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TEACHERS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES WHILE TEACHING REFUGEES IN GREECE: "IT'S PRETTY EXTREME"

ABSTRACT: Current global events lead to a sharp rise in the number of displaced persons. Since 2014, large new flows of refugees have been arriving in Europe and especially Greece, which has been the country through which many people on the move enter Europe (Koehler et al., 2018). Within refugee education, the role of teachers is acknowledged as critical facilitators of education (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Yet, few studies centre on teachers and their experiences while teaching. This paper explores how eight teachers describe their experience teaching in refugee education on the Greek islands and mainland and what they have learned from this life experience. Data was collected through interviews applying the biographical method inspired by Peter Alheit (1995; 2018). Within the analysis of teachers' narratives, there was a focus on challenges and teaching strategies they created in response to the challenges, as well as the teachers' ideas on the importance of education and variations in their stories due to working in different locations and teaching various age and gender groups. The learning experiences are contextualised with the concepts of transformative learning, habits of mind and points of view, connected to the Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow (1997; 2000; 2018). The challenges and strategies which emerged in teachers' experiences are discussed with the findings of previous studies on education in refugee contexts.

KEYWORDS: refugee education, education in emergencies, teachers, transformative learning experience.

Introduction

At the end of 2021, 89.3 million people worldwide were displaced. Roughly 53.2 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs), 27.1 million were refugees, and 4.6 million were asylum seekers. Fed by ongoing or new conflicts, the number of displaced persons (DPs) was estimated to exceed 100 million at the beginning of 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). Contributing hugely to this significant increase in the number of refugees worldwide is the 2022 invasion of Russia in Ukraine. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war forced approximately 7.7 million Ukrainian people to seek refuge across Europe, of whom 1.4 million are registered for temporary protection in Poland (UNHCR, 2022). The large numbers and rationalised international discourse make it easy to forget the social reality and lived experiences of individual refugees and anyone involved in supporting and facilitating temporary hosting and living essentials for displaced people.

The increased collaboration of humanitarian and development actors, especially the rise of the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus, has turned attention to education because of its profitable opportunities (Siddiqui & Nguya, 2020). For people in

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conflict-affected contexts or a situation of displacement, the classroom can be a dependable and safe environment (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Moumné & Sakai, 2017). Students' social and emotional needs can be met within the classroom, and crucial intellectual and social development opportunities are therefore created (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). This makes education an invaluable tool to mitigate trauma and develop resilience by providing skills and knowledge for facing current, past, and future crises (Burde et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2001). It is also believed that education can improve socialisation, promote peace and inclusion, and advance nation-building without violence or inflicted fear in crisis contexts (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Novelli, 2010; Rubinstein-Avila, 2016). Moreover, education is a human right conceptualised as a rule for normative behaviour by the Convention of Human Rights (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Its importance is also underlined in various international treaties and laws, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). Although education as a human right is stipulated on a supranational level, implementing education remains the responsibility of the nation-state (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

This issue of facilitating quality education for refugees is complex as it involves social, political, economic, psychological, and environmental perspectives (Wa-Mbaleka, 2012). European countries are increasingly concerned with the facilitation of quality education for refugees as host countries with larger influxes of people arriving on the continent since 2014 (Koehler et al., 2018). As a result, European countries face challenges in providing educational opportunities for newly arrived refugees. Various strategies have been undertaken, among which inclusion in public education is perceived as the most sustainable and ultimately aimed for (Koehler et al., 2018). Education is considered an essential means of structural integration because of the large number of children, adolescents, and young adults among DPs. Various European countries have undertaken efforts and developed strategic plans to include refugees in the national educational system, such as Greece (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2019).

Regardless of the decision-making authority on the macro-level, the responsibility of pedagogical implementation for these international agreements, and national laws and policies on education relies on teachers (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). This has prompted questions for me, such as: *Who are these teachers? What is their experience with teaching refugees? And what did they learn during this experience?* Mapping the theoretical field has granted insight in some of these questions. Besides working on written curricula and educational goals such as literacy and numeracy, teachers working within refugee education hold many other roles (Wa-Mbaleka, 2012). Teachers impart stability, continuity, routine, and support for students' physical, cognitive, and social needs

(Dryden-Peterson, 2017). However, few studies on refugee education focus on teachers and their experiences, which affect their teaching competencies and personality. Previous studies researching teachers' perspectives found that teachers are dissatisfied with their teacher training prior to the start of their position (Bodon & Votteler, 2017; Safotso, 2020; Simopoulos & Magos, 2020). Research conducted by Anastasia Papapostolou, Polyxeni Manoli and Anna Mouti (2020) revealed how teachers experience anxiety and challenges, mainly due to their lack of training in intercultural education. In Rabia Hos and Halil I. Cinarbas' (2018) and Pelin Taskin and Ozge Erdemli's (2018) studies, teachers mentioned that their prior teaching experience did not prepare them for the circumstances they encountered when teaching students with a refugee background. However, the experience of teaching in the temporary and non-formal setting of a crisis programme in Turkey stimulated learning by self-realisation and re-examination of their values and beliefs (Hos & Cinarbas, 2018). According to the interviewed teachers, this experience "contributed to their teaching and personal development and enhanced their civic responsibility and personal growth" (Hos & Cinarbas, 2018: 190).

