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Approaches to the Education of Syrian Refugee Children in Greece

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In this proposal I am requesting funding to travel to Greece and study the current experiences surrounding the integration of Syrian refugees into Greece's community, specifically as seen in the education of children refugees. I will visit refugee camps sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to gain an understanding of daily life for children and how volunteers and family units are working to provide an education for children that have been without a formal classroom setting while also promoting the introduction of refugee children to the Greek schooling system. I will conduct interviews with volunteers, staff, and families within these NGOs to understand the steps being taken to provide education, as well as reaching the ultimate goal of integrating refugees into a new environment. I will work closely with fellow Honors student Ken Cavanaugh, who will be researching how refugee integration is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced within NGOs.

This past semester I completed a course to begin my study of international relations. Within the course, we learned the foundational ideas to understanding the structure of an international system, and in many instances we focused on varied methods of relations between nations. One method of bridging the gaps of culture and distance is through the implementation of NGOs. These organizations promote international, national, and local cooperation without the interference of government. NGOs are often founded to address a specific need that is seen in society¹. In the case of Greece, many NGOs were established to provide a solution to the issues surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis.

The truth of the Syrian refugee crisis is in its seemingly unknown end result. Many refugees have been displaced for months, not knowing where their future lies. For many, their basic needs have been met (though not satisfactorily), but as these short-term problems are solved, long-term, lasting issues arise. These include issues on gaining citizenship in foreign countries, learning languages, finding work, and integrating into a new culture and environment.

Each year, the United Nations Refugee Agency publishes a comprehensive analysis that helps give perspective to the current refugee situation. In 2015, there were 14,400 unaccompanied minors, and children comprised 25% of the refugees to Greece, Italy, and Spain.² In order to fully promote the process of refugee integration, the report calls for “a comprehensive response, based on solidarity and responsibility sharing.”³ In addition, UNHCR provides an understanding on local integration, which occurs when a refugee finds a permanent home in a host country, as seen in the ability to pursue a “sustainable livelihood, contribute to the life, and live without discrimination or exploitation.”⁴ Education is a crucial step towards this integration.

The majority of popular discourse on the education of children addresses impersonal facts, as seen in the common idea that refugees are a homogenous group. In September of 2016, *Politico* published an article describing the 1.5 million children refugees that make up the “lost generation,” many having been out of school for 18 months.⁵ This article discusses the

¹ Andrew Cockrell, “Liberalism and International Relations,” Loyola Marymount University, 16 Sept. 2016, Lecture.

² “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 201,” *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*, United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 20 June 2016.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Zia Weise, “Refugee Children Get Little Education in Europe,” *Politico*, 27 Sept. 2016.

controversy surrounding integration of refugees into the Greek public schooling system, and as a result, many NGOs and volunteers are stepping forward to fill the gaps in education. It briefly explains the basic structure of many NGOs' school programs, in that they provide a few classes each day.⁶ Similarly, *Independent* published an article addressing the large-scale benefits of the education programs that NGOs, such as Be Aware and Share, are providing for refugees on Chios, a Greek island near Turkey. This article reflects on the reactions of outsiders like the delegates from the European Commission and their view that the NGOs' initiatives are "the most positive thing that's happened on [Chios] in months."⁷ It is important to note how the detached nature of these reports emphasizes recognizing the experience of a group over the experiences of individuals.

Few sources have conducted in-depth studies on the individual experiences of Syrian refugees, but most prominent is the 2017 *TIME* cover story, which follows the experiences of four women and their children, the "children of no nation."⁸ This story highlights the uncertainty of the children's paths ahead. "For the tens of thousands of refugees bottlenecked in Greece," unable to return to their home country but unable to move forward in the relocation process, the question lies in the future of the next generation. The development of this *TIME* story over the course of the next year will be beneficial to the studies surrounding the personal experiences with camp-based education programs for children refugees, but thus far, *TIME* is the primary source of coverage of these individual experiences.

Because of the relative modernity of the Syrian refugee crisis, the amount of academic studies regarding children's education and development is limited. However, many studies have been conducted regarding experiences within different refugee situations. For example, the *Education Psychology in Practice* journal published a study telling a 13 year-old boy's story as he fled from Montenegro to the United Kingdom in 2000. This study followed his developmental difficulties in school due to the trauma experienced as a refugee. The case identifies that many believe school is solely a source of stability, when in reality "refugee children have to cope with

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert Trafford, "Inside the Incredible School Teaching Refugee Children on the Greek Island of Chios," *Independent*, The Independent Online, 9 Sept. 2016.

