analysis and empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and policymakers, within the 3-year KA2 Erasmus+ project (2020-2023) “Ensuring Continuity in Education for Refugee” (“The Continugee Project”)² funded

² <https://continugee.eu/>.

within the framework of “Strategic Partnerships for school education,” we aim to illustrate (1) the fragmented implementation of inclusive national legal frameworks and (2) the obstacles related to the continuity of refugee youth education, in two project partner countries, Italy and Greece, at national and/or local levels. Continuity is intended here as a three-stage process that does not follow a linear path: access, recognition, and transition. As our findings show, in fact, these processes are often intertwined, and their achievement is recognized as relevant for educational success.

The first section of this article discusses theoretical and empirical issues concerning the education of refugee minors and the continuity of their schooling. The second section presents both data and legal/institutional framework analysis focusing on (1) inclusive policies and their fragmented implementation and (2) differentiated school inclusion models and various embodied educational practices. This section also introduces a brief excursus on the management of school placement of minors from Ukraine in both countries, which appears to be a relevant new event in this policy field that could act as a possible driver of policy innovation or segmentation. The last section presents the conclusions.

Refugee minors and continuity of schooling: theoretical and empirical evidence

School inclusion of foreign minors is a crucial issue at the local, national, and supra-national levels because the large influx of refugees and migrants in Europe has turned refugee education into a European issue (de Wal Pastoor 2016), and the impact of newcomers on the school systems has highlighted problems of inclusion/exclusion, continuity and consistency in education and learning outcomes. Furthermore, educational responses to refugee and asylum-seeking minors represent a litmus test not only in terms of the inclusiveness and cohesion of the educational systems of the contexts analyzed, but also how the effects of globalization on education and social change are understood (Pinson and Arnot 2007).

Despite extensive policy talk and policy measures in EU member states, several studies have highlighted various structural obstacles that make it difficult for refugee minors to be placed in school without major disruptions to the continuity of their educational path. First, refugee minors are not often targeted in educational surveys (Bloch *et al.*, 2015) and data on their school results are quite often not available at neither the local nor national databases (Crul 2017). What is more, while in different contexts, refugee services invest heavily in providing quality educational programs for refugee minors in their care, their educational outcomes either lack systematic empirical analysis (*i.e.*, Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022, for unaccompanied minors) or there is few recent research evidence (*i.e.*, Edele *et al.*, 2021; Hutchinson and Reader 2021). It is likely to be so because the “refugee crisis” is perceived as an immigration control issue related to adults rather than a global policy issue with educational aspects (Pinson and Arnot 2007). Nevertheless, in the absence of such databases providing the necessary information on the school profile of refugee minors, it becomes complex to identify needs and implement policies dedicated to this specific group.

Second, backgrounds characterized by civil war, ethnic conflict, persecution, and exile are significant in shaping the lives of refugee minors (Bloch *et al.*, 2015), and concomitant educational programs that do not consider such experiences, often fail to identify and attend to their actual needs. However, excessive focus on trauma, risks homogenizing the individual and collective experience of refugee minors' oppression, while also overshadowing the exclusion and discrimination suffered in the destination context (Rutter 2006).

What seems essential is the relational approach in refugee minors' school placement, and the knowledge of not only individual but also family, school and community contexts of minors is necessary to understand the ideal environment for young people to thrive in learning (Aleghfeli and Hunt 2022). According to the comparative analysis of Koehler and Schneider (2019), the challenge is to advance from the ad hoc measures taken in reaction to the immediate emergencies to more permanent structures and concepts that presume high levels of heterogeneity in classrooms as the most likely normality of schools in the future. Research on the socio-spatial and temporal elements of refugee placement in school contexts (Borsch 2021) has also shown that both the biographical time of refugee and immigrant minors and the social, instructional, and contextual characteristics of the reception classrooms in which care practices take place, are essential for their well-being and learning development as well as a favorable accompaniment. As a result, educational approaches designed for refugee minors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds must place a strong emphasis on the creation of effective curricula as well as the professional development of educators. Because many refugee minors have never attended school or have been away from it for a long time — usually years — using instructional practices that actively engage these students is crucial. Recent applied research has repeatedly underlined a structural drive toward teachers and school innovation and improvement³.

The frequent change of reception centers and the consequent change of schools make it slow and challenging for refugee minors to adapt to the host country's school culture and learn the language (Crul 2017). In fact, because in most cases the border member state that became the point of entry of refugees into the EU or the first country of settlement will not be the place of their final relocation, it is necessary to ensure a degree of continuity in the content and form of the educational services provided and to facilitate their school integration. In 2015, in Lebanon, for example, about only one in five Syrian refugee children were enrolled in schools because the number of Syrian school-age children exceeded the capacity of the entire Lebanese public school system (Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2015). Last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal function of educational institutions throughout Europe since spring 2020 up to school year 2022/2023. For more than 24 months, the consequences of this disturbance have disproportionately impacted the migrant and refugee youth who largely depend on vocational education and training (VET), a

³ The Horizon 2020 Project Immerse has a wide and updated database that is available online. Recently, a focus on young refugees from Ukraine has been opened: https://www.immerse-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IMMERSE_Ukraine-10-principles_EN.pdf.

mode of teaching and learning that relies heavily on in-person classes and workplaces that have been suspended or limited (CEDEFOP, 2020; OECD 2021b).

The research methodology

The qualitative data for the Italian case are based on 14 qualitative interviews held between January and June 2022 with teachers and social workers working in different regions of Italy. The qualitative data for the Greek case are based on two focus group discussions held online between December 2021 and February 2022, with the participation of 11 teachers, principals, policymakers and coordinators of refugee reception and education structures.

