

Refugee Children's Career Aspirations at a Hospitality Center in Greece

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Abstract: A child-centered approach to education paves the way to discover a child's personal dreams, aspirations, experiences, abilities, and interests. In child-centered educational contexts, students are encouraged to express and discover themselves. This is particularly relevant for refugee children who have suffered trauma, change, and repeated schooling interruptions that may negatively affect the future-oriented thinking that forms their career ambitions. The purpose of this study is to identify the aspirations of refugee children through a small-scale study conducted at a Refugee Hospitality Centre in the outskirts of Athens, Greece. Twenty-one (N) refugee teenagers were interviewed and participated upon their parents and teachers' consent, through a semi-structured interview about their career preferences as well as their academic aspirations and intentions, as well as their chosen destination countries. The motives behind their choices were discussed and differentiations with gender, country of origin, and school attendance were examined. Finally, suggestions are made to support refugee students to explore possibilities about their career orientations and values in order to be included effectively within society and fulfill their aspirations.

Keywords: refugee education, career aspirations, career orientation and vocational training, teenagers' ambitions and expectations, inclusion in the society and labor force.

Since 2015, an unprecedented influx of refugees has started in the European region and Greece has become a main reception country. Almost 1.2 million refugees from warring regions of the Middle East and Africa arrived in the country between 2015 and 2021 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] Operational Data Portal, 2021). Greece, in the past, was mostly considered as a transit country rather than a destination (Kuschminder, 2018). With the closure of the Western Balkan route, the temporary transit period lasted longer than it was expected for most refugees (UNICEF, 2017a). By the end of 2020, over 44,000 refugee and migrant children, including 4,027 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC), lived in Greece (UNICEF, 2021). UASCs are often exposed to prolonged violence, insecurity, and inadequate housing (Giannakopoulos & Anagnostopoulos, 2016) and their psychosocial well-being is compromised. Child-centered educational provision can alleviate the effects of psychological trauma (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023), while a supportive school environment that approaches children as active participants, able to speak for themselves, helps empower children in creating positive change, consistent with their aspirations and personal needs.

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Literature Review

Greece provides access to formal education for all children aged between 5 and 15 years, including child beneficiaries of international protection (Leivaditi et al., 2020). Primary formal education functions under two schemes: (1) The Reception Class scheme, offered in morning mainstream schools, with 15 hours per week of intense Greek language lessons and attendance in mainstream classes during other lessons. (2) Structures for the Welcoming and Education of Refugees (DYEP: acronym in the Greek language). These classes offer a one-year preparatory afternoon program for refugee children, 4 to 15 years old. They are mostly located near Refugee Hospitality Centers, where local schools are unable to cater to the newly arrived large refugee populations and are aimed at children with no knowledge of the Greek language. Refugee students, after one school year of attendance at DYEP classes, move to morning mainstream Reception Classes, as inclusion is the primary aim, whilst segregation is a measure that impedes the inclusion process (Palaiologou et al, 2021). Non-formal Education programs were also successfully provided from the beginning of the refugee crisis, both in large Refugee Hospitality Centers as well as in urban areas with a high proportion of refugee populations.

Skaramagas Refugee Hospitality Centre, the largest camp in Greek mainland during its time of operation, was located at an old navy base in the outskirts of Athens. Refugee camps intended to provide temporary accommodation relief (UNHCR, 2000), but given the length of asylum procedures in Greece, this period was often significantly extended (International Rescue Committee Hellas, 2020). In 2020, the Skaramagas refugee camp hosted about 2500 people, and the beneficiaries' main countries of origin were Syria (40%), Afghanistan (30%), and Iraq (10%) (Palaiologou et al, 2021), with 40% of the population under the age of 18. Non-formal education programs were offered to the refugee children in Skaramagas, mostly by non-governmental organizations and volunteers by municipal authorities. All non-formal educational programs at the camp required prior approval by the Ministry of Education under the condition that they do not overlap with the curriculum of formal education (SIRIUS Watch, 2018). A variety of educational activities and pedagogical activities were organized to provide a joyful environment, boost refugee children's communication skills, overcome gaps in knowledge, help them develop positive feelings towards the host society and improve their well-being. In addition, refugees were supported in their career education; they were trained in job searching techniques, how to prepare their curriculum vitae, in developing computer skills, etc. (Leivaditi et al, 2020). British Council proved to be an important provider of informal education at Skaramagas camp, for the vulnerable age range group of 11-18 years old, offering life skill classes, digital literacy, career education and professional development. British Council also offered a structured program and curriculum for the English Language with emphasis on human rights, cultural diversity, and non-discrimination. This evaluation report (Nomikou, 2017) highlights that all the refugee children made considerable progress in their English language skills, as well as their communication, presentation, and leadership skills. The formal education programs that were provided from the first year of the camp's functioning showed that formal education participation had many positive outcomes for refugee children on their mental health and psychological state, on the learning outcomes, as well as on their skills development (Fasaraki, 2020).

