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Risk and Protective Factors in the Provision of Academic and Psychosocial Support for Refugee Adolescents in Greece: The Case of the Skaramagas Learning Centre

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers regarding the protective and risk factors involved in providing academic and psychosocial support to refugee adolescents through a nonformal education program in a temporary accommodation facility in Greece. A thematic analysis of focus groups reports highlights the importance of creating opportunities for meaningful participation, the critical role of teacher–student empowering relationships, the challenges of navigating socio-cultural barriers, and operational difficulties inherent in emergency education settings. Findings emphasize the complex interaction between individual circumstances and contextual factors essential in promoting resilience among refugee adolescents in transitional settings.

KEYWORDS

refugee adolescents; protective and risk factors; academic and psychosocial support; emergency education; Greece

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine la perception des élèves, des parents et des enseignant.e.s en ce qui concerne les facteurs de protection et facteurs de risque liés à la fourniture d'un soutien scolaire et psychosocial aux adolescent.e.s réfugié.e.s au moyen d'un programme d'apprentissage non formel dans un établissement hébergement temporaire en Grèce. L'analyse thématique des rapports des groupes de discussion souligne l'importance de créer des occasion de participation significatives, le rôle essentiel des relations d'autonomisation entre les enseignants et les élèves, les défis liés au franchissement des barrières socioculturelles et les difficultés opérationnelles inhérentes aux contextes éducatifs d'urgence. Les résultats soulignent l'interaction complexe entre les circonstances individuelles et les facteurs contextuels essentiels à la promotion de la résilience chez les adolescent.e.s réfugié.e.s dans des situations de transition.

INTRODUCTION

The years 2015 and 2016 marked an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, as over a million refugees moved to Europe, fleeing forced displacement, violence, and persecution in their home countries (European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations [ECHO], 2017). Greece, one of

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the main gateways to the continent, experienced a significant influx of new arrivals in 2015, as an increased number of refugees sought resettlement in central and northern European countries (ECHO, 2017; UNHCR, 2016a, 2016b). This surge in arrivals was largely due to the sharp increase in people using the Eastern Mediterranean route from Türkiye to Greece, most of whom were refugees fleeing wars, conflict, and insecurity in Syria and other countries in the Middle East. The implementation of the European Union–Türkiye agreement in March 2016 aimed to address the refugee crisis by limiting irregular migration from Türkiye to the EU. This led to nearly 60,000 people being stranded—more than 23,000 of whom were children—in overcrowded camps in Greece (UNHCR, 2016b).

In this emergency context, the Greek government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) assumed formal responsibility to take action concerning school-age children's fundamental right to education. Providing structured and meaningful educational activities for refugee adolescents in schools or in informal learning spaces within temporary refugee accommodation facilities was critical not only for their academic progress and educational attainment but also for their social-emotional well-being and future integration in the host countries (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children, 2017). Despite the various educational policies and interventions implemented during this period in Greece, limited research has explored the role these initiatives played in providing academic and psychosocial support to refugee adolescents.

The purpose of this article is to describe the perceptions of adolescents, parents, and teachers regarding a nonformal education program focused on language acquisition, remedial education, and life skills activities at Skaramagas Refugee Camp, a temporary accommodation facility in Greece. Following an ecological perspective, this qualitative study employed semi-structured focus group interviews to gain an understanding of their perspectives on protective and risk factors in providing academic and psychosocial support through the emergency program implementation. Given the importance of designing equitable and responsive educational services to ensure the continuity of education for forcibly displaced adolescents, it is essential to identify the factors that enable or hinder their ability to thrive in transitional settings.

EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS: EXPLORING RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Forced migration is not a single event but a dynamic process involving multiple moves between countries with diverse living conditions and potentially traumatic events (Crawley & Jones, 2021; Snel et al., 2021). Refugee adolescents are particularly vulnerable to psychological, behavioural, and emotional problems, as well as school failure, due to several risk factors encountered throughout their migration journey. These factors include direct and indirect exposure to violence or other potentially traumatic events, family separation, insecure asylum status, precarious living arrangements, varying levels of adjustment to the host society, and lack of social support (Fazel et al., 2012; Kien et al., 2019; Scharpf et al., 2021). Unaccompanied refugee minors constitute a particularly vulnerable group due to the unique challenges they encounter, which have been shown to systematically disrupt their access to education and impede their educational attainment (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022).