Most interviewees for the Italian case work with minors hosted in Italy as “unaccompanied minors.” In the Italian case, the choice of the study areas aimed to cover various policy contexts, as Italy is characterized by the strong territorial differences in public service provision and access: Lombardy and Piedmont (north), Marche (center) and Sicily (south). In terms of document analysis, we performed a review of Italian sociological literature and institutional documentation. The networking with social services and civil society organizations provided us also with firsthand information on the policy process.

In the Greek case, focus group discussants hold various positions relevant to refugee education: teachers, principals and refugee education coordinators work with both accompanied and unaccompanied minors who attend the refugee education structures set up in local schools, Attiki (the region of the country capital, Athens) and Central and Northern Greece. Due to the centralized control, policy frameworks are almost identical across Greek regions and are discussed with policymakers from the Ministry of Education. But policy implementation in educational structures depends on school and teachers’ capabilities. In terms of document analysis, we have reviewed institutional documents and the reports from the Ministry of Education Scientific Committee for Refugee Education, along with relevant reports by international organizations and NGOs operating in Greece.

Determining factors and barriers of education quality and continuity: the Italian case

Over the past decades, Italy has been a major destination for both accompanied and unaccompanied minor refugees. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (MLPS) records — as of December 31, 2021 — 12,284 unaccompanied minors in Italy increased to 14,558 in May 2022 (Ministero del Lavoro e dell Politiche Sociali 2022) following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The main country of origin is Ukraine (28.1%), followed by Egypt (22.5%), Tunisia (9.4%) and Albania (7.2%). In this context, even though the growing number of unaccompanied or separated children arriving in Italy has been a matter of concern for public and private bodies involved in providing immediate humanitarian response, no data were available on their migration trajectory and, more generally, on their living conditions (Dovigo 2018) or regarding the

type of educational institution they are enrolled in, the distribution according to gender, age, country of origin and so on (Grigt 2017) until 2020. In this context, the two research studies involving the same sample conducted by ISMU⁴ in 2020 and 2022, commissioned by the Ministry of Education and developed within an AMIF⁵ project, builds a national picture of unaccompanied foreign minors' access to education and other learning programs. It mainly suggests that a constant synergy between schools, educational agencies and reception facilities is the main condition for successful school integration.

In recent times, there has also been a growing concern on the unaccompanied minors disappearing from hosting institutions (Burrai *et al.*, 2022), apparently fleeing toward family networks in other countries or just hitting the road with dangerous, informal, or illegal migration networks⁶.

The preliminary results (Barberis *et al.*, 2022) of the Continuagee project also confirm that refugee youth's migration plans often do not foresee a long stay in Italy. Thus, they may not be as motivated to learn Italian, even feeling "trapped" in reception systems, so much so that a relevant share of guests tries to exit from hosting institutions and policy paths. However, we can also see the problem from another perspective: reception and school institutions are not as capable of motivating refugee youth and providing educational paths fitting/supporting/reorienting their migratory plans.

Our findings showed that educational opportunities available in Italy are segmented and fragmented along at least three dimensions: location, age, and legal status⁷. As expected, the quality and the availability of educational opportunities are usually higher in Northern Italy. The Italian model of reception of managed migrations, including refugee youth and unaccompanied minors, is characterized by a dispersal strategy. Thus, many facilities are located in suburban and rural areas. In 2021, a nationwide research platform was opened by the NGO ActionAid to evaluate the performances of the reception system and the geographical distribution of the reception facilities (Openpolis, ActionAid 2021). As hosting facilities are so scattered, educational institutions may not be feasible; thus, access to education may require public or private transportation, even for quite long routes (*i.e.*, more than 30 km, as mentioned in cases from Sicily and Marche regions).

⁴ The Foundation Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità (ISMU) is an independent scientific body studying migration phenomena in Lombardy, Italy, and Europe.

⁵ <https://www.msna-ali.it/> The project proposes concrete activities aimed at enhancing the integration process of UAMs in Italy, including by means of information and digital tools through the extensive national collaboration undertaken by the Provincial Center for Adult Education (CPIA 2) Metropolitan Bologna. An additional aim is to promote universally recognized values such as welcome, integration and the right to education, as well as to disseminate good practices and experiences to the public, teachers and experts in the field. On AMIF see European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2021-2027), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027_en.

⁶ See the European network of journalists that follow the issue of minors' disappearance with an EU-wide coverage: <https://lostineurope.eu/>.

⁷ See Morris (2003) for legal statutes as formal markers of inclusion and exclusion and civic stratification as a formal system of differentiated rights.

We had a hard time when there were kids who wanted to go to high school, but it was too far away, and they couldn't even come back home by public transport in the evening. They finished at nine in the evening, and they couldn't get home by any public means of transport. (Social worker, Milazzo).

The limitation in autonomous access to education weakens migrant youth's road to autonomy and their freedom of choice over the kind of education they can achieve. The main educational opportunity usually and consistently offered to refugee youth in Italy refers to Italian language courses, called "L2" (second language). Such classes are often offered by the same reception centers, hosting facilities and host families. Another common option is short, usually no more than 3 months, vocational training courses in some specialized skills that provide formal certificates. Nevertheless, the state of vocational training in Italy is such that quick access to the labor market is not that easy (Ascoli, Ranci and Sgritta 2016).