Thus, fuelled by the current political crises and resulting migration waves, as well as the recognition of the crucial role of teachers in crisis settings, I decided on the significance of directing attention to teachers who teach refugees and researching their learning processes. My study was also motivated by personal interest in teaching and previous experience as a teacher, from which I have learned how becoming a teacher is an individual process and realised teachers have different priorities stemming from their norms and values. Their personality plays a part in teaching, classroom management, and student-teacher relationships. Aiming to understand the effects on and learning process of teachers working in crisis contexts, I utilise the transformative learning theory by Jack Mezirow (1997; 2000; 2018) to help recognise teachers' retold learning moments from life experiences. This paper is based on data collected for a previous study on reconstructing teacher identity in refugee education and elaborates on the preceding article by examining their learning process in terms of what they described as learning experiences¹. I will do so by centralising teachers' personal stories and reflections captured with a narrative interview design, applying the biographical method inspired by Peter Alheit (1995; 2018). This method allows for the exploration of an individual's life in its totality and elicits their own contextualised experiences. Eight teachers with experience educating refugees in Greece have reconstructed their life experiences for these interviews. The findings in this study are constituted of their vignettes and codes

¹ The original study referred to is a master's thesis for the master's programme in International and Comparative Education at Stockholm University titled "Re/constructing Teacher Identity in Refugee Education A Study on National and International Teachers' Narratives Working in Greece". For more information, please contact the researcher.

established from an inductive coding process. Together, these will answer the research question: What are the learning experiences of teachers teaching refugees?

By answering the question, this study will engage in current trends in education and support teachers facing challenges and dilemmas concerning their social reality. Especially in times of global conflict, there is an urgency to prepare teachers for new situations and protracted disequilibria to be faced. Research into teachers' experiences can give insight into what is needed or could be expected to ultimately contribute to educational quality for students and quality of life for teachers.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This article employs the framework of transformative learning as conceptualised by Mezirow (1997; 2000; 2018) and applies the biographical method from Alheit (2018) in the conduct of interviews. Alheit (2018) describes biographical learning as the influence of retelling one's life stories on learning processes. From my point of view, there are connections between the theories in terms of their assumptions and relatedness to adult learners, the opportunity for reflection and meaning making, and the influence of life experiences on learning. Both biographical learning and transformative learning view the creation of knowledge as a continuous process in which an individual develops themselves in relation to their life experiences. Biographical learning focuses on learning about one's own biography, for example, their previous experiences and social background (Bron & Thunborg, 2020). Learning is then understood as a process of reflexivity, meaning-making life experiences and constructing new knowledge through reflection (Alheit, 2018). Within transformative learning, the focus shifts to the meaning-making of experiences and critical reflection to evaluate, validate, or reconstruct existing meaning-making structures (Mezirow, 2018).

Mezirow (1997: 5) discusses that understanding our life experiences is "a defining condition of being human", which requires an independent evaluation of our frame of reference. The Transformative Learning Theory describes how the reference frame is composed of (1) the habit of mind and (2) the resulting points of view. The habit of mind is the precursor of the point of view and represents a broader, more abstract, and habitual way of thinking influenced by contextual factors, such as sociocultural, educational, economic, and religious perspectives (Mezirow, 1997; 2018). Habits of mind are articulated in beliefs, value judgements, attitudes, feelings, and memories. Points of view often surface in dialogue, for example, positive or negative attitudes, feelings, and judgements held against particular groups or individuals that possess different characteristics from our own (Mezirow, 2018). The durable habits of mind and

the more fluid points of view constitute reference frames. A reference frame defines an individual's meaning of the situation.

Central to transformative learning is the transformation of the reference frame (Mezirow, 1997), which is described to occur in various ways: (1) by elaborating on existing frames of reference, (2) by learning new frames of reference, (3) by transforming points of view, or (4) by changing habits of mind. A crucial part of the transformation process is a critical reflection of what constitutes the beliefs, interpretations, habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (1997) suggests that critical reflection arises mainly in communicative learning in which at least two persons aim for reaching an understanding of and consensus in their meaning-making processes and justifications. The result of transformative learning is the change of reference frames in "inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Klobučar, 2015; Mezirow, 2018: 116).

Another comparable descriptor between both theories is how they view learning as a process which occurs across time. Transformative learning is most often researched from the idea of (sudden) significant life crises (*epochal*), which trigger a disorienting dilemma and lead to the learning process (Klobučar, 2015; Mezirow, 2018). However, transformations because of transformative learning can also be continuous and represented in a progressive sequence (*cumulative*) (Mezirow, 2018). Biographical learning assumes a continuous learning process and follows pathways or transitions (Bron & Thunborg, 2020). The assumption that learning happens over a span of time, and is influenced by life experiences, benefits from a research method that allows for reflection on longer-term or past experiences.

Employing the transformative learning theory and biographical theory in this study helps understand teachers' learning processes in relation to their ideas on teaching and the specific group of refugees with whom they are in daily interaction. Furthermore, the narratives might elicit the reflection of teachers' reference frames and resulting behaviour as the frames of reference shape cognitions, feelings, and perceptions and predispose our beliefs, purposes, expectations, and intentions.

Methodology and Methods

Thus, underlying the choice of methodology for this study is the theoretical underpinning, as well as my ontological perspective of *constructionism*, which leads me to believe that an individual's social reality, including their ideas, beliefs, norms, and values, is shaped, and developed through interactions between individuals and their social contexts, grounded in specific cultural and historical backgrounds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hong & Cross Francis, 2020). Therefore, I chose to apply in-depth narrative interviews

following the biographical method. Narrative interviews elicit a participant's story without following a set of questions or the interviewer's lead and giving interviewees autonomy in their story (Każmierska, 2004). Narrative interviews allow for impromptu storytelling, uninterrupted by the researcher's questions and, thus individuality and subjectivity of the interview process. Adding the biographical approach in the discussions, inspired by Peter Alheit's method (2018), invites the exploration of the totality of an individual's processual life through which various contextual influences and life events can be connected. The narrative and individual actions are thus placed within a social context and situational conditions, representing the dynamic relationship between the individual and society, allowing for an understanding of the course and significance of daily events (Domecka et al., 2012). Research practice also assumes that retelling a life story will be of educational value to the individual in understanding, reflecting, and transforming thoughts and perspectives (Rosenthal, 2004).