Data from over 70 countries revealed that by the end of 2022, more than half of the world's nearly 15 million school-age refugees remained out of formal education (UNHCR, 2023). In the same data, enrollment in secondary education for refugee children stood at 41% compared to 65% in primary education. However, enrollment in national education systems does not always guarantee access to quality education (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). In other words, there seems to be a disconnect between the recognition of equal educational opportunities as a fundamental human right in international agreements, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) and the 2015–2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4, Quality Education; United Nations, 2015), and the reality that forcibly displaced adolescents are disproportionately excluded from national educational systems. Previous studies have also documented the unique challenges refugee adolescents face in their educational engagement and attainment such as intermittent education, language barriers, deficits in teacher training, diverse curricula and teaching methodologies in a variety of formal and nonformal education settings, often with few resources, low social inclusion, discrimination, and high dropout rates (Abu-Amsha & Armstrong, 2018; Baak et al., 2023; Bešić et al., 2020; Cook & Kim, 2023; Crul et al., 2019; Hossain, 2023; McDiarmid et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2023).

Despite these adversities, many refugee adolescents demonstrate remarkable resilience and successfully adapt to their new environments (Dangmann et al., 2022). Both formal and nonformal educational systems play a crucial role in fostering the resilience of refugee adolescents by creating an environment of warmth and stability. Such an environment helps strengthen their coping mechanisms and mitigate the effects of trauma and toxic stress in constantly changing and fragile contexts (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022; Burde et al., 2016; Lynnebakke & de Wal Pastoor, 2020). This is especially important in humanitarian emergencies, where access to various educational environments often provides the only means of obtaining culturally sensitive and equitable educational services (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2020).

Education for refugee adolescents in distant resettlement host countries differs significantly from that in countries of first asylum due to prolonged stays in refugee camps, interrupted schooling, and short-term planning within education systems (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023). Consequently, the phase of migration or asylum process rather than the individual educational needs often determines access to quality education. This leaves many refugee adolescents without equal and sustainable educational opportunities, risking their future prosperity (Abdelhamid et al., 2023). These findings underscore the need to examine contextual risks and protective factors to understand and respond to the distinct needs of the growing population of forcibly displaced adolescents in transitional settings within hosting countries of first asylum. This case study contributes to the evidence base by emphasizing the importance of supportive nonformal educational environments for refugee adolescents navigating states of transition and uncertainty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary ecological models offer a comprehensive understanding of the risk and protective factors at different levels and their powerful impact on refugee adolescents' psychological well-being and educational progress (Arakelyan & Ager, 2021; Panter-Brick et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al.,

2018). These models build upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems theory by emphasizing not only the effects of past trauma and adverse experiences but also the ongoing social conditions and displacement-related stressors that affect refugees' mental health and psychosocial well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Silove et al., 2017; Sleijpen et al., 2016). A broader ecological framework of refugee health considering risk and protective factors across multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, school, community, society) and phases of displacement (pre-migration, transit, and resettlement) is therefore recommended; this lens acknowledges the interactions between factors at the many levels of refugee adolescents' social ecology (Scharpf et al., 2021).

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2018) identified risk and resilience factors for the psychosocial adjustment of children and youth in post-migration contexts across various levels: (a) the global level, (b) the political and social contexts of reception, (c) the microsystems, and (d) the individual level. Success in age-appropriate developmental tasks, such as academic achievement and proficiency in the host country's language, indicates positive adaptation and well-being, especially refugee adolescents who have been exposed to highly traumatic experiences. Within this framework, multilevel interventions addressing interactions between ecological systems, engaging proximal processes (children and parents/guardians, peers, and adults), and supporting the agency of refugee adolescents have the greatest potential impact (Arakelyan & Ager, 2021). This integrative framework guided the analysis of this study uncovering the dynamic interaction between personal circumstances and contextual factors in creating a supportive and meaningful educational environment for refugee adolescents in a humanitarian setting.

THE SKARAMAGAS LEARNING CENTRE

During the summer of 2016, Skaramagas, an old navy base located in the outskirts of Athens, accommodated 3,000 refugees, of whom 96% were families from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. To address the educational needs of adolescents residing in the refugee accommodation facility, British Council, in partnership with UNICEF (funded through the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations), developed a nonformal education program with the aims of ensuring access to education, promoting school readiness, and providing psychosocial support to adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (Adamakis et al., 2024). This emergency program was implemented for 18 months, from November 2016 to May 2018, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Education and other NGOs operating in the facility. The objective was to support refugee adolescents' transition into formal education by helping them develop the necessary language, academic, and social skills. This was an important initiative as the Greek educational system at that time lacked the capacity to accommodate the large number of school-aged refugees (Crul et al., 2019; Koehler et al., 2022).

