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Barriers of Adult Refugees' Educators in Leros, Greece

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Abstract

In the present paper we attempted to highlight the obstacles that the adult refugees' educators in the area of Leros face. To collect our data, we used the qualitative approach and conducted interviews throughout the avalanche sampling, so that the participants could express their ideas and perceptions. Our sample consists of adult refugees' educators working in NGO ECHO100PLUS, which is activated in Leros. The analysis of the data revealed the educators' inexperience and lack of training, as well as the inadequate organization and support on the state's behalf. However, the bright side is the full support from ECHO100PLUS and the positive attitude of the local community and the trainees towards the educator's work.

Keywords: Adult Education, Barriers, Refugees' Trainers

1. Introduction

The unprecedented influx of refugees and immigrants into Greece has created new conditions and has pointed out on the one hand the need for support and assistance and on the other hand the problems and shortcomings of Greek structures. The Greek state is called upon to meet the basic needs of a growing refugee population. These needs have to do not only with food and housing, but also with their integration and adaptation to the new cultural environment, mainly through education, not only of children and adolescents, but also of adults.

After all, the main and primary goal of adult education is to compensate for social inequalities through the progress and improvement of the educational level of the vulnerable social groups (Kokkos, 2008, p.9). Adult refugee education programs seem to help improve self-image and self-confidence, smooth socialization and integration into society (Xirouchakis, 2019), as well as to avoid marginalization, social exclusion and social pathogenesis (Bezati & Theodosopou, 2006).

The success factor of a program is, basically, the educator. The educator's work is considered quite demanding, as he/she needs to be knowledgeable about the subject, to know how to perform his/her role and which his/her

position in the team is depending on the educational circumstances. In addition, he/she has to cope with adversity arising from the fact that he/she is addressed to a vulnerable group. Of course, even if the educator fulfills all the above criteria, he/she must always be vigilant, as there are additional parameters and obstacles that can put a program at risk.

In general, the education of adults with different nationalities and cultures in combination with the economic and educational deficiencies and weaknesses makes it necessary to probe the obstacles that arise from both the teaching of a socially vulnerable group, such as refugees, and the shortcomings in benefits and infrastructure (Institute of Continuing Adult Education, 2010).

The goal of this research is to record the views of the educators who teach adult refugees in Leros about the obstacles they face in their daily work. The recording of the obstacles aims to improve those parameters (teaching-related or not) which, however, are crucial for achieving effective education (Rogers, 1998, p.51).

In order to achieve this goal, we conducted a qualitative approach, using telephone and live interviews with the adult refugees' educators who work for the NGO ECHO100PLUS. The results of the research revealed the need for organization and finding resources from the state.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adults' education

In general, education is considered the preparation for life. As life is constantly changing, the preparation should be unrelenting and endless. Adult education was founded on this basis (Lindeman, 1926, p.3-4). According to Jarvis (2004, p.32), adult education can help people connect more easily with modern culture, make creative use of their free time and enrich their lives. Adult education has its own characteristics. According to Thompson (2019), the characteristics that differentiate it from the education of minors have to do both with the variety of its forms and its voluntary nature, as well as with the fact that it takes care of the individual needs through a detailed curriculum. The great theorists of education, such as Piaget, Vygotsky, etc., often developed conflicting theories concerning the way in which minors and/or adults learn (Kokkos, 1998, p.23). Of course, despite the points of controversy, the above theories have in common the following basic principles:

- a) all people have cognitive needs, ie a need for knowledge, exploration and understanding (McLeod, 2018);
- b) the active involvement of the learner in the learning process is more effective than the passive transmission of knowledge;
- c) all people, depending on their personality, age, and previous educational experiences, express specific preferences as to how they are educated and taught; and
- d) previous knowledge and experiences are very important, as they are the foundation for building new cognitive paths (Kokkos, 2008, pp.46-47).

The adult educator to perform his/her work should be guided by the basic principles of adult education, which emphasize in social theories of action and not psychological theories of learning (Collins, 1991), although according to Imel (1998) the above is not a definitive list of adult education principles, but a guide of good practices that the educator should know and handle.

2.2. Vulnerable groups

All people who experience social exclusion, become victims of racism and prejudice and as a result are deprived of access to the labor market (such as people with disabilities, drug users, ex-prisoners, refugees and minorities) consider to be socially vulnerable groups (Tsimpoukli, 2008, p.281). In the education of vulnerable groups, especially refugees, both the special needs of this group and the different ethnocultural capital of its members must be taken into account, as they can become causes of a failed educational program (Kefala, 2017).