Unlike most methods, conducting a narrative interview with the biographical approach means the interview is not the result of interactions between a researcher's questions and the participant's responses but solely based on the story of the participant and possibly on additional inquiries by the researcher for clarification of the story afterwards. However, there are still several approaches to narrative interview designs as proposed by previous studies. In this study, I used a method which combines the techniques of Tom Wengraf (2001), Gabriele Rosenthal (2004) and Kaja Kaźmierska (2004). Kaźmierska's (2004) 5-steps were adopted and assimilated into a form used during the interviews to take additional notes. The first and second phases, the initial phase and phase of stimulating narration revolve respectively around small talk to create a comfortable setting, ensure confidentiality and rights, and emphasise the importance of telling a personal story. The interview continued with the main storytelling phase, which was introduced with a single theme-based question but asked for the participant's life story, following Wengraf (2001) and Rosenthal (2004):

I am interested in your life story about teaching refugee education. You could start by telling me how you experienced being a teacher in refugee education and why you chose to do this. I would like to hear about your life that led up to this and what you might have learned from this about your past, present and future. Take your time, please.

During the main story phase, the participants tell their story without the interference of the researcher, excluding paralinguistic expressions of interest and attentiveness to support and stimulate the participant (Rosenthal, 2004). The fourth phase is additional inquiry, which regards internal questions for clarification of the told story. Lastly, the interview ends by closing the recording. I initiated an informal conversation to comfort the participants, thank them for their trust and time, and inform them about the further course of the study and their personal preferences for pseudonyms.

Procedure and Analysis

This study complies with guidelines for research ethics prescribed by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2017) and the European Commission on General Data Protection and Privacy (GDPR) for European studies concerning consent, confidentiality, and data storage. Data was collected online because of the uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic and the practicality of interviewing participants in various places. Recording the interviews online allowed for collecting audio and visual data, which was transcribed with attention to body language, eye movement and hand gestures in combination with audio-related cues such as silences, rephrases or stutters. The transcribed interviews were analysed following the thematic analysis by Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2006, 2022), which allowed for freedom and subjectivity in exploring the data and meaning making. I used NVivo to systematically keep track of and reorganise the codes and themes in an iterative cycle of inductive coding, following the six steps for thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2022): familiarisation through data condensation and transcribing, coding, generation of themes, and reviewing the themes, then defining the themes and lastly writing up the findings.

Sampling

The participants of this study were selected through various steps in a non-probability sample. A call for participants spread within my network on social media reached a group of people who had experience working with refugees and were interested in participating in the study. To limit the scope of the study, participants from a specific population were selected after considering various contextual factors: their pedagogical experience, their nationality, and the country in which they gained pedagogical experience, and their relation to the persons in my network or me. The last criterion was important to select a heterogeneous group of participants, whilst the first criterion enabled a contextualisation of results and comparison between national and international teachers in the original study. For this comparison, an equal amount of national and international teachers was included in the final sample of 8 teachers. Of the eight participants, four are described as national teachers because they were born in Greece or identify as Greek and teach in Greece. The four other participants are defined as international teachers since they did not identify as Greek and were not born or raised in Greece but moved (temporarily) to work with refugees. All participants identified as female. The age of the participants ranges between 22 and 37 years. Further details about the teachers' nationality, age, and background can be read in the participant's vignettes below.

Participants' Vignettes

Hera (she/her, Greek, 32) holds a university degree in education, and a post-graduate degree in pedagogy, education, and sociology, and she follows seminars on refugee education by the Greek government. She currently works as a primary school teacher close to Thessaloniki, teaching in different temporary positions but mostly involving immigrant and refugee students. Hera is very interested in other people and different cultures and felt inspired by Paulo Freire (1970), her study abroad semester, and her volunteering position as a teacher for adult immigrant students at the university. In her daily life, Hera is in close contact with refugees and immigrants who live in the same area.

Areti (she/her, 31), originally from Greece, is a Greek philologist and pursued a master's degree in Educational Sciences in the Netherlands. During her studies in the Netherlands, the Greek refugee crisis started, and Areti was inspired to support the situation. Her passion has always been about the inclusion and integration of minorities in education, as she believes in equality and equal human rights. She would like to research the potential of quality education for one's life and the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds on educational opportunities. She is currently working as a teacher in an international school, follows specific refugee-focused seminars in support and international education offered by the Greek government, and volunteers for several humanitarian organisations.

Cassia (she/her, Greek, 30) studied to be a general teacher in Greece and holds a master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences specialising in minority youth. After teaching in public education for one year, she was assigned a refugee reception class. Prior to her teaching position, she gained experience working with refugees in the Netherlands. Her passion for the inclusion of minorities inspired her involvement as a volunteer in an organisation which fosters the inclusion of queer youth in the educational system in Greece.

Rose (she/her, 29) is half-Italian, half-British, and grew up in Italy. For her university degree, she moved to the UK and studied Social Sciences while pursuing a career working for a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). The absence of social interaction led to enrolment in teacher training for shelters. After finishing the training, she worked for several NGOs on Samos as a teacher in English as a Second Language (ESL), both for male and female classes and female-only classes.