The program utilized a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach, incorporating language instruction (English and Greek), remedial education, and life skills development through drama, photography, art, sports, and music. To enhance students' learning and promote social inclusion, students participated in various socio-cultural activities and field trips (see Delaney, 2017, for more information on the program's conceptual framework, methodology, and curriculum). The program included teachers' training seminars on child protection, trauma-informed practices, and resilience-building (see Adamopoulou, 2019, regarding the

contents and methodology of the training seminars). A full-time school psychologist was available to support students' social-emotional needs. Teachers were also given access to a 24-hour online counselling helpline to address secondary trauma and stress.

This study focused on the second phase of program implementation (December 2017–May 2018), during which 101 adolescents (62 male, 39 female) participated for 2 hours of instruction each day. Students aged 12 to 17 years (n = 31, ages 12–13; n = 27, ages 14–15; n = 43, ages 16–17) attended the program. The students originated from Iraq (57%), Syria (24%), and Afghanistan (19%). The languages spoken included Kurdish dialects (61%; Kurmanji, 42%; Sorani, 19%), Arabic (20%), and Dari (19%). Ten students were unaccompanied, and 59 students attended Greek public schools. Of these, 36 participated in afternoon preparatory classes,[1] while 20 attended morning schools. Student enrollment and attendance fluctuated due to the open-access nature of the program, with students entering and leaving the program based on the progress of their asylum procedures. Cultural mediation was provided on an as-needed basis through collaboration with a specialized NGO.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was used in this study. This methodology is particularly effective for exploring phenomena in specific contexts as it empowers minority voices and encourages researchers to consider their own biases when working with research participants from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Ungar, 2003). Thus, it provides insightful information on the protective and risks factors of programs that support the academic and psychosocial needs of refugee adolescents in an emergency context.

Participants

Participants in the focus groups included 27 refugee adolescents, aged 12 to 17 years, along with 6 parents and 6 teachers. Students and parents were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq and had been in the refugee accommodation facility for 2 to 18 months. The length of students' participation in the program ranged from 2 to 17 months. Prior to their arrival, many of the students had been exposed to traumatic events and had experiences of limited or interrupted formal education. Five of the six teachers and one program staff member participated in the study (Table 1).

Data Collection

This study was completed by one professional psychologist, one university psychology professor, and one master's-level graduate psychology student. Data were collected from seven focus group interviews held between April and May 2018 at the nonformal education program's premises. The second and third authors conducted the interviews, while the first author facilitated participant recruitment with the help of the program staff. All students, parents, and teachers involved in the program were invited to participate in the focus groups, and all who volunteered were able to do so. Five focus groups were conducted with students, one with parents, and one with teachers and staff. As this was the first time participants interacted with the two researchers, special care was taken to establish trust; the researchers focused on how they communicated and engaged with participants. To ensure comfort and inclusivity, student groups

[1] These transitional classes serve students aged 6–15 years living in refugee accommodation centres for 1 year. They operate during an afternoon shift for 4 hours in nearby school units and offer a reduced curriculum, including Greek and English language, mathematics, sports, arts, and computer science (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children, 2017).

Table 1

Focus Group Participants' Demographics

Focus group	Number of participants	Age (years)	Gender (males/females)
Student group 1	6	12–15	3/3
Student group 2	6	12–15	4/2
Student group 3	4	12–15	2/2
Student group 4	6	16–17	4/2
Student group 5	5	16–17	4/1
Teachers and staff	6	Adults	2/4
Parents	6	Adults	1/5

were composed of mixed-gender classmates. Three interpreters (an Arabic and Sorani speaker, a Kurmanji speaker, and a Dari speaker) assisted in the communication between the researchers and participants. Their role was to translate researchers' questions into participants' native languages and their responses into Greek.

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed by the authors based on the study's objectives. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions to clarify responses or elicit additional insights. Focus groups discussions lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data Analysis

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim by the third author, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis by the two first authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and its ability to capture complex social contexts, making it well-suited to examining diverse perspectives on the nonformal education program. The analysis began with data immersion, where the authors repeatedly read the transcripts to identify initial ideas. Detailed line-by-line coding followed, with the authors independently generating initial codes related to key protective and risk factors at different levels of refugee adolescents' social ecology. To ensure rigour, triangulation across participant groups (students, parents, and teachers) was employed, along with meetings to discuss discrepancies and reach a consensus. The third step involved synthesizing the initial codes into larger themes. In the fourth step, the coded data were refined: the authors reviewed the coded data extracts for each theme to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes. An iterative analytical process allowed the authors to move back and forth between the focus groups, refining and collapsing categories to strengthen reliability. Given the first author's extensive experience in refugee education, efforts were made to reflect and mitigate any preconceived notions that might influence data interpretation. This reflective process included ongoing discussions of the researchers' perspectives and potential impact on interpretation, supporting the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical procedures outlined in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, as well

as relevant European research standards (European Commission, 2010). Prior to participating in the focus groups, participants were given both verbal and written information regarding the study in their primary languages. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that confidentiality and anonymity was assured. Students gave oral consent to participate in the study, while written informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians. Participants were also informed about data management procedures and signed a consent form before data collection began. Participants' personal information was removed from the final quotes to maintain confidentiality, particularly given the small number of participants in the parents' and teachers' focus groups.