Skaramagas refugee hospitality center (i.e., camp as a shorter term) was chosen as a representative context to satisfy the aim of this research, which was to investigate refugee children's career aspirations upon arrival in Europe. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews, in which refugee children were placed at the center of their stories as protagonists, expressing their own experiences through open-ended questions. The goal was to let students transmit their point of view through their own words, often including silence (Seidman, 2006). Mapping refugee children's career ambitions is important, as any attempt to understand the

children's educational needs in order to design relevant educational policies should include listening and understanding children's own perceptions.

Methodology

Research Aim and Questions

The aim of the research was to investigate refugee children's career aspirations upon arrival in Europe. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews, in which refugee children were placed at the center of their stories, as protagonists, expressing their own experiences through open-ended questions. The research questions were:

1. What career would you choose to do when you grow up, which you would pursue through education?
2. What career would you most love to do and study for?
3. What are your alternative choices, what else would you like to do as a job when you grow up?

It was important to discover, not just ideals and dreams, but specific aspirations which they have in their lives in order to fulfill their dreams, for which they would be willing to invest effort and time. Questions about chosen destination countries were also posed ("*Would you like to stay in Greece? If not, what country would you like to settle in?*"), as destination countries seem to be critically linked to teenagers' investment in education and career/study choices.

Sample

Twenty-one (N) refugee teenagers were interviewed and participated, upon their parents and teachers' consent, through a semi-structured interview about their career preferences as well as their academic aspirations and intentions, as well as their chosen destination countries.

Data Analysis and Presentation of Results

The research followed a mixed-methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative data. This descriptive study attempted to understand how refugee children subjectively perceive their transition to a new linguistic and cultural environment and provide practical data about refugee children's career expectations. The data was collected during individual semi-structured interviews conducted by the research team between July and September 2020 at Skaramagas refugee camp with the help of interpreters and the presence of the administrators on duty at the camp. More specifically, the research attempts to (a) explore refugee children's dreams, (b) map their future ambitions, and (c) depict their educational needs.

The research team needed permission to access the camp and conduct interviews. The team was interrogated about the aims, and possible benefits of the research project before permission was obtained. Given that children are legally incompetent to give valid consent, parental permission was also required. The team, abiding by the "do not harm" principles, avoided direct and indirect questions that could lead to re-experiencing difficult situations and did not press for answers, respecting children's sensitivities. The interviews lasted 7-16 minutes each, with the presence of an interpreter; interviews were transcribed. Some children expressed themselves more than others. Children were encouraged to express themselves, and the rephrasing of questions helped them. Empathy and a simple explanation of the interview's aims, in appropriate language for children, helped them feel more comfortable with the process. The

respondents were regarded as active participants in the narration of their experiences in identifying solutions to the difficulties they faced. They were welcomed in a non-biased, culturally appropriate way, their privacy and emotional state were respected. They were informed that they could stop participating at any moment without providing explanations. Confidentiality was ensured, and a code number was used for each interviewee during the process of collecting/organizing data to protect their identities.

Children of the pre-adolescence and middle adolescence age range were selected to ensure that they could answer the research questions. The study sample comprised of 21 children, 14 girls, and 7 boys. Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran were the countries of origin, and their age varied between 10 and 17 years old. Children had been in Greece between 7 and 72 months. As the sample size is small and child participants are not used to talking about themselves (Vannini et al, 2015), the outcomes can only be indicative.

During the interviews, participants expressed high professional aspirations and repeatedly mentioned that they wanted to build a future in Europe, advance their studies, and excel academically. These results strengthen the argument that host countries should provide effective educational opportunities for refugee children. The combination of high aspirations with missed years of schooling and lack of host language skills means that refugee children would benefit from specific educational interventions addressing their individual complex needs. Failure to address these needs may lead to early disappointment, which can be a strong deterrent to the continuity of refugee children's studies as well as decrease their self-esteem.