Sibylle (she/her, 25) was born and raised in Spain but moved to the United States with her family in her teenage years. She got involved in Greece's refugee crisis through her academic studies in Political Economy. She received a research grant to conduct

field research in Greece and started volunteering for humanitarian projects. She spent over two years teaching and coordinating education projects. She continued working with migrants. After returning to the United States, she started a volunteering position as a teacher in legal orientation in an immigrant detention centre. Since moving to Spain, she has been teaching immigrants Spanish.

Filia (she/her, Greek, 31) first started to engage in refugee education in 2016, when she was a student in a post-graduate teaching and planning programme. After half a year of facilitating refugee education with an NGO, she was presented with the opportunity to support opening a new school for refugees and migrants near Athens. She switched jobs and started working in a shelter for unaccompanied male minors. She is currently enrolled in her second postgraduate programme, Greek as a second language.

Lucy (she/her, 37) was born and raised in the United Kingdom. After completing her teacher training and obtaining a certificate in English language teaching for adults (*CELTA*), she started working as a primary teacher. She worked in the United Kingdom for a year and then travelled overseas to teach ESL. She worked overseas for 15 years in Greece in two different locations as both teacher and school coordinator. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, she returned to the United Kingdom and started teaching as a college teacher for newly arrived people.

Artemis (She/her, 22) is originally from the Netherlands. She studied Marketing and Communication but switched to International Development Management when she realised, she wanted to pursue a career working with people, which connects with her love for God within her religion and her passion for helping others in need. During her studies, she went to Lesbos for an internship, initially in the Social Care team. Due to pressing demand, she started assisting teachers and became a teacher and teacher trainer after. During her work in the shelter, she researched classroom behaviour influenced by trauma.

Findings

The following section is organised according to four subthemes in the original study, focusing on how teachers discussed their learning experiences while teaching refugees and the particularities of refugee education. Hence, this chapter is divided into four sections: (1) challenges teachers experienced while teaching refugees, (2) the strategies teachers developed because of these challenges, (3) the importance of education expressed by teachers, likely influenced by their experiences, and (4) variations in experiences due to teaching on a location, or to a specific gender or age group.

Challenges teachers experienced while teaching refugees

Challenges for teachers teaching refugees was the most frequently used latent code (Braun & Clarke, 2022), applied when teachers brought up their challenges in refugee education, which mainly occurred implicitly, or when I noticed a pattern in their expressions and clarified with them in the additional inquiry phase of the interview. Teachers with pedagogical experience of teaching a class with children without refugee or immigrant backgrounds naturally compared their experiences of teaching in refugee education with their knowledge acquired in other teaching experiences. They explained the particularities of different cultural habits, language barriers, educational backgrounds, and situations related to their life experiences of fleeing their country: their families' living situations, as well as psychosocial and mental health and learning deficits. Teachers talked about the contextual conditions of shelters, including fights, fires, floods, electricity cuts, and arrivals. Artemis explained that it is often difficult to understand students' past and present situations and the resulting trauma and impact on psychosocial and emotional well-being. Past and ongoing experiences of living in refugee shelters or facing problems such as xenophobia were said to influence students' behaviour and cause tantrums, fights, or other reactions within the classroom. Filia talked about physical conflicts between students at her school because of cultural differences. Lucy also mentioned how some situations could easily trigger these students:

Their emotional level is much more like alert mode, survival, and mood. They may be less resilient actually in the classroom, even though as a human they are way more resilient than most people. But yeah, in the classroom and maybe their emotions might be more like quick to go.

Rose explained that this complex setting is difficult to deal with and makes a person question their behaviour as a teacher and how they behave towards refugee students.

The teachers talked about their desire to support the psychosocial well-being of students through conversations about their hobbies and previous professions, or their background – in case this is permitted. However, this proved to be too difficult given the language barrier, as exemplified by Rose: “I couldn't really work on this topic with my students because it was such a low level we were doing. Like ‘water, orange, apple.’ There was no way to discuss these more complex ideas”. Moreover, Hera mentioned that communicating classroom rules and creating a collaborative environment is complex for teachers. Sharing a sense of belonging and making friends must be challenging for refugee students, let alone understanding the content of what is being taught in the classroom. However, teachers indicated that DPs are often interested in learning English. Lucy talked about teaching English to refugee students motivated to learn and work seriously: “Teaching English is like the most obvious thing. Like everybody wants it over. Yeah. All refugees wanted [it], no matter where they're going [to be], is

the thing they know. Wherever they are, it'll be useful". This was not the same for learning Greek, the national language, as the students did not necessarily want to stay or pursue education in Greece, especially those living in shelters on the islands. Individual differences create a gap between students being motivated to learn the language or not seeing the use of learning the language of the country in which they temporarily reside. Teachers noticed how explaining the importance of speaking the language to integrate into society and create friendships helped increase students' motivation, as noted by Sibylle who stated "They wanted to be integrated, they wanted to learn the language. They wanted to try everything they could, you know?"

Nevertheless, teaching a language remains a slow process, mainly when all socio-psychological needs are attended to first and only after this is there time for the content, as Filia emphasised: "Because we have to, to first consider the social and psychological parts, and then the teaching and the knowledge". Rose also said it could be frustrating for a teacher: "Also, teaching a language is such a slow process. So it can be a bit frustrating because I can't transfer a language to someone in a few days or a few months". Multiple teachers talked about their struggles with this slow progress or not seeing any progress in learning the language. Besides a lack of motivation, factors mentioned earlier, such as the new classroom environment, living situations, and trauma made progression in language learning difficulties.