2.3. Barriers

Based on the psychological approach, a person to meet his educational needs must first have the coverage of biological needs and security needs (Vergidis, 2008, p.29). Failure to meet basic needs creates barriers for both the trainee and the educator. At the same time, the cultural and social heterogeneity of the group creates additional obstacles, as the educator on the one hand has to take them into account in the planning of teaching, on the other hand is called to combine different ethnocultural elements and structure a cohesive group (Blackledge & Hunt, 2004, p.266). Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that traumatic experiences, as well as the physical and psychological state in which the trainees find themselves are additional barriers to the smooth running of the program (Richardson, MacEwen & Naylor, 2018).

According to Valakas (2008, p.172), the room in which teaching takes place is vital for the successful, leak-free implementation of a program. In general, a classroom should be comfortable and attractive and predispose team members to learning and collaboration. At the same time, it must be equipped with supervisory means and provide opportunities for leisure. Also, according to Gözpinar (2019), the classroom should be a neutral space for refugees. From the above it can be concluded that the lack of adequate infrastructure, equipment and teaching materials is an additional obstacle that complicates the work of educators (Kantzou, Manoli, Mouti & Papadopoulou 2017).

Based on the research of Gözpinar (2019), teachers agree that teaching is a profession that is learned over time and the teaching of refugees is no exception to this rule. Lack of experience is therefore another obstacle faced by adult refugee educators.

Additional obstacles arise from the lack of coordination by a central body (Pottakis & Nikolopoulos, 2017), from the constant movement of refugee populations and the overcrowded classrooms (Walters, Garii & Walters, 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative approach

The choice of methodological approach was largely determined by the theoretical position, interests and political perspective of the researchers (Diefenbach, 2008). Additional factors that lead us to this choice are the fact that the literature gives us little information about the obstacles that adult refugee educators face and, therefore, it is very important to draw information from the participants themselves through investigation (Mason, 2003, p.96), as well as the fact that the size of the available sample makes the qualitative approach necessary (Creswell, 2016, p.209).

3.2. Sampling and data collection process

In the present study, the sample consisted of 9 educators who teach or have recently taught adult refugees in Leros. The sample was selected based on speaking Greek, in order to facilitate the research and to avoid any wrong conclusions due to the translation. Participants were approached through the avalanche process (Creswell, 2016, p.206, 209). The first seven interviews were conducted by telephone due to quarantine, while the last two of them were conducted live.

3.3. Limitations of the research

In the present study a first constraint stems from the fact that most of the data was collected by telephone. Although its implementation was imposed by the circumstances, it nevertheless creates research limitations related to the impossibility of recording non-verbal frameworks and actions (Bergmann, 2004, p.301).

Our research deals with a phenomenon (the refugee crisis), which is quite recent. As a result, there are not enough references to ensure high levels of quality, such as books or scholarly articles. The use, mainly, of early-stage material creates another limitation in our research (Creswell, 2016, p.86).

Taking into account the above limitations we can say that the results obtained from the present study cannot be generalized. The present research recorded a reality at a given time in a given place. The results compose an interpretation, which, however, cannot be arbitrarily transferred to different contexts (Matt, 2004, p.328).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Financial and organizational inadequacy

Despite the efforts of the Greek state to meet the learning and educational needs of the existing minority population, the recent sweeping and continuous influx of immigrants and refugees highlighted the (until now) inability of the state to build an organized plan for the refugees' education. This weakness was also recorded through the interviews of the participants in our research. Specifically, the trainers mentioned the state's reluctance to finance and take initiatives and the complete deposition of adult refugee education in voluntary organizations and private initiative, a fact that is confirmed by the literature (Kantzou et al, 2017).

As the first participant informs us, *"things could have been done before the start (in the field of training)"*, with which the third participant agrees, stating that *"training programs are definitely something that the majority of participants want"*. The seventh participant adds to the above, as he states that *"they could definitely provide us with training"*.

Some believe that the situation would improve if the state provided better accommodation structures to the trainees. The third participant emphasizes that *"the state could possibly do something more in all areas, including hospitality"*. The fourth participant agrees that the best infrastructures will help their teaching work as well (*"...to meet the basic needs of these people. D: Yes. All this, okay, affects us and bothers us all, of course"*).

From the above, it seems that the areas of training of educators and hospitality of refugees are identified by the participants as the most basic parameters for improving the conditions of the teaching process.