RESULTS

Themes that emerged from the analysis pertained to protective and risk factors, which were reflective of the dynamic interactions between individual processes and both proximal and distal social contexts within refugee adolescents' social ecology, in the provision of academic and psychosocial support in an emergency context.

Creating Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

All three groups highlighted the program's inclusive, experiential, and participatory learning activities that offered refugee adolescents valuable opportunities to develop essential skills and competencies. Parents emphasized the importance of language learning, especially English, as a tool of empowerment and survival. One parent compared speaking multiple languages to having "seven humans in one person," whereas another shared how their daughter used English to interpret for the family during their refugee journey: "While we were in prison, my daughter was interpreting for us in English, and she was helping us. To my point of view, English and other languages may help them a lot—especially the English language."

Despite the instructional challenges, as most students were beginner English learners, teachers observed their positive progress in class and underscored the significance of language acquisition for communication, self-awareness, and social mobility. One teacher noted, "We teach English courses toward communication, so I feel like we are working toward the same aim, giving them [students] tools so that they can use them and on top of that give them awareness of who they are." However, students observed that some adolescents often overlooked the value of language learning for their future in Europe. One 14-year-old student reported, "Those who don't come think more about playing games and having fun they don't think that here—we are in Europe—we have to learn at least five languages. They should spend more time in the centre." Amid the uncertainty of the asylum process, students, parents, and teachers viewed English as essential to adolescents' successful migration.

Participants also referred to the music program, which involved teaching/learning songs from various cultures and languages, playing instruments, and participating in collaborative musical activities. One teacher noted, "Music is one of the best, funniest, and easiest ways to learn Greek or English or any language," highlighting its role as a "vehicle" for language learning and classroom collaboration. Another teacher added, "That's why I think music is important to be here, and that's why I feel very lucky; the children seem to enjoy it. It is also a great 'social glue' because you also sing on a third language."

Parents also recognized the positive impact of music lessons, observing that their children enjoyed learning and performing songs: "When the children come back home from music class, they are all happy and keep singing." Students evidently often shared what they learned with their families, indicating that the program's influence extended beyond the classroom. The implementation of a music program based on experiential pedagogy appeared to not only enhance language acquisition and curriculum delivery but also foster community and family involvement.

In their discussions, students highlighted the program's personalized learning environment in comparison with formal education. For instance, one 13-year-old student compared the program's math instruction to that in public school, saying, "We had math at the Greek school, but here at the program, they help us more, and I learn it better." Another 14-year-old student added, "It takes more time [at the Greek public school], while here it is helpful that they teach us everything word by word and it is better." Students were disappointed with their experiences in mainstream education due to the demanding curriculum and lack of differentiated instruction. One student explained, "It is better to learn here, because at the Greek school we are together with Greek students, who already speak Greek, and the teacher writes everything very quickly, so it is difficult for us to learn." Teachers also noted the program's supportive role: "Students learn some things that they can't probably learn so well in the Greek school."

According to teachers, the provision of multilingual, ethnically diverse, and mixed-gender classrooms facilitated not only students' academic growth but also their socialization into and participation in European life. One teacher noted, "I feel like this is a stepping stone, their first step of European integration, and I think that the part we play is not only about all these aspects of education, but also in terms of socialization." Immersion in an inclusive environment and the development of important life skills were particularly beneficial for the 16–17-year-old adolescents, who had limited educational opportunities due to the country's compulsory education age, which typically covers only those aged 6–15. As one teacher commented,

> I began to realize that children need extra stimuli; they really expect this, and they really want it—especially the older children who don't go to the Greek public school. They really seem eager to get in touch with new ideas.

It was essential for students to develop transferable intercultural skills applicable in other contexts, as noted by another teacher: "You can see from the social development that has taken place so far that they can act independently and transfer things from here to more people."

Consequently, the program offered meaningful activities through inclusive and interactive methodologies, which contrasted with the traditional teaching methods in Greek public schools.