Interviewed children were most talkative in answering the question: "*What career would you choose to do when you grow up, what would you pursue through education?*". Some children provided a 'Determined choice' as an answer (meaning that this was the job they had selected). Other children responded that they had a preference for one 'Only' choice (but had not thought of alternatives), while a third group gave up to three alternative options. It is expected that during this development period (early adolescence, ages 10-14, and middle adolescence, ages 15-17), teenagers begin to take an interest in their educational prospects and set long-term goals. Although children's career choices are usually changeable and temporary, the findings offered insights into cognitive representations of potential futures and children's perceptions of adult work. All interviewed children reported they wanted to attend university ("*I want to go to the university; I want to study*"). Social expectations, parents' desires, and career advice are often focused on university routes, as college degrees are considered vital in moving up the economic ladder. Many refugee children reported that, although safety was the main reason for escaping from their countries of origin (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023a), their parents also wished to improve their financial circumstances and regarded education as a powerful agent towards this goal. Their choices are displayed in Table 1 below:

Nearly half of the children (ten) reported that they wanted to become doctors to treat people, five participants stated that they wanted to become teachers, one child wanted to be a lawyer, one child to be able to fly (pilot), and a girl said being an air hostess was her dream job. Two children reported their first-choice profession 'football player', and one child classified as 'undecided'. It is worth noting that nearly half of the interviewees (nine children) were 'determined' about what they wanted to do, discussing no alternatives and six out of nine were determined to study medicine. This could reflect strong inner, familial, or communal motives. Seven children gave only one answer for their chosen profession and could not provide any alternatives due to lack of information, limited awareness, or interrupted decision processes (for example, when asked about alternatives, they would answer '*I'm not sure*', '*I don't know*'). Four children presented second and third choices. These findings raised theoretical issues about the representations of 'careers' and 'professions' in children's minds, as well as to how refugee teenagers are informed and counselled about career matters in modern Western economies.

Table 1
Refugee Children’s Career Ambitions

Professions	Determined Choice	Only choice	First choice	Second choice	Third Choice
Teacher	2	2		1	
Doctor	6	3	1		
Lawyer		1			
Football player			2		
Mathematician				1	
Pilot		1			
Airhostess	1				
Police-Officer					1
Economist				1	
Fashion Designer			1		
Social Worker				1	
Undecided	1				
Total	10	7	4	3	2

Note. ‘Determined Choice’: interviewees were determined to choose this option and considered no other. ‘Only Choice’: interviewees presented this option as preferable but did not have information about alternatives. ‘First Choice’: this is their most preferred option among alternatives.

According to these data, it appears that the most popular occupational preferences were in medicine and teaching. These findings seem to correlate with other research results. A study by UNICEF (2017b) reported that migrant and refugee children in Greece wanted to study and become doctors. In a similar direction, World Vision (2019) found that Syrian children wanted to study medicine to treat people in Syria. Another survey in 35 countries showed that young refugees demonstrated strong resilience and high expectations about the future (Blanchet-Cohen et al.,2017), whereas ‘doctor’, ‘lawyer’, and ‘teacher’ were the most respected professions. According to Ming (2014) and Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider (2000), refugees do not prefer low-quality jobs that are traditionally associated with migrant workers but they have priority to obtain University degrees and high-power jobs.

The answers refugee children give show their tendency to popular and traditional professions in their communities, like teacher, doctor, lawyer, and pilot, but also the limited range of options that usually children of this age are aware of. An obvious question then arises as to whether these priorities would change if children had more updated information about the job market. Another indicator that we would like to present is ‘aspirations about professions’ related to ‘gender’. Table 2 presents occupational distribution from their first career choice according to gender.

In terms of gender stereotyping and career expectations, it seems that only the profession of ‘doctor’ appears in both lists. Gender differences generate from social perceptions in educational and familial contexts, but even the small sample of this study demonstrates that conservative cultural norms are changing. Despite objective difficulties, confining girls’ expectations to household activities seems to be declining, as found in Hunt’s (2021) study on young female refugees in Greece.

Table 2*Children's Aspirations about Professions Related to Gender*

Professions	Boys	Girls
Teacher		4
Doctor	4	6
Lawyer		1
Football player	2	
Pilot	1	
Airhostess		1
Fashion Designer		1
Undecided		1
Total	7	14

Note. The choices represent the interviewees' first career choice only.

Table 3 presents the next factor explored, which is the choice of profession and enrolment in formal education, as an indicator of active investment in their future dreams.

Table 3*Children's Aspirations and Formal Education Registration Status*

Professions	Registered	Not registered
Teacher	2	2
Doctor	5	5
Lawyer		1
Football player	1	1
Pilot	1	
Airhostess	1	
Fashion Designer	1	
Undecided	1	
Total	12	9

Note. The choices represent the interviewees' first career option only.