One argues that the state should use the knowledge and talents of refugees. Specifically, the second participant highlights the fact that *"no one has bothered to see [...] there are too many people who have knowledge and practices, I mean they know some art with their hands, they can be barbers or tailors or whatever, there are too many who are theoretically trained"*. According to her, the Greek state could "take advantage" of the talents, knowledge and skills of these people, thus offering them a decent job.

Finally, three participants answered that they do not know what extra could be provided by the competent bodies.

The fifth participant states that *"for the state I am not able to tell you if it provides sufficient support"*. Respectively, the eighth participant states that *"I do not know and it was not in my object to know it"*. And the ninth participant claims that *"maybe there were things offered by the municipality or the state that I did not know"*.

4.2. Lack of training

Studying the results of the present research, we find that very few of the trainers had some training and/or experience in adult education and in particular, in the education of vulnerable groups. In fact, as some characteristically stated, they were completely unprepared to cope with the task assigned to them. An important finding is the fact that a significant part of the sample realizes the need for additional training to enrich his teaching, a fact that is confirmed by the research of Brinia, Fotakeli & Vasileiou (2019).

The participants' responses show that only 2 out of 9 have attended some kind of training in teaching vulnerable groups. In more detail, the first participant argued that: *"I did not have such teaching experience before I started work, the truth is"*. The next participant said the same thing: *"in general, I have not done any training, I have not been taught how to teach"*. The following participants were also involved in this with phrases such as: *"no, and I am sure it would help a great deal"*, *"no, unfortunately and it is something I would like to do"*, etc.

The only exceptions were one participant (5th interview) who stated: *"I have done, but not on the subject of music"* and one participant (6th interview) who stated that: *"yes, let's say. Elderly, because they are in fact considered (vulnerable group) and I have also received EOPPEP certification "*.

4.3. Communication

In addition to the lack of adequate training, participants face other obstacles in practicing their work. The most important thing is communication, as there are no translators or interpreters to facilitate communication between the educators and the trainees. This obstacle is not mentioned in the literature.

More specifically, communication was stated as a problem. The first interviewee states that a serious problem *"is the language of communication, of course. We don't work with translators."* And the second participant argues that: *"the biggest problem I face in teaching is first and for all language"*. The same is pointed out in the third interview (*"another big problem is that many people don't speak a word of English"*). The fourth participant states that: *"in the work of teaching percussion I do not deal with..., let's say the problem of language"*. And the fifth participant stresses that the problem is *"the language, which is difficult to communicate with them"*. In the same vein, the sixth participant states that *"the greatest degree of difficulty is the language"*, but also the seventh participant who adds that *"the part of communication is very basic, because there are no interpreters and not everyone knows English"*.

4.4. Psychological and living conditions

Another significant difficulty is the psychological state in which the trainees find themselves, the difficult, and often inappropriate, conditions in which they live and the constant mobility from place to place. In fact, the majority of the sample claims that the above have an impact on their own psychological state. The aforementioned difficulties are noted in both domestic and international research (Vergidis, 2008, p.29- Richardson et al, 2018- Walters, et al, 2009).

In more detail, it was said that the psychology of learners is a very important barrier to teaching. The first participant stated that a serious problem *"is also the psychology of students, which changes too easily, [...] if he/she has problems or psychological trauma (may) prevent someone from being as receptive to education as we would like."* And the third participant acknowledges that *"what makes our work difficult is the psychological part"*. Similarly, in the fifth interview there is talk of the difficulty arising from *"the psychology that many of them are"*, as in the seventh, it is stressed that *"something that makes the situation very difficult is the psychological part"*. In the same vein, the eighth participant underlines the need to transform negative psychology because of difficult experiences into learning opportunities (*"this was also a goal, which would be done if there was a continuation, their own experiences to change them and transform them into something more creative and through this time to have a very good time and collect for themselves some positive things in these difficulties that they had gone through and passing"*).

Some recognize the difficulty arising from the living conditions of refugees. As the third participant states: *"we see every day what these people have been through, that is to say, since the difficulties are not over after they have crossed the sea, continue to live with such conditions of residence, insecurity and concern about how their "adventure" will end, and this affects not only them, but us as well"*. The fourth participant points out the same, which highlights the obstacles caused by the lack of daily, personal hygiene in the teaching process (*"in the summer students come unwashed [...] And you're about to pass out because of the stink"*).

4.5. Composition of the group

At the same time, additional issues that complicate the educational work are the unstable composition and the heterogeneity of the group, which are, also, confirmed by the literature (Blackledge & Hunt, 2004, p.266).