Empowering Teacher–Student Relationships

Participants described the relationships of students with teachers as crucial and supportive, highlighting the importance of creating a caring and trustworthy educational environment in an emergency context. Students reported that their relationships with teachers contributed to their overall experience in the nonformal education program. For example, they expressed confidence in their teachers with statements such as the following: "They are very good teachers. We are learning. The teachers care about us. We trust them." These positive relationships motivated students to

participate in activities, even in those they initially disliked or were skeptical about attending. For example, one 16-year-old student stated, "I don't like music, but I like the teacher who is teaching us music; he told us that it is about the feeling and that music comes from the heart, and that's what I like about it."

According to parents, the strong relationships between teachers and students was a critical factor in their children's motivation to attend the program. One parent observed: "When my son is at home, he wakes up very early to come here; he trusts the place; he feels trust to come here at the program and study." Teachers also recognized that the positive relationships with students are significant for engaging them in learning: "Certainly there is trust, as I have said before, they choose to be here, so having a good relationship with them is essential."

The empowering learning process was critical in building relationships between refugee adolescents and their teachers. One teacher noted, "I really believe that they trust me, and the teacher is always the easiest one to approach because they feel confident with the lesson, so they feel really easy with me." Parents also noted how supportive learning experiences and academic success were the foundation for the development of caring relationships between teachers and students. One parent observed, "He also goes to two more places to study, but he doesn't show so much attention over there; he is left behind, but here he is more patient, and he agrees with the way teachers teach them." Another parent added, "Here you put a lot of pressure on children to study, which somehow makes the children feel like they trust the educational system, so they prefer to study a lot." Compared with formal educational settings, the program's student-centred learning environment, structured expectations, and caring relationships contributed to greater motivation to learn.

Additionally, parents highlighted the advising role of the teachers:

> Often the children come here and dress up with whatever they have. They just keep coming in the same clothes. If teachers told them to change their clothes, they may want to change them before coming to the school.

Parents viewed teachers as respected role models and acknowledged their influential role in their children's lives.

All three groups recognized that the high-quality student-teacher relationships had a positive effect on students' well-being. Students referred to feeling happy and enthusiastic about attending the program. A student said, "We are excited; we didn't like it when it closed during holidays. We feel happier since we have started the program." Feeling successful in their learning created a positive learning experience. A 15-year-old student said, "We feel happy. We like it. We feel like we are learning, and the teachers are good." Parents also acknowledged that the program made their children happy: "My son says that this teacher did this, and this teacher did that, and he is always happy with the children." Most parents felt joy when their children thrived, underscoring the value of a supportive and trusting educational environment for the whole family: "When I ask the children, they tell me that they are happy, they are learning from the teachers and it is joyful for them, and since they enjoy it, we are happy."

For teachers, the centre was a safe space within the refugee accommodation facility. One teacher noted: "We have managed to have them being around the learning centre, even if they don't have something to do here, because they feel it as if it is their second home." This focus on providing physical and emotional safety contributed to refugee

students' engagement in learning and their overall well-being. A 17-year-old student commented: "The children are safe here; they are studying for some time, and then they are going out to have fun and come back; the children are very happy that they are coming here in the camp." In short, the program became a supportive educational hub for students in the refugee accommodation setting, offering a nurturing and supportive environment that met their educational and emotional needs.

Navigating Socio-Cultural Barriers

The third theme represents the barriers within the social ecology of refugee adolescents that impacted their participation. Parents stressed the importance of their involvement in their children' education, particularly in monitoring behaviour: "Children must come to the program and learn, and parents should show interest in them, asking them about the program, ask them why they missed a day, what happened, and so on." However, teachers observed that not all families provided support in their children's learning: "Families are not always supportive, and you cannot actually do anything for that. You can only go door to door and say, 'We are here.'" Even engaged parents who attended teacher–parent meetings faced language barriers that limited their deeper involvement; one teacher noted, "We have a lot of success with parents, but there are also barriers because of the language and translations." Students also recognized the significance of teacher–parent meetings for keeping parents informed. One 12-year-old student stated, "Our parents attend the meetings, they come to the program for them. They like the fact that they know what the children are doing."

The absence of parental involvement and adult supervision especially undermined the educational engagement of unaccompanied older students. As one teacher stated,

> We also have some older students, especially the boys, who are free to go around unaccompanied. They find friends in Athens, and they don't come so much anymore. We are also losing them due to the same reasons that the Greek public schools lose students.