Moreover, frequent new influxes of learners on the move change the class dynamics and require different strategies or repeating and changing content. This caused disappointment, frustration, and exhaustion among teachers, although many seemed hesitant to admit it in their narrative. Hera did explicate her frustration:

So also this [new influxes of students] is a challenge, because sometimes the teachers are like there to help them improve, to learn the language, to help to write Greek, to talk Greek. But okay, slow down, there are also many other important things. I am trying to do this, I am trying. Because sometimes I am not managing it. But I know that they are making improvement. Not in the tempo I want them to do, but they are making improvement.

The teachers mentioned several other challenges around the content, such as unsuitable themes like "shopping and pets, things that are maybe not so important in this context", which was noted by Rose.

All differences mentioned above, between educating students with or without a refugee background, emphasised power imbalances between students and teachers and non-refugees and refugees. Teachers firmly pointed out how refugee learners should be treated like any other person, not according to the external discourse around refugees, Lucy said: "yes, very difficult 'cause you don't want to make it like 'Oh they are special people!'". However, unequal power dynamics emerged numerous times in teachers' narratives in refugee education. Most teachers working in shelters and

schools are European citizens or international citizens with greater financial means, legal claims, and more stable living situations as well as the possibility to travel away from the place where they are teaching and residing – which creates a power imbalance, which was also explicated by Lucy: I always just kept saying, like, ‘the power, you have a passport, you can get up and leave if you have a argument, you can walk away and go back to your house and have a chill out area. They don’t’”. The hierarchy then intensifies the naturally present power imbalance between teachers and students, caused by the knowledge transfer from teacher to student in traditional education methods. Hera pointed out how this hierarchal relationship is the vessel to transfer political beliefs, implicitly and explicitly, through the curriculum or teacher: “Never it is only education. It is also political. It is always together this. It is never education without politics. That is what I believe”. Hera talked about the power one has over students, inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970). She explained how students learn from a person, from words, behaviour, and the ideas and perspectives communicated and how these have a long-lasting effect on their lives:

I mean like how you teach, the way you teach is full of, eh ...how to say that... full of words that says what is right and what is wrong [...] this is how they can behave outside if they were, if they will be racist, if they will be kind, if they will learn to fight for their rights.

Another example of politics in education brought up by the teachers is inclusion. They talked about the inclusion of refugees in the national education system, as well as the inclusion of minorities as pointed out by Cassia:

I try to connect all these things, you know, with, um, minorities and have a more intersectional way of, like teaching. [...] you can be a member, for example, of many minority groups and how these affect you in general but also the way that, [...], your mental health.

Hera also explained how she is a proponent for inclusion:

we don’t need to cut, how to say, to cut the students. So for example, education for disabilities, education for refugees, education for general students. All this is a general education and we can all be here. We can have a lesson and we can also have a child with a disability, a child from another country, a child with one parent, a child with two gay parents and whatever. This is our community, so this is our class also.

There is a fine line between individual attention aiming to ensure they have the means to integrate into the system and making them feel like outsiders by organising separate activities. Areti mentioned how refugee learners are offered an educational moment apart from other children in a Saturday school:

I mean it’s nice, but still it’s not, it’s again like you are a bit, doing this kind of segregation in a way. Because you bring them on a Saturday and then you have these kinds of activities. But it’s on a Saturday and it’s not on a weekday. And maybe that’s what could be changed a bit in the future.

Simultaneously, integration into the national educational system requires structural changes, which Greece has attempted. Filia explained how the reception classes are organised to ensure the children can transition smoothly into the national system. Still, while they are in the process of learning Greek, non-native students must also attend regular classes taught in Greek, and it is debatable how functional and motivating these classes are for them, as illustrated by Filia:

Let's explain to you, when a refugee goes to public school, he has to attend a special class reception class in order to learn the language ... and also some hours they have to attend this special class. And the other hours they have to be with other kids, but when the kids are in their general class, the teachers didn't give any special exercises or something easier. They [refugee students] do the same lesson for everyone, so they don't understand and they feel that I'm sitting in my desk and I don't know anything. I don't understand anything.

All the factors mentioned above separate refugees from national students in public education. The issue of xenophobia was brought up by Greek teachers teaching on the mainland. A hostile environment towards refugees from the host community, and even among the teachers exists parallel to teachers and people who advocate for welcoming refugees. Areti mentioned the sharp contrast between her and her social circle: "I have friends that are racist towards refugees and immigrants because they think like we can't really have them and because that's what has been heard of course from the propaganda". Her profession did create more awareness and understanding among her social network and helped them become more open-minded, which was also the case for other teachers and their social circles.

Strategies teachers developed

The teachers described how the challenges require adaptability, flexibility, and resilience. While experiencing challenges, teachers also discovered strategies to overcome or cope with them. For example, several teachers addressed the importance of rules, including Artemis: "we grant them a sense of safety by offering rules"². These rules are also of importance to classroom management, which is not as self-explanatory as it can be in a class of learners with a homogeneous ethnic background, students who have grown up with the same educational culture in the same country, or perhaps in a different country but with a similar academic culture. Artemis also pointed out that "then there are children who have never been to school because of the war in their mother country"³. Hera also mentioned that often, if they have been to school, their habits

² This quotation was translated into English, the original Dutch excerpt is: "we geven ook een soort van zekerheid door regels te bieden".