It is considered by some participants that the mobility of trainees makes their work difficult. The second participant states that *"another problem we face is the ability for refugees to attend all classes, because learning cinema is, they have to watch everything. [...] And the fact that [...] sometimes call them [...] for interviews or they are suddenly kicked off the island, they completely lose the peace, i.e. there can be no continuity"*. The same problem is identified by the third participant who informs us that *"whenever one can leave for the hinterland in other hotspots completely unannounced without having made any progress"*. The fourth interviewee stressed the state's responsibility for the problem of refugee mobility (*"why, say, who are the ones who take so long to prepare for them the triptych, a triptych, which asylum seekers take, to move on, to go to the next structure, etc?"*). Similarly, the 7th participant highlights the problem of mobility (*"something else is that at any time they may have to leave Leros without having any notice, so this does not help and have a follow-up to the course"*).

4.6. Lack of experience

Although they were not mentioned in a large percentage, it is worthy to refer the admission of using wrong practices due to lack of experience and the existence of stereotypes, as they are extensively mentioned in the research of Simopoulos (2014) and Gözpinar (2019) as barriers in the educational process.

The problems arising from the lack of knowledge and experience in the education of vulnerable groups (inexperience, ignorance of different cultures, stereotypes) were also highlighted. In particular, the sixth participant states that: *"I too heard from various people that they (the migrants) were violent, that they were generally misbehaving, and I panicked"*, which proves that she maintained negative stereotypes towards her trainees.

The ninth participant stressed that she faced *"problems that had basically to do with the fact that it was my first time involved with adults, they were adults of different ages and coming from a very special and different culture, which although it enchanted me, nevertheless made me have many qualms if I do it right and have many fears not to offend or escape their own limits"*.

4.7. Lack of teaching materials

One participant also mentions the lack of teaching materials (English books) as an obstacle (*"there is no corresponding material in essence"*), which, on the one hand, is identical with the results of the research of Kantzou et al (2017), and on the other hand, conflicts with other participants who claim to have at their disposal all the necessary equipment. This contradiction may be related in part to the differences between teaching English (formal classroom, using traditional supervisory material) and teaching cinema or theater (freer and more spontaneous teaching, using alternative teaching and supervisory tools).

4.8 Open courses

Some interviewees highlighted the difficulty resulting from the operation of open courses, resulting in the unstable formation of the group. Specifically, the first participant informed us that: *"at the school that we operate in Leros we have made the decision to keep all our courses open. This means that a refugee can enter the course by registering if he or she feels he or she has the appropriate level at any time [...] and this means that the teacher may have prepared a lesson plan, which at any time may not work that day, because he or she has a different audience than he expected."* The eighth participant told us that: *"the problems mainly were with the formation of the group. In other words, while at first they all came with enthusiasm and in some of the countries where they came from theatre was an unknown word, certainly in their daily lives it was not one of their first choices. Mostly it was the formation of the group, i.e. different ages, of course they were all adults, but the different countries from which they came..."*. The ninth participant argued the same, which stressed that: *"the*

other difficulty that came in was that the formation of the group was not stable. The persons changed, the number of people we knew and could understand their limits changed [...]. The recommendation was changing, so we were going back to the beginning."

In the above interviews it seems that the problem is the formation of the team either because of different levels of language proficiency or because of the large divergence in age and ethnocultural interests, which at the same time changes from course to course, making the work of trainers even more difficult.

4.9. Overcrowded classrooms

Although there are overcrowded and inappropriate classrooms in the literature (Walters, et al, 2009), this is not confirmed by the present study, as none of the educators mentioned anything similar.

4.10. Support

Maybe this is why the participants seem to be completely happy with the NGO they work for, as it provides them with full support. However, this does not seem to be the case for the competent bodies of the state. More specifically, they seem to want the state to take care of both their education and the improvement of the living conditions of their trainees. At the same time, they seem to prefer the existence of an organized plan that will be funded by the Greek state. The above results are also mentioned in the theoretical part, as they are findings of other researches (Pottakis & Nikolopoulos, 2017).

