Democratic citizenship education for refugee and asylum seeking women in Greece during the pandemic: an innovative educational project enhancing career development

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Abstract

In the light of a blatant lack of any state-run citizenship or social orientation educational projects, refugees in Greece face inescapable difficulties towards their integration. Especially for vulnerable uprooted women, labor-market integration is even more challenging. Therefore, a tailor-made experiential educational project was designed for a group of refugee women, exploring the role of democratic citizenship in their career development. The 45-hours training was held in UOM as part of a PhD thesis, was of blended mode and used participatory learning techniques such as theatre, experts' visits, role playing and more, leading to the empowerment and skills' enhancement of the trainees.

Keywords

women refugees, citizenship education, career development

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1 How it all began

Greece has always been a migration hub, mainly due to its geographical position. Especially since 2015 the country has been the direct or intermediate destination towards refuge for asylum seekers from all over the world. It is estimated that today out of the approximately 910.000 immigrants residing in Greece, about 126.000 are recognized refugees and asylum seekers (Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, henceforth Greek MoMA, 2022). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), almost 25% of those living in refugee camps are women, 39% are men and 37% are boys and girls (IOM, March 2022).

It cannot be emphasized enough that access to education and sociovocational integration are highly interlinked. This is more evident when it comes to education on sociopolitical aspects of the host society; it is unrealistic to expect that a foreigner will successfully integrate in a community whose rules, practices, customs and civil history are unknown to him/her. All this creates an impediment to access to occupation, as people that are already familiar with this information have a lead in the job arena. Also, sociopolitical topics are an integral part the written examinations that immigrants must go through when applying for naturalization. Despite the above, in Greece there is still no state-run or other "official" educational program on sociopolitical aspects of the receiving society.

Within this gap of educational services provision, an innovative educational project was designed as part of a doctoral thesis carried out at the Department of Educational and Social Policy of the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki with a special focus on the educational needs of refugee and asylum seeking women. The main goal was to collect the experiences and reflections of these vulnerable learners regarding the enhancement of skills related to their career development, mainly on its aspects career resilience and self efficacy, through a democratic citizenship education course.

2 The educational project

2.1 The target group

With an Open call disseminated through NGO's, posters, Social Media page and mouth to mouth, women refugees and asylum seekers with a basic knowl-

edge of English were invited to join a citizenship education class at the University of Macedonia, in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Out of the almost 40 adult women and the people that identified themselves as women that expressed an initial interest, a total of 27 women finally shaped the research group, as for some people the advertised course period was not convenient after all, others found a job in other cities and had to leave Thessaloniki, while others realized that their other roles (e.g. being a worker and the head of a single parent family) would not allow them to fully participate in this experimental course.

Then the research subjects were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group of learners (N=13) that would actually take part in the course and the control group (N=14) that would not participate in classes or any other citizenship education classes. Splitting research subjects into two groups served the *rationale* that we would need to see at the end of the intervention if there are differentiations regarding approaches and skills related to the experimental group's career development when compared to the ones of the control group. The educational intervention with the 13 subjects was carried out face to face at the premises of University of Macedonia and after a month we had to continue online due to the general lockdown decided by the competent public authorities. Their age range varied from 24 to 43 years old and the countries of origin were Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria and Uganda.

2.2 Training needs assessment

The semi structured interviews *before* the educational intervention included a section on the existing digital skills of the subjects, in case we had to go online, and a training needs assessment section. In the latter part, the subjects had the opportunity reflect on and freely express what do they need to learn regarding citizenship education (legal and sociopolitical topics) during this period of their life.

According to the grouped responses given by the participants before the educational intervention, *rights and obligations of the asylum seekers and recognized refugees* was one of the most reoccurring topics, followed by *access to justice and free legal aid*. Most of the women were also highly interested in knowing more about *rights and obligations at work: forms of employment, beginning and ending of a work relationship, salary, insurance etc.* and in having

a guide on *how to start their own business* (online or on site). A lot of women sought to grasp a better idea of *the Greek political system* (the constitution, the parliament, the government, the courts), *the characteristics of the Greek economy and labor market* while others wanted to know more about existing *opportunities to study as an adult in Greece*. Some participants highlighted their need to also learn more about *the Greek culture*, including its geography, population, history, religion and traditional practices, as well as the *procedure and papers needed to acquire the Greek citizenship*. Nonrecurring responses included more specific topics, such as how to issue a driving license, how to work in other EU countries or how to issue a divorce or recognize the one existing back home; these topics were not included *per se* in the design of the educational intervention, but we tried to cover them during the course when the occasion permitted to do so.