³ This quotation was translated into English, the original Dutch excerpt is: "en dan heb je sommige kinderen die nog nooit naar school zijn geweest door de oorlog in hun thuisland".

within a classroom setting and perceptions of rules are very different than expected in their host country. Hera, in her narrative, explained how this is troublesome to follow the rules: “So from where do they [refugee students] know this [class rules]? They maybe haven’t gone to kindergarten. Now they are in the first year of primary school without going to kindergarten. So this is a bit gap. They are all challenges”.

Establishing a collaborative environment for students has also proved vital to them experiencing the feeling of safety and helps make education more enjoyable according to all teachers, as exemplified in the following quotation of Hera: “[...] because maybe sometimes it is more important to make them feel safe. Feel good, feel like ‘this is my school, not their school, and I am here like an alien’, then to learn them make a sentence”. Filia also talked about the atmosphere in the classroom and school and how important it is for the students to feel welcome, especially in foreign and even hostile environments: “I think as I see the most important is to make these kids, to feel welcome. Because I see, especially in the public schools. Um, they face a lot of racism and also from the teachers”.

However, not all challenges can be solved by teachers themselves, and there should be interventions for some. For example, many teachers voiced their need for better pre-service and in-service guidance and support, which could contribute to setting, understanding, and applying personal and professional boundaries. Teachers described other needs as well, which I construed in three overarching themes: (1) there is not enough teaching personnel, and more teaching support is needed to cover the workload as well as ensure the quality of education; (2) there is not enough support for teachers available; and (3) existing teaching material is insufficient.

The importance of education expressed by teachers

Furthermore, teachers’ visions of education or teachers’ ideas about the importance of education for refugees often emerged in the narratives and was coded as a latent code (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The participants had experienced this importance themselves, or their idea of the significance changed because of their experience teaching. Artemis explained how teaching refugees has changed her perspective on education and that we can continuously develop ourselves as humans. Sibylle also became more aware of the importance of continuous learning opportunities throughout life when teaching adults with a refugee or immigration background and talked about the importance of increased self-reliance: “we rely a lot on ‘an expert who will do it instead of understanding that it is something that people need to learn all the time, whether that is English or something else”. Besides self-reliance, a “feeling of safety” and “being part of the community”, mentioned by Lucy, are also reasons teachers mentioned the importance of learning languages for refugees. Rose mentioned ways in which education can help

provide a safe space and help take refugees' minds off the responsibilities they had in the shelter, as well as instil hope: "people living in the refugee shelter were so bored. There was nothing to do, they were feeling hopeless about their futures. So, this investment in their English was precious to them".

Education and explicitly teaching a functional language to stimulate integration in society were often brought up when talking about teaching women-only classes. Rose spoke about the potential of education and how educating women had empowered her and the female students. In the education of female refugees "[...] the focus was a lot of empowering women to make their own decisions [...]". Many teachers talked about the investment in education and what it could offer students if they had equal access to quality education. Teachers spoke about education as the place to teach valuable life skills, attitudes, and knowledge such as "to respect everyone and inclusion and freedom of speech" as pointed out by Cassia. She followed by explaining how teachers have an important role in this: "like how you are teaching or how you're teaching your classes. [...] like students can see you and they take these you know, characteristics and they can also adapt, they can also include them in their lives". Artemis also spoke about how education in crisis contexts is necessary for childrens' healthy mental and psychosocial development. According to her, education should always include and prioritise psychosocial support in crisis contexts since it holds the potential of protecting and fostering the well-being of students. Artemis explained that this is crucial for young refugees: "Because childhood, of course, is an essential part of a human's life, like all problems that you encounter as an adult have their roots in your childhood"⁴. Besides the content, Rose also explained how enrolment in education already advantages protection and how this was the goal of education within a shelter, "the idea was not that our students would learn much English, but that they would have a safe space to go". I noticed how teachers gave nuances to their expressed importance of education for minors, adults, or female students. This was not the only variation in teachers' narratives based on the age and gender of their students. I found that teachers' learning experience was also dependent on the age and gender of whom they were teaching, as well as where they were teaching.

Variations in experiences due to teaching in a location, or to a specific gender or age group

Teachers on the mainland often taught refugees and migrants from different locations together with children born and raised in Greece. This emphasises the importance of

⁴ This quotation was translated into English, the original Dutch excerpt is: "omdat natuurlijk de kindertijd is een heel erg belangrijk onderdeel van je mensen leven als in alles alle problemen die je dus volwassen tegenkomt zijn ergens ontstaan in je kindertijd".

learning, teaching, and applying intercultural communication within the classroom and in contact with immigrant or Greek parents. Furthermore, they mentioned the change in attitude towards refugees and immigrants in their social circle because of their work. Teachers on the islands relocated for their teaching job and were usually organised in NGOs, which led to an “NGO bubble”, as construed by Rose. Living and working on the Greek islands and the extreme context of refugee shelters was tough on their mental and physical health. Being closely involved with refugees and co-workers led to questioning ethical boundaries in student-teacher and refugee-volunteer relationships among many teachers. In any experience, whether in the context of a refugee shelter on the islands, in public education in Greek, or language classes for immigrants, the teachers brought up the unique needs of refugees and the boundaries this requires. Seeing students, adults and children often full of hope and dreams, surviving in terrible living situations and under severe conditions, is challenging for teachers and requires a constant reconsideration of their competencies within and outside the classroom.