The young refugees often receive the offer of free and short professional courses on professional topics like HACCP⁸ food management and safety in the workplace, and some others have managed to do welding courses for a fee, but with private training companies. The courses we offer in our reception projects, which are in agreement with public vocational training institutions, are such kinds of courses. They allow you to use food, allow you to work in restaurants and allow you to administer food or safety at work, or to know how to use a fire extinguisher, trivially. They don't give direct access to a job, though. (Social worker, Milazzo).

As previously stated, the age of unaccompanied minors is currently very often close to 18, and the overwhelming majority are males. In this context, even if Italian legislation on the school inclusion of foreign minors, law no. 47/2017 (the so-called "Zampa" Law⁹), provides for the activation of specific conventions for apprenticeships and the possibility of obtaining qualifications even when coming-of-age, unaccompanied youth can no longer enjoy a special permit of stay, this profile often faces direct and indirect discrimination in the access to education. Provision is also made to support those coming of age up to the age of 21, should they need a longer integration program. However, in the field, mainstream upper secondary schools are not rarely ill prepared (when not willing) to welcome students with low proficiency in Italian and unclear previous educational paths at an age close to the final exam for the school-leaving certificate.

The main option they are offered is in the frame of the so-called CPIA (Provincial Centers for the Education of Adults), public schools providing lower and upper secondary school degrees (ISCED 2-3) or vocational training. The latter, managed by both public and private institutions, is regulated at the regional level.

The access to normal upper secondary education (ISCED 3) is less likely, also due to various limitations: (1) lack of official degrees of formal education in the country of origin; (2) lack of formal education at all; and (3) schools' reluctance to include stu-

⁸ Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points. It is compulsory training for workers and businesses in the catering and food sector.

⁹ Named after the MP proposing the bill.

dents aged 16 to 18 in the first grades of secondary education, as age gaps are deemed to produce ineffective class management.

In Italy, the Government Decree no.130 of 2020 has set new standards for the reception system targeting refugees and minors. This regulation states minimum standards of social services provision, includes: linguistic and cultural mediation; teaching of Italian language; school placement and/or vocational training; career guidance and job placement; access to housing and social services; legal support; health and social support; and pocket money. Although the quality of formal provision of integration services has been improved, education and training offered to refugee youth do not often match their expectations.

Certainly, often minors as well as children in general arrive with very high expectations toward the hosting institutions. And these expectations are projected onto the reception team and the services offered. We often hear controversy about the services they are offered, which always seem to be too poor. Perhaps the education offered to them is too poor; it is difficult to connect the hosting institutions with an employer because vocational training may not immediately activate a job contract. (Social worker, Jesi).

What is more, in apprenticeship positions, identifying trustworthy employers is not always very easy for those teachers and social workers who manage VET projects: As stated by some interviewees managing reception facilities, some employers see refugee youth as a low-cost labor force and do not comply with the training dimension of apprenticeship and vocational contracts.

The quality and efficacy of training and education are also related to learning-group arrangements. On the one hand, dedicated L2 classes may be more targeted to specific learning needs and levels; on the other hand, it is well known in education studies that separate education, without proper intergroup interactions, also involving native peers, has negative effects on both educational achievement and societal integration at large.

Considering the language training, in the centers for adult education (CPIA), sometimes there is a poor assessment of the needs of the young refugees. We try to fill the gap by increasing the search for educational paths for them and by trying to mediate with language teachers. If we realize that the boy needs to be placed in a higher class, because we see that he is bored and no longer finds the motivation to learn the language, we talk to the teachers. It is the community worker who mediates this gap. (Community worker, Ancona).

In the specific case of unaccompanied minors in reception centers, the problem of social isolation is magnified by the location of hosting accommodations, not rarely placed far from educational facilities and populated areas. On the other hand, if we focus on pre-primary and primary education (ISCED 0-2), our interviewees considered the quality of education, as much as the efforts for a good school participation made by schools, in a much more positive way. The availability of integration resources (e.g., intercultural mediation, teachers' expertise) may be variable, but the attitude in educational settings is seen as more positive. In this context, the most im-

portant barriers to school attendance are in producing school certificates from countries of origin and assessing minors' age, school grade and learning and social skills. Upper secondary schools (ISCED 3-4) tend to refuse the enrolment of those older than 18 or even less for fear of causing "disruption" in classes and courses. Under this perspective, younger children are seen as much less of a threat than young male adults. Here, the most important obstacles to school attendance are the production of school certificates from the countries of origin, as well as the assessment of children's age, school grade and learning and social skills.

The starting point is an assessment of the language in their school experience. This applies rarely as you may consider that, when you flee by boat, it is difficult to carry your school documents. They don't even have their IDs, or they come from places where they usually attended 6/7 years of schooling only. We ask someone to send us school documents, but we see that there are very poor places with difficulties in accessing these documents, especially if they come from (Sub-Saharan) Africa, while in countries like Egypt, the situation is much better. (Social worker, Ancona)

In addition to the subjective difficulty expressed by the social worker, this quotation is also evidence of a paradoxical bureaucracy, whereas Italian law provides that a lack of documentation cannot in any way be a reason to exclude a child from education; in practice, this lack becomes a major obstacle in accessing education. As can be seen, the problem is not so much formal access (rules and regulations entitling children to education) but informal practices that undermine accessibility through arbitrariness in the enjoyment of rights due to refugee minors.

In this context, the educational system, based on groups of classes of the same age, seems rather rigid and struggles to adapt to a good number of refugees' individualized educational paths.

We have had difficulties with respect to the insertion of boys in high schools — for example, some trade schools. They told us they were not taking adults because they were already eighteen years old [...] Schools are not open to the world outside. When they have a class already formed, teachers want their clique of pupils. Some teachers say, 'I don't want them to sink my class.' (Social worker, Milazzo).