More specifically, the first participant states that *"our NGO has offered me everything I have asked for, but [...] I would like the training and the offer to be more general, to meet the needs"*. Respectively, in terms of providing support, the second participant emphasizes that *"the NGO (supports us) 100%. And financial support sometimes if needed. [...] Now we had no other support, neither from the municipality nor from the state"*. In the same spirit and the third participant emphasizes that *"ECHO100PLUS (the NGO) help us a lot. The state could perhaps do more in all areas."* The 4th participant agrees with the fact that the NGO has a school that produces work and offers support (*"Ok, EKO has a second chance school"*), but at the same time highlights the lack of support from the state mainly through the lack of incentives for training to the refugees (*"could, say, the first reception or the police, etc., tell them, you know something, your case will be examined after 8-9 months, make it sure you'll know English to communicate"*). And the sixth participant considers that *"the NGO I work for [...] provides full support. [...] That is, the state, I am not telling you about the refugees, does not even care"*. Similarly, the seventh participant informs us that *"I have no complaints from ECHO100PLUS. Now surely the state could have taken more care of both the hospitality and education, so that such an important part as education is not based on the good will of some."*

Of course, some participants claimed that they did not know if the state and the relevant bodies provide sufficient support. The fifth participant states that *"for the state I am not able to tell you if it provides sufficient support. For the NGO you asked me, I think they are flawless"*. Similarly, the eighth participant stated that *"from the NGO we had the full support [...] I do not know with other competent bodies"*. Like the ninth participant, she stated that *"basically we believe that we cooperated with the NGO, anyway. So they were always by our side [...] But only the NGO, no one else"*. The specific participants acknowledge that the support for their work came from the NGO, but they do not know if the state supports ECHO100PLUS financially or otherwise, as the ninth participant typically states: *"I guess in relation to the NGO there may have been things offered by the municipality or the state that I did not know."* For this reason, they were reluctant to respond with certainty that the state, for its part, did not provide sufficient support.

4.11. Local community and trainees

Moreover, the participants claim that both the local community and their trainees view their work positively, as they recognize that the work produced is a deterrent to unpleasant episodes and improves everybody's life.

Nevertheless, most of the participants find the practice of their work mentally and emotionally exhausting, mainly due to the experiences and living conditions of the refugees. These are two areas that the state could take care of on the one hand by upgrading the accommodation structures, on the other hand by hiring psychologists and social workers, who would consult both the refugees and their educators.

The local community of Leros seems to maintain a positive attitude towards the work of educators according to the majority of the sample. Some state that the local community views their work neither positively nor negatively. The rest of the sample states that the local community is hesitant. More specifically, the first participant states that *"Leros is considered one of the islands that has dealt with the refugee issue in a relatively good way in relation to other islands."* The same is stated by the second participant, who claims that *"the majority of us are treated very well"*. The third participant emphasizes that: *"I have very positive impressions from the locals"*. Likewise, the fourth participant believes that *"they treat us very positively"*. The 6th participant informs us that *"I have not heard much negative (comments)"* and that *"the good thing is that at least here in Leros that we are very peaceful [...]. Most are happy"*. The seventh participant agrees with the above (*"Positive. Very positive."*). But also the ninth participant, who judging by the reactions of the members of the theatrical group distinguishes a positive attitude, full of interest (*"we had the reactions of the members of our own group, who found it extremely interesting "*).

The fifth participant observes that the local community is neither positive nor negative, as it is divided (*"there are those who applaud it and there are those who are on the other side"*).

And the eighth participant identifies a hesitation of the local community towards the work of the educators, judging by the reactions of his circle (*"I do not hide from you that in the beginning they were a bit advisory"*).

In general, it seems that the majority of the local community has a positive attitude towards the work of the participants, because, as the educators themselves characteristically state, *"the community of Leros for the most part [...] realized that it is good that we employ adult refugees and are busy during their day, otherwise more problems could be created if they had zero employment "*.

5. Conclusions

According to the information gathered, it seems that, although the cooperation with the NGO, the relations with the local community and the trainees are at a very good level, problems such as the lack of training, the difficult conditions of the hospitality structures, the lack of appropriate teaching materials, the constant movement of the trainees and the unstable composition of the teaching group greatly complicate the work of the trainers.

In participants' point of view, the creation of an organized plan that will be funded by the state and will take care of their training, will improve the living conditions of the trainees, but also will utilize the already existing knowledge of the refugees, would improve significantly their working conditions and would make their work less exhausting. This is a conclusion reached by a recent research by the Citizen's Advocate (Pottakis & Nikolopoulos, 2017). Of course, because, as already mentioned, the refugee issue and especially the issue of adult refugee education is relatively recent, little research has been done in this area. Very important would be the results of research that would explore the views of educators in another NGO or another place with refugee accommodation structures.

To conclude, the role of adult refugee educators is multiple and difficult and their work extremely demanding. In Leros, the education of adult refugees has been undertaken by people who, for the most part, had neither the experience nor the theoretical knowledge, nor the support of the official state. However, working with passion and pure humanity, redefining their own values and breaking down pre-existing stereotypes, they managed to overcome difficulties and produce work that is recognized by both the local community and the refugees themselves.

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