⁸ Aryn Baker, et al. "Children Of No Nation," *Time* 188.27-28 (2016): 38-51, *Academic Search Complete*. 30 Jan. 2017.

adapting to schools where there may be no one from a similar background or even who talks the same language.”⁹ This study offers a unique perspective on the importance of a child’s experiences as a refugee in their cognitive development.

Conversely, a study published by the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* in 2009 takes a broader approach by examining the larger issue of the treatment of refugees in education. They are often “treated as a homogeneous group,” when in fact refugees come from a multitude of experiences.¹⁰ As a result, education needs vary on an individual basis. Regardless of background, this study identifies “the importance of a welcoming environment” and “the need to meet psycho-social and linguistic needs” within every education program for refugees.¹¹

The *Harvard Educational Review* published a study that considers a different approach to refugee education. It follows two Somali Bantu refugee families integrating into American society. The study finds that the education received within the American schooling system is important, but these families also use “storytelling as a way to give their children advice about navigating life and school” to help their children understand the value in education.¹² This study serves to show that successful education of refugee children does not only take place in formal schooling or in programs established by NGOs, but can also result from informal socialization.

The *Comparative Education Review* journal published an academic study specifically following the educational experiences of Burmese refugees in Thai refugee camps. It is important to note the occurrence of academic studies examining the unique role of camp-based education. This study found that most refugees “have no access to an officially recognized and accredited education system,” and that “the quality and relevance of education” is diminished by a lack of opportunities to leave and experience life outside the camp.¹³

However, what is missing in many of these previous studies is their application to the Syrian refugee crisis specifically. The studies I have highlighted either present theories regarding

⁹ Robert Hart, "Child Refugees, Trauma, and Education: Interactionist Considerations on Social and Emotional Needs and Development," *Educational Psychology in Practice* 25.4 (2009): 351-68.

¹⁰ Sandra Taylor and Ravinder Kaur Sidhu, "Supporting Refugee Students in Schools: What Constitutes Good Education?," *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16.1 (2011): 43.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Laura Roy and Kevin Roxas, “Whose Deficit Is This Anyhow? Exploring Counter-Stories of Somali Bantu Refugees' Experiences in ‘Doing School,’” *Harvard Educational Review*: September 2011, Vol. 81, No. 3, pp. 534.

¹³ Su-Ann Oh and Marc Van Der Stouwe, "Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand," *Comparative Education Review* 52.4 (2008): 593, *The University of Chicago Press*.

the experiences of refugees from Somalia and Montenegro, or the experiences of refugees within a camp in Thailand. The refugees from Somalia and Montenegro reside in the United States and have access to formal education systems, whereas the majority of Syrian refugees reside in camps. The study of refugees in Thailand applies to the study of camp-based education, but in a differently situated refugee crisis. In addition, these studies largely consider a broader focus on the experiences of refugees as a group, rather than the individual lived experiences. Rather than considering the various methods of education that influence a child's integration, these studies each focus on one approach, whether in examining the education within the family unit or within NGO-sponsored camp-based education.

I plan to study the Syrian refugee crisis and the different forms of education being provided through Greek refugee camps sponsored by NGOs. Both camp-based education programs and education within the family unit is accessible through the environment of NGOs. Previous research stresses the importance of recognizing the range of experiences of refugees and cultural backgrounds, and I hope to study the education initiatives addressing these varied experiences by understanding their methods of approach towards the education of refugee children. The education types I will study include both traditional and alternative classroom settings provided by NGOs,¹⁴ as well as informal education within the family unit. My consideration of these varied educational approaches addresses the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences of refugees.