The number of young refugees in public school is low, and why? Because the boys already arrive at the age of 16/17. We have cases of kids that enter school in the eighth grade, but it happens if they are 14. Otherwise, when a boy reaches the age of 16/17, our job is to try to give basics — basic skills, basic autonomy, practical and self-care — and our project is aimed to grant them access to the labor market. So, we tend to invest in basic autonomies and job-oriented skills, and we propose training courses instead of formal schooling. (Community worker, Ancona).

On the other hand, refugee youth's motivation to continue schooling is challenged by the conflict between the need for autonomy and some economic gain as well as long-term educational and vocational plans. What is more, schools usually do not accept the timing of young refugees' life course: integration in the same age group of students becomes difficult as the class can react with resistance and distrust to the newcomers. In general terms, this is connected to the complex and lunatic

management of time in the reception system of Italy, both hurried by an emergency framing and slow in the never-ending wait times recipients experience (Pitzalis 2022).

A conflictual issue is precisely in the timing of the project. Families enter the project at any time of the school year, and, therefore, at any time of the year, we turn to schools for the inclusion of children in classes. This sometimes creates discomfort, resistance and difficulties linked in part to institutions that have a systematic rigidity, as you well know. The same problem arises at the end. It is true that families stay with us for 2 years more than individual guests. It is true that our guests, based on the work and life opportunities that arise, decide to leave the territory and go elsewhere. This is not a positive school experience it is experienced in a somewhat traumatic way, so to speak. (Social worker, Jesi).

In conclusion, the most accessible educational institutions are those intended for adult workers (CPIA). In that context, refugee youth are placed in existing (adult) classes, or, more often, a number of refugees are regrouped in a single class. The result is that — contrary to the much-praised Italian comprehensive model — special classes are created, with a sort of educational segregation in “refugee-only” groups. In this respect, the formal principle of inclusion as a cornerstone of the Italian educational system risks becoming a form of exclusion if resources and skills are not effective enough to support equal participation (Barberis and Buchowicz 2015). This is quite consistent with the progressive subsidization of the Italian welfare model where the actual implementation of incorporation is up to households, civil society organizations and local institutions (from municipalities to schools) without a clear support (Kazepov and Carbone 2009).

However, it is worth mentioning that, through the abovementioned AMIF-funded project “ALI-MSNA 1 and 2”¹⁰, Italy has received, in an emergency measure, funding to support and sustain the learning pathways of UAMs — up to a maximum of 1,000 — through the adoption of personalized learning plans (PDPs) and interventions to strengthen linguistic skills and tutoring in the study of other school subjects.

Differentiated school inclusion models and relevant educational practices in Italy

If inclusion policies are jeopardized by territorial and administrative fragmentation, another factor that affects the effectiveness of policies is everyday informal interaction. The cultural diversity of refugee minors, gender and age is an embodied dimension that does have a relevant impact on the outcome of education policies (Vass *et al.*, 2017). On the issue of racism and discrimination in school and by the teachers toward young pupils, there has never been an institutional action. Few voices have claimed a decolonization of school curricula, and less have underlined the implicit or even explicit conflicts emerging between school management and students and families of refugees exacerbated by the COVID-19-related social crisis (Migliarini 2017; Locatelli and Mincu 2020; Mincu 2020; OECD 2021a).

¹⁰ For the project report in English, see ISMU (2021).

Our interviews with social workers confirmed this problematic relationship. Migration and cultural diversity in schools are often still perceived as a threat and not as an opportunity, but according to some cultural mediators, the attitude of public-school teachers is slowly changing toward a more open approach:

We go to the meetings with the aim of doing mediation work, and to do our part, I can tell a lot of anecdotes involving teachers. I could write a book about how many there have been. Once I had to specify that these guys arrived in Italy by boat, and when I confirmed it, the teachers changed. The whole situation has changed. From an aggressive approach in front of a parent who does not understand and does not listen, we have moved on to a more understanding approach — a willingness to communicate — because this is the hardest difficulty. (Social worker, Jesi)¹¹.

On the other hand, although professionalization in dealing with migrant youth is constantly in demand, according to senior and experienced teachers, the school community should avoid relying completely on outside experts and social workers in their educational role to foster inclusion, as teachers are the main figures in the daily interaction with refugee minors. Under this perspective, if teachers are not trained consistently on migration issues and cultural differences, external help by experts will not be effective:

If I were to choose, I would implement teachers' training because they live a day-to-day interaction with boys and girls. I also see that is dangerous to delegate all to outsourced experts (psychologists, cultural mediators etc.) because teachers are those bringing the burden of the educational relationship. (Teacher, Urbino).

Learning support teachers can be a crucial resource for integration work in education as they can be activated by schools to build a favorable teaching environment for migrant students. In the complex governance entanglement of migrations, clear policy directions seem to be lacking (Blangiardo *et al.* 2022) as some teachers have pointed out:

I would love to receive training helping me to understand who migrant children are, instead of just teaching me coding or using a tablet or knowing how to integrate lessons with online videos. That is, if I speak to a Colombian, Chilean, Venezuelan, a Kurd, a Turk [...] if I have a Kurdish boy and a Turkish boy in the same class, how should I behave? What experiences do they have within their families? These are perhaps the lessons and training that we need now, especially if we want to have a school that can be not only up to date but truthful to our students, as classes are changing. (Teacher, Pesaro).