Teachers also identified cultural barriers that affected students' attendance in the program. One teacher highlighted the gender-based restrictions that female students faced regarding program attendance and engagement: "Last year, they [parents] also didn't want the girls to have physical education; it was quite difficult convincing them to let them play sports, which they had never played before." These barriers often included the influence of powerful male figures in the family. One teacher commented, "In the absence of the father's figure the older brother had that role. So, basically if the older brother didn't come, the girls didn't come to the program." Additionally, some parents objected to music lessons for their children, particularly girls, citing religious concerns: A teacher noted, "I talked to the parents as well, but they were not willing to co-operate with that because they think their religion doesn't allow them to do that, so it was a complete failure in these cases."

In light of these obstacles, teachers stressed the importance of seeing parents not as a homogeneous group but as individuals with their own cultural perspectives. One teacher remarked:

> We have made efforts to talk to the parents about how important it is to engage the children in the whole curriculum, and we have some success. There are different types of parents and within every culture we have different types of parents as well.

Teachers navigated cultural conflicts by negotiating educational matters with parents to facilitate their children's participation

in the program activities. For instance, one teacher recounted an incident with a father who, despite his initial refusal, permitted his children to attend music lessons:

> There is a win for three cases, where the father doesn't really approve music as a tool of education or as a learning subject, but at the end, he let his children be here and be part of the music lesson, but not go to the concert, so it was a half success in these cases.

Teachers also identified the late-night culture at the refugee accommodation facility as an obstacle to student attendance and educational engagement: "Our morning classes are early morning classes, and the culture of the camp is nocturnal." Students shared similar thoughts, mentioning that the late hours hinder some students' ability to attend the program: "Students don't come because they want to sleep and it's very early. They sleep late—[until] like four or five o' clock."

Another significant barrier was the pressure on students to work to support financially their families during resettlement. One teacher commented, "Some parents prefer their children to work and not come to the program. Then, there are people that expect to leave and go to Germany. They don't care at this phase." In other words, some families prioritized financial assistance from their children over education, especially if they expected to relocate.

Furthermore, some unaccompanied adolescents were afraid to register in the program due to lack of official documentation, as illustrated by a teacher:

> We have some unaccompanied children who came a few weeks ago to enroll in the program because they were afraid to come earlier due to not having proper papers. They were afraid to be caught or something like that.

This hesitation can be explained by the fact that unaccompanied adolescents were reluctant to apply for asylum in Greece as they feared that it would hinder their ability to continue their journey to central and northern Europe.

In summary, insufficient parental involvement, cultural values, and challenges linked to transient living conditions were identified as significant barriers in refugee-background adolescents' social ecology. Teachers were instrumental in navigating and overcoming these barriers to support refugee adolescents' participation in the program.

Operational Challenges

The last theme encompasses teachers' discussions of the various infrastructural issues and operational challenges in the program's implementation stemming from the fragile context of the refugee accommodation setting. One teacher stated, "In the second year, when we opened the program, all the containers were damaged and broken. We were working with broken windows, and it was raining outside." Teachers also expressed frustration over the lack of essential educational material: "You need books to teach the children. Books came one month ago." According to teachers, delays in acquiring the necessary supplies affected lesson planning and undermined the quality of educational activities provided. Moreover, reliance on a "roaming system" for internet access hindered the implementation of technology-enhanced learning strategies that could benefit students' learning.

Even though teachers recognized that the strict policies and procedures of the organization were essential for maintaining the quality of the program's implementation in a constantly fluctuating environment, they also viewed their bureaucratic nature as a significant barrier to the program's effectiveness. For example, teachers expressed their frustration with these procedures as they delayed the financial support and resource al-

location that limited their ability to respond to students' immediate needs. One teacher commented on the time-consuming nature of these policies: "Then there are these policies and procedures that we have to follow, and everything needs time, and we have to follow a procedure and that's it." In view of these obstacles, the ambitious goals of the program proved challenging to achieve within its implementation framework. As one teacher noted, "All the financial support procedures take really long and consume all the time, yet I think this program was very densely designed, and it really demanded so much comparing to the period of implementation."

Another operational challenge was the reliance on external authorities, such as the Ministry of Migration Policy and NGOs, which affected the program's functioning. One teacher explained, "If something happens, only the camp manager is responsible to make decisions," and this could create delays in addressing urgent issues. One example is the lack of access control and the prolonged absence of a camp manager in the refugee accommodation facility (for almost 6 months), which left teachers, students, and parents at a heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerable to delays in decision-making beyond their control.

These obstacles required constant problem-solving and flexibility for practical problems to be addressed. One teacher said, "This is a project that required practicality and decision-making on the spot." Another teacher added, "This is a big part of the job for me, and you have great responsibility, unlike [in] mainstream education; in mainstream education you have to mention the problem but here you have to resolve the situation." At the same time, the disconnect between central decision-makers and on-the-ground staff caused frustration. A teacher noted, "Sometimes there was also a lack of understanding. Some people [administrative staff] had trouble grasping things without experiencing them first-hand, relying only on descriptions."