In conducting my research, I primarily plan to perform interviews and take part in participant observation. Over the course of 17 days, I plan to visit three NGOs in Athens, two NGOs on Lesbos, one NGO on Chios, and one NGO in Thessaloniki. The camps I will be visiting provide many forms of assistance to refugees, but I will be focusing on the education initiatives. I will conduct in-person semi-structured interviews with staff and volunteers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the philosophies and goals that drive the education initiatives, as well as the methods of education being employed and their understanding of the effects in the lives of the refugee children.¹⁵ I will engage in interviews with refugee parents on their approaches to educating their children within the family unit, and if given permission, I will

¹⁴ See Akoyunoglou-Christou for an example of an alternative education initiative within a Chios refugee camp.

¹⁵ All interviews will be conducted under the standards of the Institutional Review Board.

interview their children to gain an understanding of the way their perspective shapes the discourse surrounding educational programs.¹⁶ I will collect educational artifacts from the NGOs when possible, while taking photographs to create a visual story documentation of the experiences. I will partake in participant observation methods by volunteering at the NGO-sponsored refugee camps to interact on a personal level with refugees and fellow volunteers and staff. This observation of behavior in practice will create an extensive understanding of the formally structured, alternative, and informal methods of education. Based on connections from NGOs in Greece and guidance from my partner Ken Cavanaugh's faculty mentor, Dr. Rachel Washburn, and my faculty mentor, Dr. Kerstin Fisk, we will further develop our research through Skype interviews before and after our trip to Greece.

The data that Ken Cavanaugh and I obtain from interviews and participant observation will initially be condensed into separate papers addressing our focuses on the experiences of refugee children in education and the integration experiences of refugees through NGOs. We plan to develop a multi-pronged written project that encompasses the varied experiences of refugees through the personal experiences of individuals as influenced by NGOs. We will supplement our written study with photos and artifacts obtained through our visit to Greece. Over time, we hope to develop a co-authored analysis relating the findings of our projects, from which we hope to pursue opportunities to present our research at conferences and potentially publish in academic journals.

Ken Cavanaugh and I created the following table to give more specific information on the NGOs and camps that we have selected as sites of visitation during the grant period. Included are the organization names, locations, brief descriptions, and contact information. Note that while in Chios, Ken Cavanaugh and I will visit separate NGOs; while he interviews at Souda Camp to further his research of the ideologies and practices surrounding integration, I will spend time interviewing staff and volunteers who work at Refugee Education Chios. Aside from this distinction, Ken Cavanaugh and I will visit and interview at the same NGOs to maximize our resources and to generate cohabitable data. While our studies will differ substantially in our

¹⁶ Zia Weise, "Refugee Children Get Little Education in Europe" *Politico*, 27 Sept. 2016.

interview questions, research participants, and artifact collection, they will be related in their sites of collection. We are excited to see how lines may be traced between our individual research projects as we generate data during the grant period.

In addition to the NGOs detailed on this table, we plan to use our faculty mentors in the Political Science, International Relations, and Theology departments to expand our list of contacts in Greece. We will also employ a snowball sampling technique during the grant period in order to establish connections with local networks of NGOs which may not be accessible via internet search.

Organization Name	Location	Description	Contact Information/ Website
Athens Solidarity Center	Athens	Offers a comprehensive set of services for refugees, including legal support, psychological services, and spaces for children and families.	athens@solidaritynow.org http://www.solidaritynow.org/en/kentro-allileggiis-athinas/
Khora	Athens	The Khora Community Center provides food, medical care, legal aid, education programs for children, and a women's space.	khora.athens@gmail.com http://www.khora-athens.org
Zaatar	Athens	Camp focusing on the most vulnerable refugees, minors and single mothers, by providing education programs, childcare services, healthcare, LGBTQ services, and housing.	contact@zaatarngo.org http://zaatarngo.org
Lesvos Solidarity	Lesvos	The only open refugee camp on Lesvos, provides basic necessities along with language programs, children's classes, and social support.	info@lesvossolidarity.org http://www.lesvossolidarity.org/index.php/en/
Be Aware and Share, Refugee Education Chios	Chios	NGO adapting to the lasting refugee needs. Provides accessible education through two non-formal schools and a youth center.	beavolunteer@baas-schweiz.ch https://www.facebook.com/refugeeeducationchios/
Help Refugees	Thessaloniki	Provides basic necessities, health care, education programs, job training, and housing for refugees. Primary goals: creating opportunities for anyone to join their efforts in providing quick and direct relief.	northerngreecevolunteers@gmail.com http://www.helprefugees.org.uk/about/

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