In terms of differentiated reception models, it is worth mentioning the management of the Ukrainian refugee flows. As of June 28, 2022, 141,562 Ukrainian exiles were registered in Italy, in which some 32% were minors¹²: compared to any recent refugees, this is a much higher share flow to Italy. On June 6, when registered Ukrain-

¹¹ This quote was extracted from the Intellectual Output 2 of the Erasmus + Project "Continugee" (Barberis *et al.*, 2022).

¹² Data were collected and released by Vittorio Nicoletta and can be retrieved here: <https://github.com/vi-enne/profughiUcraina/blob/main/data/outputProfughi.csv>.

ian exile minors were close to 42,000, 27,495 (some 65%) were already included in the school system (Ministero dell'Istruzione 2022); 45% of them were in primary schools — something quite different from what the older refugee minors usually have. Almost 5,000 schools have been hosting Ukrainian exile minors, with an unprecedented diffusion of refugee students (mostly in Northern Italy: one-third has been hosted in just two regions, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna).

The educational placement of minors from Ukraine in Italy has been highly exceptional in nature: they triggered a process of relative innovation in the system under several respects: unlike what applied to other refugee flows, Ukrainian refugees were free to decide where to settle based on preexisting family or friendship ties, and they were exposed to highly simplified procedures in the issuance of documents and access to services (Campomori 2022), including schooling. Two interviewees reported as a “shock” the fact that Ukrainian minors were included in mainstream classes even a few weeks before the end of the school year, even though this opportunity was explicitly barred by the very same schools for a Bangladeshi family. Also, another experience from Rome confirmed the exceptional rapidity of the implemented routes of refugees from Ukraine:

To produce the documents here in Rome, they were quite fast; in fact, a very fast procedure was implemented that worked anyway and should be implemented in other emergencies because it worked well. The police headquarters also sped up the time; if it was always like this, it would be perfect. (Social worker, Rome).

In conclusion, in the Italian case, the management differences applied to different refugee flows risks deepening inequalities horizontally, not only between natives and refugees but also among refugees from different backgrounds. Furthermore, the high degree of educational institutions' autonomy has resulted in a very uneven and dispersed scenario for young refugees that creates educational offerings that are high quality in some places and highly fragmented and segregated in many others. The system appears incapable of raising the standards of benchmark levels, and its outcomes will worsen as long as the age of pupils grows.

Determining factors and barriers of education quality and continuity: the Greek case

The Greek system of education is generally considered to be equitable and “relatively inclusive” (OECD 2018: 33), in the sense that it is comprehensive, avoids early selection and employs policies and practices focusing on the inclusion of socioeconomically disadvantaged and at-risk student groups. According to Greek law, asylum-seeking minors are required to attend primary and secondary school under conditions similar to Greek nationals (Greek Council for Refugees 2021).

Formal structures for refugee education came into operation in Fall 2016, almost after a year into the crisis, focusing on allowing minors to leave the reception and accommodation centers (RACs) and get a fresh start in their education within their new societal context. The Ministry of Education described the school year 2016-2017 as a

“pre-integration” “transition” year and included the establishment and operation of three different structures for refugee minors’ education (Ministry of Education, 2017):

- 1) Preschools within the RACs, mainly operated on a voluntary basis, or enrollment of refugee minors in neighboring mainstream preschool facilities: these structures could not reach all refugee minors in need, but, according to teachers and coordinators, they were rather successful. A strong reason for their success in the integration process was that the teachers did not need to have highly developed intercultural competences, they did not drastically change their routine and communication with minors often relied on nonverbal and activity processes.

Refugee minors face the same problems of adapting to school like all early age children, regardless of their origin and country, because, due to the age of the children, it takes some time to adapt anyway. However, they adapted more easily than older children who had already formed their personality, and they acted as ‘sponges’ absorbing new school experiences. In their second year, they had no problem following the program, like native children. (Preschool teacher, Central Greece).

- 2) Afternoon classes in designated public schools accessible from the RACs, called Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFRE, Greek acronym DYEP), aimed at enabling refugee minors with little or no education background to gradually adjust to the new national, cultural and school environments, as well as to experience Greek and European culture and literacy, covering a weekly program of 20 hours, and offering four core subjects (*e.g.*, Greek, mathematics, English, information technology), as well as arts and sport activities. The ministry and the teachers agreed that DYEPs did not serve educational purposes only:

The purpose of the establishment of the DYEPs was to get the child into a school ‘normality,’ into a school context, and not leaving them out, as long as they were forced to stay in Greece or they themselves decided not to leave. (Ministry official, Athens area).

Most teachers were aware that the purpose of the DYEPs was not for children to acquire literacy skills, as there were basic communication and language problems. Interpreters and translators were not available in the DYEPs; neither were cultural mediators. (Primary school teacher working in DYEP, Athens area).

The refugee minors who benefited most were those who had a basic knowledge of English:

Many of the students came to school speaking English quite well because of the language lessons delivered by NGOs and by unemployed teachers paid by the Public Organization for Employment in the RACs. These lessons were ‘lifesaving.’ Without the knowledge of English, the children would not have been able to cope, and neither would we. (Primary school teacher working in DYEP, Northern Greece).

- 3) Reception classes (RCs) within primary and secondary schools located in zones of educational priority (ZEP), which are defined by the Ministry of Education and that aim at teaching Greek to refugee minors housed in nearby areas: many teachers in these classes did not feel prepared to help these minors integrate into the school environment.

It was clear that these were not the 'kids next door.' We didn't know what they carried inside them and what they had experienced in their countries. (Lower secondary school teacher working in RC, Athens area).

In our research, we identified several factors that undermined or limited the effectiveness of the relevant policies and initiatives for the inclusion and educational success of refugee minors following the 2015-2016 refugee "crisis".