It is worth mentioning that nearly half of the children are not registered in formal education. However, this is not related to career dreams but to other factors worth investigating further: for example, two children reported they discontinued formal education because of bullying. Yet the most common reason seems to be an expectation for relocation, as six out of nine non-registered students were refugees expecting to move to another European country 'very shortly'. Although certain refugee families were relocated sooner than others, it seems that, in general, relocation waiting times turned out significantly longer than expected. As a result, children missed important years of the education process. A third incidental reason for the relatively low rate of the registration process may also be related to the fact that the study was conducted during the pandemic, when school attendance was generally negatively affected (Prekate & Palaiologou, 2021).

Students who participated in the interview expressed their aspirations in high-earning professions and jobs with prestige (e.g. doctor, lawyer, pilot), but these professions also explicitly or implicitly symbolize the issues and problems they faced during and after their journey (medical assistance, healthcare, education, legal assistance, safe transport). The insights gained from this study provide empirical confirmation that children from disadvantaged socio-

economic backgrounds with educational inequalities often express a desire to overcome the hardships they faced and help others.

As already stated, interviewed adolescents expressed a universal, among refugee student populations, to travel and build a ‘better life’ in another country. Table 4 presents the results to the question: “Which is your desired country for settlement?” according to country of origin:

Table 4

Destination Intentions According to Country of Origin

Destination/ Origin	Germany	Greece	Holland	Turkey	USA	England	Belgium	Undecided
Syria	7	1	1	1			1	
Afghanistan	4				1	1		2
Iran					1			1
Total	11	1	1	1	2	1	1	3

Note. In case of multiple answers, the most favorite option is represented in this table.

More than half of the children (eleven) reported that their intended destination country is Germany, a country popular for Syrians and Afghans alike. Two participants wanted to go to the USA, and one child stated that they wanted to stay in Greece. Other destination countries included Holland (one case), Turkey (one case), England (one case), and Belgium (one case). In the case of more than one chosen destination, an additional question was posed as to their second favorite choice. During the interviews, children seemed to explore a European identity and mentioned a sense of belonging (“*I like life here*”), satisfaction (“*I am happy*”), exploration (“*I want to travel, learn languages*”), and solidarity (“*Everybody is good here*”). However, their most important criterion of choice was the presence of relatives or ethnic community in their destination (“*I want to go to Germany, there are many Syrians there*’, ‘*Because my uncle is there*”).

A picture emerges of contemporary Europe as a desirable paradigm of multicultural societies. The findings are in accordance with the data presented by UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM (2019), with Germany appearing as the top destination for refugee and migrant children in a sample of 35% of all child asylum applications lodged in Europe between January and December 2019. This is different from other European countries, as a report carried out in Italy between July and October 2019, 65% of the respondents reported Italy as their intended destination (DTM, 2020). However, the composition of refugee/migrant influxes to Italy are different to Greece. Staying in Greece was not a popular option due to the difficult living conditions and lack of professional prospects compared to other countries in central Europe. It is interesting that none refugee child expressed any intension to return to his/her home country.

Discussion and Suggestions

Skaramagas refugee camp provided examples of educational success, as many children, especially in primary school, enrolled in state formal education morning classes and became fluent in Greek within one school year. On the other hand, many teenagers hardly attended school at all, missing out on important years in their educational path, adding to previous education losses (2.5 years of missed schooling on average). Upper high school was even less accessible, leaving teenagers isolated in camp containers, with shattered dreams and prone to depression and substance abuse, with very limited opportunities for socialization and peer friendships, which are a priority for refugee children (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023b). All interviewed students had high aspirations, but this did not translate to academic achievement. The reasons behind the mismatch between dreams and reality can be explored in the fact that almost all teenagers hoped to settle in another European country, where, in their minds, ‘*this is*

when life will start'. The idealization of a future destination, compounded with the severe difficulties that the Greek secondary education system presents for non-native speakers, led many teenagers to drop out of school and postpone their life dreams for 'later'. However, as relocation arrangements were often greatly delayed, teenagers missed out on crucial academic milestones. According to a US study with migrant children (Beine et al., 2020), when children's aspirations and expectations misalign (for example, due to practical difficulties), children are even more motivated to strive harder. But this finding emerged in the context of a permanent settlement. Refugee children in Greece were not at their final settlement location, perhaps without a realistic assessment of 'practical difficulties'. There was no informed 'misalignment' that would drive children to be motivated, but a widespread general conviction that '*in (northern) Europe, all things are possible*'. This idealistic conviction might have led refugee teenagers to complacently think they could '*catch up later*'. On other occasions, conflicting expectations from their families, such as the expectation to bring money home rather than study, immobilized teenagers, who ended up doing neither (child labor is legally forbidden in Greece) and felt too guilty to be going to school.