Rules of conduct, rules for communication, and periods of employment are different for schools and NGOs and often also differ between NGOs. All participants brought up that there should be clear rules to establish sound, ethical, and harmonious relationships and working conditions. However, the participants had different preferences and ideas about the extent to which the rules should be formal and restricting. Especially in the case of educating adult students, maintaining distance was understood differently by the teachers, and several teachers explained how this was more difficult than with young children. Teachers felt very connected to adult students, and some formed significant relationships with them, despite present guidelines disallowing this. Especially on the islands, it was more challenging to keep their distance since it felt like a bubble they were living in. A teacher also mentioned how young male refugees often approached young female volunteers during and after work. The young men were looking for privileges, such as a faster administration process or more food, even though the volunteering teachers could not offer this to them. In the case of minors, teachers described how they kept a distance for safeguarding reasons. However, especially in the case of unaccompanied minors, Filia explained that the people living and working in the shelter felt “[...] like family. They don’t have their parents or siblings, and so we’re all together all day [...]”. Rose also described the importance of a teacher to unaccompanied minors: “I could see they were grateful for having a point of contact. Someone who remembered them every day, checking in on them, um, for lots of the minors it was like this, especially the unaccompanied minors who didn’t have any family there”.

Teachers described that it was mentally very challenging to teach young refugee students and witness their emotional trauma; Lucy explained why this was the case more than for adult students:

Yeah, I think definitely with the young people, it was just so much more emotional because their journeys were the same as the adults. They were going all in the same as the adults, like some of them, they just wouldn't be there the next session and you would hear from friend that they just gone, they go on the boat, they gonna, yeah that just that was much, much harder. Because just couldn't believe little kids, they were so tiny, like physically tiny. And yeah, it was just so much, much harder to deal with that. I found.

For Artemis, this was especially difficult to witness because of the realisation that childhood is a significant determinant for a future person.

The age of students was also brought up when describing differences in group dynamics within the classroom. Power dynamics were tested and pushed in adult groups, and hierarchy within the community was noticeable in student relationships. Lucy explained how life and conflicts within the shelter was a determinant for the atmosphere within the classroom. This was less the case for minors, and the teachers characterised them as resilient, playful, and overall joyful in the classroom. Several teachers described how the effects of cultural clashes within the shelters, discrimination of refugees, and trauma are more noticeable in adults and their behaviour in the classroom. However, all teachers described the presence of trauma and the need for psychosocial support in the school for all students. Adult refugees were more serious in school and about the importance of education for them, especially women. Areti talked about language as helpful in integration and establishing relationships between women, as well as the importance of learning the native language for practical reasons such as asylum processes:

The bureaucracy that they have to go through, they don't like they get asylum and they then can't really do anything. They're stuck. Sometimes they're stuck in here or they are pushed back to their countries. And you know it is a dangerous country to live where they are coming from.

Interaction with women in detention centres, detained for a lack of papers, made her understand their urgent situation in which their gender plays a part. Rose also elaborated on her experience teaching female refugees, which felt different to teaching both genders:

[...] I don't think it changed because they were older. But maybe the fact that they were women was something new and very nice for me. Also all of my colleagues were women and I felt happier to be a woman. And I think I learnt a lot by working in that centre in those terms as well.

These differences and similarities in experiences, challenges, and strategies of teachers, show their unique learning experiences. Teachers must use different teaching methods or techniques when addressing either minors or adults. Their professional development, such as classroom management and flexibility, benefitted from diverging learning moments. However, regardless of the differences in teaching gender and age,

the strength of refugees and the way they remained hopeful was a source of inspiration for the teachers in any case which Cassia explicated as follows:

I've learnt from refugee students as well, but specifically from them. I mean. Just I don't know, like their strength. I don't know, i, i. I cannot say anything about that like. Again. It is like when they are sharing a story. I cannot just listen to them and I cannot just say anything and now the same thing, like I cannot explain how, like the strength they have, these kids have. You know, starting, like experiencing all these things and then going to school every day. Yeah [...]

Discussion

In this paper, teachers' learning processes were addressed from a biographical approach and related to the Transformative Learning Theory as outlined by Mezirow (1997; 2000; 2018). The findings show the influence of teachers' learning experiences in threefold: firstly, in relation to their perspectives on educating; secondly in relation to their perspective on refugees; and lastly in relation to the transformation of frames of references.

In response to the faced challenges and other experiences, teachers adapted their teaching methods and vision on education, and became more flexible and resilient in the classroom as well as outside their work environment. These findings relate to a change in points of view because of the need to modify assumptions or beliefs that proved wrong or not useful (Mezirow, 1997). Lucy for example described how her teaching strategies did not fully suffice within this context:

Yeah, I guess, that's just what a teacher learns about unexpected things happen in the class, but it's pretty extreme [...] most of my setup like it's the same as any teaching but it is that you have to be yeah. More resilient, more aware of like respecting students' choices.

Teachers described how interacting with refugees and having dialogues with them taught them life lessons and knowledge that they had otherwise not learned. Hera adequately recapitulated her holistic learning experience with a metaphor of her teaching bag:

Always, all the years before, something new is added to my teaching bag, how to say that. Eh [...] Maybe they're methods, teaching methods, maybe they're ideas, from other teachers. Maybe they're hierarchy of good things like power, hope. To also how to manage in difficulties? Because refugee students show you a way how to, to face the difficulties in your life. [...] So all these things have, I have it in my bag and I, always, every year I am taking something new. From the stories of the children, from the stories in my class. From the behaviour of the children, from the behaviour of them together.