First, the refugee and migrant emergency coincided with the last phase of the economic crisis in Greece, which had a significant impact on the living conditions of the Greek people. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2009, the average household income had decreased by more than 30%, unemployment had reached 23% for the general population and 44.2% for young people under 25 years old, and 15% of the people lived in conditions of extreme poverty (OECD 2016; Dianeosis 2016). In the same period, public spending for education fell sharply during the crisis, affecting the maintenance of educational infrastructures and teachers' salaries, staffing of schools and many educational aspects of all at-risk groups (OECD 2018). The economic crisis was also associated with the xenophobic and exclusionary reactions of local communities where far-right racist discourses found listening ears (Kalerante 2020). As one teacher put it:

The first days refugee children came to school were very difficult. There were protests from far-right Golden Dawn members and reactions from parents who were worried about mixing 'unvaccinated refugees' with other students (Primary school teacher working in DYEP, Athens area).

Second, the number of students in need of urgent interventions for their education was extremely difficult to manage. According to official UNHCR data, 1,038,864 people (one-third of them minors) arrived in Greece by sea or land in 2015 and 2016. Most of them departed to other European destinations, but some 60,000 people (more than one-third of them minors who traveled with their families or who were unaccompanied) had to stay in the country when the Balkan borders were closed (Ministry of Education 2017). The challenge for Greek authorities and local communities was large, as their experience for handling similar situations was rather limited. In our focus group discussion, a municipality representative argued that "municipalities exceeded themselves during the refugee crisis," and most participants nodded agreeably. The volatile number of refugee and migrant minors due to frequent relocations or departures made the situation even more unpredictable, giving policies a character of "improvisation and trial and error" (OECD 2018: 70).

Third, as we clearly see in the case of DYEPs, the education of migrant and refugee minors was largely organized in terms of the monitoring and control of relevant populations rather than the considerations of providing quality education. RACs were usually set up in remote, degraded areas and lacked the infrastructures to accommodate the large numbers of residents and to properly host educational activities, whereas the integration of refugees in urban houses had been slow (Ministry of Education 2017).

In those difficult circumstances, the response of the Greek government and local authorities relied heavily on European and international funding and support (*i.e.*, on resources from European Asylum, Immigration, and Integration Fund; AMIF). Most educational activities taking place in the reception and identification centers (RICs) and the RACs in the islands and mainland Greece in 2015-2016 were nonformal. They were organized by international and nongovernmental organizations, many of which were invited by the Greek state authorities to establish such programs and initiatives (Palaiologou *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, there were huge discrepancies in the nature, aims and scope of these initiatives, which were pertinent to the characteristics of the facilitating organization.

A fourth issue affecting inclusion has to do with the fact that educators employed in RFREs in most cases lacked both training in managing socially sensitive students and the motivation to take on this challenging educational duty. They were selected from the general list of replacement teachers, usually on a part-time basis, and left when they took a full-time appointment in mainstream schools. During the first year of operation, some RFREs changed teachers up to four times (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Teachers had difficulty understanding the institutional framework for the operation of the DYEPs and the consequent issues of the logistical infrastructure. In some schools, active and sensitive Principals helped to overcome difficulties (*e.g.*, use of morning school equipment, consumables). But most teachers were asking for a specific textbook to use in their teaching and found it difficult to understand that the proposed textbooks were just the starting point and that they had to develop approaches specific to the students of their classes. (Refugee education coordinator, Northern Greece).

The role of the parents of both refugee minors and local students was equally important. In some schools, the racist and xenophobic reactions of student parents resulted in feelings of insecurity among refugee parents, who felt that their offspring would be in danger outside the RACs. Also, in many cases, the communication between schools and refugee parents was difficult due to language and cultural barriers:

Sometimes I had to call refugee parents who had a basic knowledge of Greek or English to act as cultural mediators to other parents. I asked them to translate what I was saying during school meetings. (Preschool teacher in urban kindergarten, Athens area).

However, there were many reports of refugee parents who had developed high expectations from their children's education. The sense of continuity of education was important for them:

Refugee parents whose children attended education in Turkey since they left their country had very high expectations from schools, and they were very interested in their children's school performance. (Primary school teacher working in RC, Athens area).

The Greek Ombudsman for Children reported that, at the end of December 2016, 21,000 refugee minors — among them, 10% unaccompanied minors — stayed in Greece, in State open accommodation centers, flats and hotels rented by UNHCR and similar organizations. An unidentified number of minors, as high as 2,000, were reported as staying in solidarity squats hosted by Greek families or in residences rented by their families (Ministry of Education 2017). The 112 RFREs that operated in that school year hosted 3,240 students aged 6 to 15 coming from 33 RACs. Another 1,500 refugee minors were enrolled in mainstream schools, either in regular classrooms, the RCs of educational priority zones or one of the 26 intercultural schools running in Greece¹³ (Crul *et al.* 2019). In the following school years, the number of minors enrolled in all available educational options increased significantly, and by December 2018, it amounted to 11,500, a 44% increase compared to the end of the previous school year (UNHCR, UNESCO, IOM 2019).

The flow of people decreased the following years, but minors still amounted to around 20% of the newcomers. Mid-2022 figures estimated that the number of refugees recognized in Greece is 147,420, but the number still fluctuates significantly. Unaccompanied minors are estimated to have reached 2,666 (UNHCR 2022). The decrease in the numbers of migrants and refugees reflects the border policy changes in Greece and the restrictions of population movements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the pandemic brought about a new drawback in the effort toward inclusion. The Greek Council of Refugees mentions “disproportionate restrictions imposed on camps and more broadly refugee-hosting facilities, in the context of measures aimed at limiting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic” (GCR 2021: 173), which complicated school access for minors leaving RACs to pursue education. Moreover, due to the lack of a technical infrastructure or essential personal equipment for on-line learning in RACs and homes, refugees and asylum-seeking minors have been further excluded from education.