2.3 Training's Purpose and goals

Taking into consideration the needs expressed by the participants, the educational project was designed to provide them with a baseline regarding key notions of citizenship, such as democracy, political participation, access to justice, migration, equality in the labor market through the lens of gender.

More specific, the goals of the course were:

- *Knowledge*: to get hold of information regarding the organization of the Greek state, basic aspects of its history and key legal notions regarding courts and the workplace legislation
- *Skills*: to enhance skills relevant to career resilience and self efficacy together with active citizenship skills such as asking for information, claiming rights, addressing injustice
- *Attitudes:* to embrace core democratic values (e.g. tolerance, equity), to accept responsibility for oneself, to feel empowered and open to engage with the community.

2.4 Content

Therefore, the content of the course was shaped into 10 thematic areas as follows:

1. Introduction to the research and training project: meeting each other, our contract
2. Aspects of the Greek culture: geography, population, history, religion, traditional practices
3. The Greek political system: the state, the constitution, the parliament, the government, the courts
4. Access to justice and free legal aid
5. Rights and obligations of the asylum seekers and recognized refugees
6. Greek citizenship: procedure, papers, consequences
7. Some aspects of the Greek economy and the Greek labor market
8. Rights and obligations at work: forms of employment, beginning and ending of a work relationship, salary, insurance
9. How to set up my own business in Greece
10. Opportunities to study as an adult in Greece

2.5 Teaching techniques

2.5.1 Experiential learning and Participatory citizenship education

According to educational theorist David Kolb whose work is influenced by Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget and John Dewey experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" and "knowledge is a transformation process" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Nonetheless, under the tradition of Dewey's pragmatism, the creation of effective citizens is achieved through the proper education and information of students (1930, p. 100–101). Besides, in our view it is highly contradictory to carry out classes on *democratic* citizenship in a traditional "banking" fashion that Freire has named and criticized (2000, p. 72). As democracy essentially means *participation*, it is absurd to design such classes (or any classes nowadays as a matter of fact) without the learner's active contribution in the epicenter of the class.

At the same time, it's interesting to pinpoint that in our case, refugees and asylum seekers *are not citizens*; maybe they will become in the future, but at the moment they are citizens of other states, the ones that failed to protect them. Therefore, it's important to keep in mind what Andreotti and de Sousa (2012, p. 1) warn the trainers about when talking about global citizenship: "[not to] unintentionally reproduce ethnocentric, ahistorical, depoliticized, paternalistic, salvationist and triumphalist approaches that tend to deficit the-

orize, pathologize or trivialize difference". The above theoretical background supported the planning of classes, especially the educational techniques and practical exercises that were mostly inspired by theatre/drama in education.

2.5.2 Learning with vulnerable learners using theatropedagogical tools

Empowerment pedagogy as expressed by Cummings was one of the most important theoretical cornerstones of the intervention. Under this approach "empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power" that in practice means that learners' experience "reflect collaborative relations of power [and] participate confidently in instruction as a result of the fact that their sense of identity is being affirmed" (Cummings, 2015, p. 102). This is why, if one summarized the theoretical principals of the educational project in a phrase that would be *"learning by doing together",* given that all activities were team-based.

In this direction and with this diverse group of survivors, we used theatropedagogical tools that can be particularly helpful with ice breaking, sharing and learning in practice under a safe space created by the theatrical condition and/or the role. Applied theatre is, nonetheless, participatory, democratic and educative *per se* (Woodland & Lachowicz, 2012, p. 266). These theatropedagogical tools involve, among others, games of interviews-in-role, hot seat, conscience alley and various role-plays (Kondoyianni, Lenakakis & Tsiotsos, 2013, p. 37). Theatre in education requires students to assume responsibility, accept decisions, and work cooperatively (Teoh, 2012, p. 6). Therefore, its techniques modified for the classroom are ideal to teach democratic citizenship. As Boal summarizes it "[. . .] Teaching is transitivity. Democracy. Dialogue." (Boal, 1998, p. 15).