In addition to changed points of view, this quotation also addresses a connection to Mezirow's (1997) emphasis on communicative learning in transformative learning experiences. Many teachers brought up the significance of student interaction on personal development. Conversations with colleagues were also mentioned as reflective

moments after which teachers had become more particular about their ideas or changed their perspectives. For example, Hera talked about an experience of disagreement on matters of racist behaviour involving her colleague. A misalignment of points of view invited a conversation between the two teachers. Although they did not reach a consensus, the conversation did stimulate the reflection of Hera's beliefs and helped her understand her thinking patterns and thoughts more clearly. Within transformative learning, recognition of one self's and the other's point of view are important stimuli for transforming reference frames (Mezirow, 1997). Conflicting views, as apparent in the abovementioned conversation, help re-evaluate values, beliefs, and feelings if the persons in dialogue partake in critical reflection.

All findings were connected to teachers' personal and professional development, also construed as teacher identity, and the influence of contextual and generational factors of time and place in the original study. Specific life situations, settings, and socio-historical spaces influence one's biography, which Alheit (2018) construed as contextuality, an interrelated aspect of biographical learning. The findings of this study confirm the challenges for teachers in the context of educating refugees, the need for better training options, and the discourse around refugee students, all addressed in previous literature. Also similar to the findings in previous studies, this study found the double-faced reality of refugee students. On the one hand, teachers mentioned their resilience, strength and hope as obvious personality traits (Simopoulos & Magos, 2020).

On the other hand, their experiences induced traumas which revealed or surfaced in the classroom (Karakus, 2019; O'Neal et al., 2018). As such, this study contributes to the current developments within educational research focusing on refugee education and helps outline this type of education while contextualising the situation of involved teachers. Moreover, the study is an example of applying the biographical method to stimulate self-reflection and the transformation of frames of teachers. This opportunity can aid teacher development in pre-service and in-service teacher training, specifically in crisis contexts. Hera explained that the narrative interview for her was a moment of reflection and learning, which the following quote can exemplify:

Now I was thinking about this question, I didn't have this before, I wasn't thinking about this before, I was like nice, but now I am thinking 'Yes that is why. [...] maybe that is what I have to find, why I have to have more dialogue also with the other teachers. Because they are the Other also, yes. Yes! This interview is also a reflection for me, yes!'

The angle of the current study relates to earlier studies on refugee education but found specific challenges and strategies related to various genders, ages, and locations. For example, teachers talked about creating a more open-minded attitude and became more aware of ethical issues related to discrimination through their teaching experience in refugee settings. These experiences describe the development or transformation of

existing frames of reference and, in some cases, the acquiring of a new frame of reference (Mezirow, 2000). This seems connected to a deep process of identity formation, touching upon Mezirow's (2018: 114) definition of transformative learning: "a wide-ranging kind of learning, reaching right into changes of the identity". Although the habits of mind are more durable than the points of view, I would carefully argue that in the current study, the habitual way of thinking of teachers evolved in response to the changing contextual factors in teachers' immediate environment either after the start of the Greek refugee crisis or because of their relocation to teach in shelters. However, to claim such a stance would require more research.

Coincidentally, all teachers in this study identify as female. This was not a requirement nor specifically sought after or mentioned as of importance. The sampling method might have influenced the sample as I, as the researcher and messenger of the selection message, share the same generation and academic level as most participants. A delimitation to this arises as I am pointing out the absence of an aim to generalise and the subjective nature of the research. However, future studies could elaborate on the relationship between female teachers and female refugees and female empowerment or the idea of being a figurehead. Reversed, it might be interesting to consider an intersectional approach to gender effects. An intersectional approach could also be adopted when reviewing challenges (*e.g.*, power imbalances or language barriers) in the case of refugee teachers and part of the community themselves, which could also be a case in refugee contexts.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore teachers' narratives and learning experiences while teaching in refugee education. The analysis of collected data developed several themes which are related to the research question: What are the learning experiences of teachers teaching refugees? For this paper, a selection of the findings from a prior study was made to research teachers' learning experiences and the challenges they explicated as important learning moments, personally and professionally. This focus helped establish strategies and ideas which might be helpful for interventions or needed adjustments for teachers, organisations, and policymakers involved in refugee education. The analysis showed that age and gender of refugee students as well as locational context were important factors to impact teachers' experiences. Differences between adult and minor students and female or mixed-gender classes generated unique learning moments. The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2018) was employed to help understand the learning process of the teachers and showed how teachers transformed their existing reference frames, points of view and habits of mind due to working with

refugee learners. Especially conversing, interacting, and witnessing refugees' living situations were important moments for the teachers to learn things about the narrative of a refugee, their cultures and lives. These experiences also made teachers re-evaluate their approach to refugees, and the possibilities of supporting them, inside and outside the classroom. In these extreme conditions, teachers went through a learning process that proved meaningful but also very difficult.

Although the study prioritised analysing individual, practised experiences rather than the situation from a macro perspective, these cannot be strictly separated. This study is positioned in the contemporary world, characterised by a complex interplay of contextual factors and the precarious situations of global crises, worldwide migration, and the involvement of many political actors. The contextualisation proves how similar learning processes and challenges appear in the institutional and pedagogical context of teaching refugee education regardless of the locational context. Therefore, I call for the development of teacher training for all teachers, who will be increasingly involved with refugees, to be well prepared – to the best possible extent, as Lucy also noted:

It's mad. Yeah, but. Yes. Yeah, I guess that's what a teacher learns about unexpected things in the class, but it's pretty extreme [...] it needs to be learned as a unique serve teaching. [...] there're definitely unique things that it should be seen as you can't just get up. Get on a plane and start teaching refugees. It's like it's just not fair.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all participants of this study, as well as my gratitude to Małgorzata Malec-Rawiński for supporting my journey as a starting researcher.

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