As a result, although RAC infrastructures have improved in the years following the peak of the crisis, educational programs were streamlined and approved by the Greek Institute of Education Policy, relevant materials were created, and the number of trained educators increased, the educational attrition rates in migrant and refugee minors remain high. The 2021 Ombudsperson’s Report states that the dropout rates for refugee minors attending mainstream schools or RFREs are extremely high and that school inclusion in RICs is practically nonexistent (Greek Ombudsperson in Collaboration with UNICEF Greece Country Office 2021).

Moreover, a crucial refugee education policy deficiency is the absence of specific measures aimed at adolescents throughout the discussed period. This is a serious drawback in inclusion attempts as it excludes a large number of refugee and migrant minors in need of education and training.

¹³ Intercultural schools and ZEPs were initially set up in the 1990s to integrate migrant and disadvantaged students into the Greek educational system.

Differentiated school inclusion models and relevant educational practices in Greece

Migrant education started as a small-scale policy issue in the 1980s, when Greek migrants returned from countries of Europe, North America and Australia, and became an education policy priority during the 1990s, when Greece received an increased number of immigrants from the Balkans (mainly from Albania, the former socialist republics of Eastern Europe and from Russia, Ukraine and Georgia); many of whom were acknowledged as ethnic Greeks by the Greek state and accorded with preferential treatment. Almost a generation later, this transformation, from a country of outbound migration to a country predominantly receiving immigrants and refugees, is not easily inscribed in social consciousness, and the reluctance of the Greek society toward others' integration is still reflected in education (Markou and Parthenis 2015).

In Greece, migrant minors can stay for more than 6 school years in RCs, which aim mainly at Greek language learning or other preparatory programs and receive limited instruction in other core subjects (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice 2019), which has a significant impact on their educational trajectories. In addition, even these classes, as well as the afternoon tutorial classes that help students improve their performance, are usually established in ZEP schools, which host the highest density of other at-risk populations (*i.e.*, Roma and vulnerable social groups). OECD data show that these groups make up a large proportion of the low-achieving Greek, based on international surveys such as PISA (OECD 2019), suggesting that these groups are very much at risk of exclusion from education and/or employment. Attendance at RFRE/DYEPs can also be extended from one to two school years by the teachers' board, who can postpone prompt enrolment in mainstream primary or secondary education schools, on the grounds of students' unpreparedness to attend all school subjects.

However, the most important problem of the inclusion models used in Greek education is that migrant and refugee education is focused exclusively on compulsory education, which ends at 15 years of age. To enroll in a general or vocational upper secondary school (Lyceum/Lykion), students need a high school graduation certificate. As Crul *et al.* noted, however, "the lack of an adequate assessment system has locked most refugee youths over age fifteen outside the Greek education system" (Crul *et al.* 2019: 15) and pushes these groups into unregulated nonformal VET provided by NGOs and international organizations with limited educational and employment opportunities.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed another form of differentiated inclusion in Greek schools. In Greece, according to official Ministry of Civil Protection data of June 2022, the number of Ukrainian refugees was 27,809, among them 7,266 minors, and the numbers were continuously rising. Similar to what happens in Italy, the issue of Ukrainian refugee education is also being dealt with at the top level of policymaking in Greece (*i.e.*, at the Ministry of Education). RCs have been set up in schools hosting Ukrainian students, and the Ministry of Education circulated informational mater-

ial in Ukrainian and established contact points for the school enrolment of minors in all regions, also including a call center in Ukrainian. The Institute of Education Policy set up training sessions for teachers in receiving schools and provided guidelines for the use of educational materials. A full array of psychosocial support services targeting minors and their families were arranged in cooperation with other ministries (Ministry of Education, 2022). However, at the end of May 2022, only 9% of the minors were enrolled and attended school (EC, EACEA, Eurydice 2022). The accuracy of this number cannot be easily verified¹⁴, but the low enrolment rate contradicts the rather quick response of the Ministry of Education and can be attributed to the fact that many families were still on the move during their first months of refuge, and refugee minors were not enrolled in any school. The situation is expected to change in the 2022-2023 school year, with much higher enrolment rates. It is worth mentioning that in several Ukrainian regions (*i.e.*, in Mariupol), there is a large community of ethnic Greeks with cultural and educational relationships with the Greek state and with relatives already living in Greece. The ethnic ties to the Ukrainian people and regions contribute to Greek society's exceptional willingness to accommodate and support Ukrainian refugees.

The arrangements described here, and the previous sections of this article reveal that, for Greece, the issue of continuity in refugee education is difficult to confront. It depends to a large extent on refugee minors' access to quality, inclusive education services suitable for their needs in a supportive educational environment. The educational trajectories of refugee minors can be easily disturbed or interrupted, and the risk of exclusion is extremely high.

Conclusion

Immigration in Italian and Greek schools has become a relevant issue that is here to stay. In 2021, the asylum applicant minors of age in Italy were 11,569, of which 28% were unaccompanied. There was a sharp increase compared to 2020, in which 7,106 minors were hosted in refugee and asylum seekers' reception facilities, of which 36.7% were unaccompanied (ISMU 2022). After a slowing down in pandemic times, their number is increasing sharply. As of September 30, 2022, there are 18,801 unaccompanied minors in Italy, of whom 83.07% are male, and 43.8% are 17 years old. In Greece, the situation is similar: the number of asylum applicant minors increased in 2021, and at the end of the year, it reached 8,445 minors, with more than 26% of them unaccompanied.