A solution to this 'double-bind' situation would be school and career counseling specialized in refugee needs and adapted academic and vocational education through accelerated learning programs, including career-oriented apprenticeship training. Apprenticeship training could help many refugee teenagers stay in formal education, while earning basic means for a living. Vocational Lyceum (EPAL: acronym in Greek) would be an option for refugee students in the age beyond compulsory education (15-19), an often-neglected age range for students. EPAL schools offer two- or three-year programs, together with one year of paid apprenticeship training. Education and training at Vocational Lyceums, as well as with General Lyceums, accelerated Greek language programs, supportive classes in secondary education, and career education training could help refugees to develop new skills and acquire new vocational qualifications appropriate for their inclusion in the labor market.

Refugee children expressed their preferences and wishes for a few professions. How well informed were the children about the practical and academic requirements of each career? These professions were refugee children's own choice? Or children were influenced by attitudes about professions status in their communities? Such questions could be addressed within a child-centered career education context, adapted to cater to refugees' needs. Lynebakke and Pastoor (2020) found that refugee teenagers in Norway demonstrated strong educational resilience and high aspirations, to the extent of talking about the 'immigration optimism' and 'the blocked opportunities challenge'. In reality, the stage of high aspirations could change according to the phase of migrant and refugee populations' educational and settlement path. Greece could be identified as a 'middle stage' in this path. Education and career counseling, as well as a school credit transfer system amongst the transition countries, could help smooth the transition process along this path.

Schooling encourages hope, optimism, a sense of belonging, and future-oriented thinking act as protective factors that could help children overcome current challenges, deal with emotional hardships, and establish future functioning (UNHCR, 2017). However, objective obstacles, such as limited host language proficiency, lack of information, and health problems, can hinder refugees' aspirations into adulthood (Hebani & Kawaja, 2020). Other limiting factors can be teachers' and local communities' prejudices. Any kind of discrimination, unpreparedness in addressing the needs of children with refugee backgrounds, schools' inability to combat stereotypes in the school environment can all hinder refugees' aspirations. The provision of refugee-sensitive career education interventions could offer updated information, search tools, and familiarization with the local economies of host countries. Moreover, career-oriented education and counseling strengthen self-awareness and could assist refugee students in setting realistic expectations and reachable goals, despite the obstacles.

An example of such interventions could be the innovative career education workshops introduced in Greek public schools, through the *Skills Workshops* subject in 2021. These workshops encourage refugee children to participate actively as the most relevant source of information about their future by developing problem-solving capacities, independent thinking, creativity, cooperation, and taking an active part (Tzintzos, 2021). The *Skills Workshops* replaced the traditional Career Orientation and Counselling subject, introducing more child-centered interventions on modern topics, such as ‘Getting to know careers of the future’, ‘Personality characteristics, skills and external factors of entrepreneurship’, ‘Professional flexibility’, ‘Use of ICTs in Career Orienteering’, ‘Getting to know professions in your area’, ‘Virtual enterprise’ (Junior Achievements Greece, 2021). These workshops involve many activities that allow refugees to become self-aware and share personal information with their peers, as well as develop job-searching skills. Through the activities, refugee students can express their views/feelings/ stories, become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and participate in contemporary cross-subject topics, such as digital skills, entrepreneurship, well-being, sustainable development, human rights, conflict resolution, and diversity issues. Such initiatives engage dialogue, and these provisions could be extended beyond formal education structures, embracing all refugee children. Educational policy should set aside traditional, inflexible ways and support refugees in creating their own future and fulfilling their aspirations (Baraldi, 2021).

Concluding Points

Despite the considerable challenges that refugee children face before and during their journey and during the resettlement process, the group of our study expressed optimism and high aspirations about their future. However, as Greece is only an intermediate stage in their life’s journey, teenagers often abandon education and postpone their training and dreams for an ‘after relocation’ period, missing out on this way important time. In this direction, children with refugee and migrant backgrounds need additional educational support through targeted education measures tailored to their education and psychosocial needs. In our view, synergies between formal and non-formal settings, as well as collaboration with their communities, could be placed as priority by host countries.

A variety of supportive parallel educational interventions could be set by host countries, in our case Greece, providing opportunities for vocational training, for learning international languages, for developing technological literacy aiming at investing in career education, especially in the upper secondary level, so that refugee students could meet the requirements of specific career paths as well as adjust to their social and academic paths smoothly (Palaiologou, 2023).

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