Given all the above, apart from the thaetropedagogical tools mentioned, we extensively used team work in breakout rooms, experts' visits and even used the course's WhatsApp group to engage learners into *participatory activities* (e.g. taking pictures relevant to a topic and posting them).

2.6 Project's implementation

The project lasted 14 weeks and it took place every single week, despite the emergency created by the pandemic. The first 2 weeks that we switched to online modality, we had a class twice a week so as to make sure that everyone

is on track, as there were some technical difficulties (access to the internet, installation of the zoom platform etc.).

Soon all participants were able to be there, to be on time and continue learning. Of course, all theatropedagogical techniques designed for the class, they now had to be adapted for an online class, which was, of course, strenuous. After a few meetings, the participants got familiar with all zoom's tools used for the class (chat, breakout rooms, polls, reactions, on/off camera and more) and thus adaptation of these techniques in the new environment was smoother every time we met. We also provided instructions and technical support through telephone for all the learners that needed it.

2.7 Evaluation by the trainees

The evaluation was both formative and summative. During the intervention, for example, we incorporated proposals made by the trainees regarding the activities at the beginning and the end of each class. It was also summative, as is shown by the following excerpts of the participants' own words.

Regarding the topics covered a participant noted that *"everything we learnt* [is] *everything I needed, everything was important for me. And the way we did it with these exercises",* while another said that *"when* [we discussed] *something about the political situation or the government how they work, all this are very important to know; because you know we are refugees, if we stay here 10 years, 20 years, we need to know, there's not enough information about the system".*

One of the main goals of the research was to see if participants' skills relevant to career resilience and self efficacy would get, in their view, enhanced or not. Almost all the participants highlighted aspects of these skills that they now feel they possess in a larger extent. For example, one subject stated that *"I will reach for help again but now I know more so I would do it more confident and more brave without any hesitation, immediately"* and another said: "*Now If I have a question and I don't know about it, I will read the contract, if I don't understand it, I speak out and say «I can't understand this part of the contract», before I'm signing".*

Another one shared that *"because at first I didn't know the community; after the training about culture, about law, about all the things I feel no it's not terrible, it's not so different or strange; I can join to this community",* while another participant stated that "*After this training I feel better with my self-esteem[...]In*

Iran I felt I was very strong, I had great skills in business management; here I felt I had nothing; now I feel I am finding myself again".

Online modality required some digital literacy skills. This experience to move online was not easy one for most of the participants *"I was really, really struggling in the beginning with the internet then I solved that problem and we continued it and I am so happy"*. Another stated that "*let me say the truth I have been hearing «zoom zoom zoom» but I haven't work with it; so it was this, our lesson, our class that made me to understand more about zoom and I'm happy for that because they use it at work"*.

Some participants even felt confident enough to provide support to other women (multiplier effect) *"I think I can advise* [a colleague] *because I have better idea after these months of lessons so I think I have to give her advice"* one said, while another stated that *"I really want to help other women cause I know most of the time, women are affected, they are the victims of these things and they need support they need someone to say ok, I'm gonna stand there for you, you can do this"*.

3 The way forward

According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) "inadequate reception as well as integration policies can exacerbate or perpetuate the effects of trauma" (UNHCR, 2007). Two participants that worked in two different refugee camps in North Greece, shared the class material (a handbook created by the trainer) with the educators working there. It was then used in community engagement groups, in sessions within the Women and Children Safe Space in the camps, as well as in adult education Greek and English language classes. According to the feedback informally received by learners of both genders in both camps, the information was "indispensable", as without it they would have no idea about things they care about such as job related legislation, workplace ethics, sexual harassment and more.

Also, soon after the project's educational intervention was over, the competent Ministry announced that from now on written exams on aspects of citizenship education would be institutionalized in order to file for naturalization. Therefore, this kind of classes are now necessary for a whole greater population of immigrants.

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