Despite these structural challenges of implementing the program within a vulnerable refugee setting, all teachers were grateful for the training opportunities and the opportunity to work in this context, and they regarded their roles as highly rewarding. One teacher stated:

> This is an interactive process between us and the children, and we learn so much from them and it seems really easy, but for me it is very important, and it makes a difference between this context and more mainstream working environments.

This reciprocal learning fostered resilience and mutual growth, with teachers feeling a strong sense of self-fulfillment and that they had meaningful impact on the lives of their students amid the fragile context of the refugee accommodation facility. At the same time, teachers appeared to be committed and adaptable to the fluctuating conditions of the program implementation despite the administrative constraints, infrastructure problems, and limited resources.

DISCUSSION

Students', parents', and teachers' voices revealed the complex interaction between personal circumstances and contextual factors that are particularly significant in the provision of nonformal educational activities to support the academic and psychosocial needs of refugee adolescents in a temporary refugee accommodation facility in Greece. The program's affirmative and supportive interventions helped adolescents develop a series of essential life skills not only for dealing with their current challenges but also for participating in European educational systems and societies in the future. Positive

teacher–student relationships were at the centre of this learning experience, supporting adolescents in their reintegration into education. Teachers were instrumental in navigating barriers related to parents' and families' cultural expectations and transient living conditions, as well as the short-term operation of the program.

For these adolescents and their families in transition, English was viewed as a global language capable of fulfilling their urgent communication needs in their migration journey. It facilitated their everyday interactions and completion of essential paperwork with welfare agencies, authorities, and teachers not only in Greece but also in any other European country they might eventually relocate to. Similar findings have been reported in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, where learning English was seen as a means for Syrian refugees to access new opportunities and vital global resources (Capstick & Delaney, 2016). Hokkinen and Barner-Rasmussen (2023) critiqued the prevailing language ideologies that prioritize host country language acquisition for refugees. They argued that learning English is more advantageous as it equips refugees for future international career prospects and possible relocations to third countries. Therefore, for refugee adolescents—especially in emergency transitional contexts-—learning English can serve as a valuable supplement or even an alternative to local language education. In this paradigm, refugee education should promote transnational skills, knowledge, and competencies, through supportive language acquisition practices, which adolescents can use flexibly across contexts, enabling them to pursue multiple futures simultaneously (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

The personalized and inclusive educational practices of the program, combined with strength-based pedagogical practices, fostered trusting relationships among teachers and students, creating a safe learning environment within the refugee accommodation facility. This needs-based approach aligns with practices found in other refugee emergency education programs (Proyer et al., 2021) and stands in contrast with the traditional teaching methods of formal schooling (Obondo et al., 2016). Differentiation in instruction was necessary to facilitate students' social-emotional and academic development, particularly considering that many refugee students had experienced pre-migration trauma or psychological stress and disruptions to their education related to displacement. Research has shown that students with forced migration backgrounds can demonstrate competence and resilience when teachers acknowledge and build upon their wealth of strengths and experiences (Darmody & Arnold, 2019). Creating a supportive educational environment that draws upon these existing competencies can help sustain refugee students' motivation, agency, and academic success throughout various stages of resettlement (Lynnebakke & de Wal Pastoor, 2020; Ungar et al., 2019). Consequently, the program served as an essential supplement to formal education, offering a more personal and flexible learning environment tailored to the needs of refugee adolescents.

The functioning of the nonformal program was particularly significant for older students, aged 16–17, who did not attend Greek public schools. This can be explained by the limited educational opportunities offered, as evidenced by the lack of transitional programs that focused on Greek language acquisition and effective assessment system for enrollment of older adolescents in general or vocational upper-secondary schools (Crul et al., 2019). These limitations, together with the fact that compulsory schooling

in Greece ends at age 15, hindered most older refugee adolescents from accessing the Greek education system. For those enrolled in upper-secondary schools, inadequate language and educational support or logistic barriers, including space in the formal schools, made it challenging to keep pace with their peers, leading to high dropout rates (Stathopoulou et al., 2025). The program was instrumental in addressing these systemic barriers by providing 16–17-year-old refugee-background adolescents with accessible learning opportunities, fostering social integration, and supporting their emotional well-being. This is significant considering that older refugee adolescents often have substantially lower educational attainment, affecting their long-term educational outcomes (Gerritsen et al., 2019).