At the regulatory, formal level, these two European countries are among the most inclusive ones in terms of access to school, guaranteeing to all minors the right to education. However, as highlighted by recent research (Grigt 2017; Dovigo 2018; Quadranti 2021), achieving the goals stated in the law is difficult without adopting

¹³ The European Commission/ European Education and Culture Executive Agency - EACEA/Eurydice publication reporting these enrolment data notes that they "must be treated with caution, especially as they are constantly evolving. In particular, the number of school-aged children and young people from Ukraine who are enrolled in schools has been increasing in some countries." (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice 2022: 9).

effective implementation plans and education practices, as they are often flawed by the lack of funding, staff or skills necessary for coping with the specific needs and developing the potential of refugee youth. Our research confirmed this assumption. Although the legal framework and institutional paths for refugee minors' inclusion are in place, the case of refugees' and migrant minors' education in Italy and Greece is characterized by a number of implementation difficulties and setbacks that depend on the entrenched problems of the national education systems and of their teachers and staff. In fact, both countries are confronted with several problems in the policy, practice, and governance of the system.

In Greece, policymaking is patterned by a significant degree of fragmentation. Reforms and changes are usually decided and enforced in an unstructured, controversial manner, and, as a result, they are often short lived and unaccomplished. Centralized governance of education ensures a degree of coherence in the administrative and educational processes, but the limited autonomy of schools and local education authorities renders the system more inert to change, inflexible and unresponsive to the localized circumstances and needs, such as those of schools in small islands, remote regions and schools facing emergencies. Last but not least, the system has so far demonstrated limited capacity in effectively monitoring policy implementation and in analyzing, interpreting and using education data for policy learning and improvement.

Italian education policies are characterized by a relevant territorial fragmentation that shows very different levels of performance. Furthermore, local practices in various contexts are often not aligned with the national inclusive policy design. In fact, our results pointed out that refugee youth are often placed in existing adult classes in CPIAs, or, more often, a number of refugees end up in a single class in VET schools. The result is that, contrary to the much-praised Italian comprehensive model, special classes are created with a sort of educational segregation in refugee-only groups. The situation is similar in Greece where refugee youth are largely excluded from formal schooling and vocational training, a fact that generally limits their potential for inclusion and for an independent future within Greek society. Furthermore, the education system based on the same age class groups is quite rigid in both Italy and Greece and struggles to adapt to the needs of individualized educational paths of a good number of refugees.

In terms of school placement, the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis has been dealt with in both countries with an institutional response labeled as "extraordinary," leading to policies that extended the access to the educational system and invested new resources focused selectively on minors from Ukraine. That situation has further complicated the civic stratification of rights and opportunities among migrants and refugees with different statuses. At the same time, this emergency not only showed that entrenched distortions, discriminations and inequalities in the social and educational opportunities for adult and minor refugees can be amended if a strong political will is supporting school management at national and local levels (ANCI¹⁵ 2022) but

¹⁵ National association of Italian municipalities (Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani).

also that educational inequalities are embodied in everyday practices that are hardly recognized by social actors, such as structural racism, gender gaps and postcolonial frames of education provision. Keeping in mind that teachers also move within certain structures and that the policies create the framework conditions for this, changing ingrained habits, prejudices and stereotypes in teachers' attitudes are a long and complex cultural work that has not yet received the necessary institutional attention.

Finally, in our fieldwork, we note an emerging claim of a relevant knowledge gap among teachers and school managers on the structures and functions of the various educational systems of the home countries of young refugees. European paths for ensuring continuity in education across countries are developing, even if quite slowly, whereas the possibility of a continuity in education across different geographies is almost not supported by specific educational policy actions. The other challenge is the (failed, in many cases) coordination of the multiple administrative levels (European, national and local) and between governmental and nongovernmental institutions and organizations having varying degrees of autonomy in managing the socioeconomic incorporation of migrants and refugees in the destination countries.

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Annex 1 – Italian field work: interviews

Interview	Role	City - Region
1	Teacher	Urbino - Marche
2	Teacher	Pesaro – Marche
3	Social worker	Jesi – Marche
4	Social worker and community worker	Ancona - Marche
5	Social worker	Milazzo – Sicilia
6	Social worker	Bari – Puglia
7	Social worker	Milano - Lombardia
8	President of third sector association	Torino – Piemonte
9	Cultural mediator	Milano – Lombardia
10	Community worker	Milazzo – Sicilia
11	School headmaster	Milano – Lombardia
12	Manager of reception centre	Urbino – Marche
13	Officer of social cooperative	Pesaro – Marche
14	Social worker	Rome

Annex 2- Greek field work: focus Groups

Focus Group 1

1 Preschool Teacher	Middle Greece (Evia)
3 Primary School Teachers (2 working in DYEPs, 1 working in RCs)	Athens area / Thessaloniki area
1 Primary School and DYEP Principal	Athens Area
1 Refugee Education Coordinator	Northern Greece (Katerini area)

Focus Group 2

1 Lower Secondary School Principal	Middle Greece
1 Ministry Official	Athens Area
2 Lower Secondary Education Teachers	Athens area / Thessaloniki area
1 Municipality representative	Northern Greece (Thessaloniki area)
1 Refugee Education Coordinator	Middle Greece (Thessaly area)

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