This study also further evidences the importance of parental involvement and support in refugee students' education. While existing research has often focused on the challenges of parental engagement during the resettlement period in a new host country (Jäger et al., 2021; Li, 2018; Zaidi et al., 2021), it is important to recognize that many refugee families spend extended periods, sometimes years, in refugee camps within countries of first asylum. In these transitional settings, parents may choose children's social isolation over social integration to preserve the family's cultural beliefs and traditions (Kuru & Ungar, 2020). Thus, asset-oriented partnerships with families are needed to ensure refugee students can fully participate in the curriculum while cultural values are respected. For example, cultural orientation programs for both teachers and parents can help tackle cultural obstacles, ensuring that refugee families from diverse cultural backgrounds, educational systems, and expectations actively participate in their children's education (Chipalo, 2024). Such interventions could enhance parental self-efficacy in navigating the unique challenges of parenting in this context, leading to positive change in parental behaviour and reducing difficulties for adolescents (Viola et al., 2020).

Teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, prioritizing both the emotional and academic needs of their students in a challenging, fluctuating, and poorly resourced setting. Similarly, Abu-Amsha and Armstrong (2018) found that teachers' psychosocial and academic support played a critical role in fostering resilience among Syrian refugee students in a nonformal program in Lebanon. Educators' caring and academically supportive pedagogical practices have long been documented to have a profoundly positive impact on students' sense of their connectedness and academic success in the presence of substantial life challenges (Kaukko et al., 2021; Touloumakos et al., 2023; Ungar et al., 2019). Both formal and nonformal educational settings serve as important mediators in the resettlement process of young refugees by providing a stable and secure environment that nurtures their educational and psychosocial well-being (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022; Reyes, 2013). The provision of structured and meaningful educational activities, whether in schools or informal learning spaces, is equally essential for enhancing refugee adolescents' integration prospects in host countries (Burde et al., 2016; Cerna, 2019). Consequently, constant and substantial professional development and support for teachers, especially in nonformal education settings where resources are limited and the risk of burnout is high, are vital (Sagaltici et al., 2022). Such initiatives enable educators to effectively address the diverse needs of refugee students within the complex environment of refugee education (Adamopoulou, 2019).

Significant barriers to refugee adolescents' education and psychosocial adjustment included factors related to their transient living conditions and the need to support their families' displacement within the broader emergency political and social context of migration in Greece and Europe. The complex, multi-layered social ecology of these refugee adolescents influenced their educational outcomes and experiences, either independently or through interactions with one another, particularly in the face of adversity (Panter-Brick, 2023). Therefore, any effort to promote educational resilience in the context of migration should account for the dynamic, multidimensional interactions between these adolescents and their immediate environment, tailored to their specific socio-ecological context (Ungar, 2008). In such settings, creating a continuum of support between formal and nonformal education that considers contextual influences is essential for understanding and addressing the distinct needs of refugee adolescents and empowering them to access and continue their education.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is one of few that has explored the role of an emergency educational intervention in supporting refugee adolescents during the humanitarian refugee crisis in Greece from 2017 to 2018. The multi-stakeholder approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of all participants. Applying a social-ecological framework provided a better understanding of how these factors operate and reinforce one another, which may inform future efforts to enhance the education and well-being of refugee adolescents in transitional settings (Ellis et al., 2020). Thus, the qualitative methodology enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives moving beyond researchers' preconceptions.

In terms of limitations, the use of interpreters may have resulted in some loss of meaning, affecting the credibility and confirmability of the findings. Moreover, the modest sample size in this study was due to the significant challenges of data collection in the refugee accommodation facility. Engaging participants, especially parents, proved difficult; therefore, recommendations from the study must be tentative. While including participants who are willing to share their experience is essential for qualitative research, the experiences and perspectives of the study participants may not be representative of all refugee adolescents, parents, and teachers involved in the program. Thus, caution is needed in viewing these findings as representative of opinions and experiences in a specific socio-cultural context and should not be generalized to adolescents, parents, and teachers in other settings. In addition, the focus groups were not segregated by sex, which may have affected participants' openness and responses. However, despite these constraints, the study did capture key views and experiences of students, parents, and teachers.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of the humanitarian crisis in Greece, the Skaramagas Learning Centre became a hub for meaningful learning experiences and essential life skills for refugee adolescents, not only for dealing with their present life challenges but also for navigating the uncertain futures they face (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2024). Barriers operating within the various layers of the social ecology of refugee adolescents should be considered when developing educational interventions in countries of first asylum. The protective and risk factors identified in this study provide valuable insights

for policy-makers and practitioners in developing nonformal educational interventions in humanitarian settings.

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