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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Inclusion of Refugee Students in Greek Schools: Pre-Service Teachers' Views about Distance Learning

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Abstract: Over the last two years, the prolonged massive school closure due to COVID-19 has provoked significant constraints for refugee children. The present study aimed to investigate the perceptions of Greek pre-service teachers on refugee education during the COVID-19 pandemic. A questionnaire was addressed to 32 native university students ($n = 32$) who attended Education Departments in Western Macedonia in Greece. The results showed that the prevalence of distance education affected pre-service teachers' perceptions. The access to devices with internet capability as well as the cultural barriers was considered to be crucial factors for the school attendance of refugee children. Participants' perceptions of the level of teacher preparation in a distance learning environment were related to their level of self-efficacy for supporting refugee students. The findings suggest that in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic, the international community should make efforts to ensure the school attendance of all refugee students.

Keywords: refugee students; COVID-19 pandemic; distance learning; Greek pre-service teachers; attitudes



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1. Introduction

Greece has always been a major entry point for people seeking safety in Europe, and since the early 2000s hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers have crossed into the country by land and sea. In 2015, Greece saw an unprecedented number of refugees and asylum-seekers arriving in the country fleeing war, conflicts and violence. Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan were the top refugee-origin countries [1]. As of December 2020, around 120,000 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants were estimated to be residing on the Greek islands and the mainland [2]. The refugee arrival was considered to be the most serious migratory challenge since the end of the Second World War. Like other European countries, Greece had to provide basic humanitarian needs for a large number of refugees.

Refugee children and adolescents are among the most vulnerable populations worldwide. The Greek education system, however, appeared unprepared to accommodate all school-age refugee children in public schools and to ensure their school enrollment. Refugee youth and adolescents as well as their parents voiced a strong desire to continue learning as their top priority, often in the context of contributing to cultural understanding, engagement and integration, employment, and overall well-being [3]. Although the provision of free education to all refugee children and adolescents was a prime concern of the Greek education system, various barriers hindered the successful inclusion of refugee students, such as teacher mobility, inadequate teacher training, the lack of classroom space as well as the presence of bias within the social and the school context which resulted in marginalization or leaving school [4].

2. Refugee Education in Greece

Since the beginning of refugee arrival, Greece has made substantial efforts to ensure that all refugee children can access education. However, it seemed that the Greek education system was not prepared to accommodate all school-aged refugee children in public education and to ensure their school enrollment. Thus, the school year 2016–2017 was characterized as a “preparatory year” emphasizing the smooth transition of refugee children from camps to school life and society [5]. One of the initiatives by the Greek Ministry of Education to facilitate the integration of refugee children into education was the institution of *Reception Facilities for Refugee Education* (DYEP: the acronym in Greek) which operated for the first time during the specific school year. Reception Facilities for Refugee Education continued to function the following school years, but a more efficient educational scheme for refugee students was also promoted. This implementation included ensuring refugee children’s attendance in mainstream public schools along with the support of Refugee Education Coordinators, who are teachers appointed by the Greek Ministry of Education to serve as the bond between the local educational community and the refugee families [6].

In particular, refugee education in Greece is provided in:

- Reception Facilities for Refugee Education which operate either in accommodation centers (morning hours) or in public school settings (afternoon hours). Reception Facilities for Refugee Education prepare children for mainstream education by teaching the Greek language, English, Mathematics, Physical Education, Computers, Art, and Civics during four teaching hours per day.
- Reception Classes (Level I & II) which operate in school structures within Educational Priority Zones (ZEP: the acronym in Greek). For children who lack the necessary Greek language skills, the curriculum is taught in the mainstream class during regular school hours, as well as 3 h in reception class to receive additional Greek language support. The institution of the Greek Law 4547/2018 on Education drew attention to the reception classes and their function alongside the morning school program [4]. Depending on their knowledge of Greek they attend ZEP I (no or basic knowledge) or ZEP II (moderate knowledge) class.

Only 13,000 refugee and migrant children of school age (4–17 years old) across Greece were enrolled in formal education as of January 2020, whereas the enrolment rate was higher among children who were 6–12 years old (75%), followed by 13–15 years old (62%), as well as 4–5 and 16–17 years old [7]. Indeed, the quality and the duration of schooling offered to asylum-seeking refugee, and migrant children depends more on where they are in the migrant/asylum process than on their educational needs [8]. Despite these conditions, school attendance rates should be increased overall and special measures taken to prevent children from missing classes. While UNICEF and UNHCR promote non-formal educational activities as a way to help bridge the gap [7], but the school attendance rate could be reinforced through the implementation of systematic and serious actions.

3. The Impact of COVID-19 Crisis on Refugee Education

Refugee children’s barriers to access to education were also increased due to the recent COVID-19 outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic is characterized as one of the most serious global health threats. The school closures deeply affected the youth of marginalized and vulnerable groups such as ethnic or racial minorities, female students, and students with disabilities and/or special educational needs increasing the risk for exclusion and inequality [9]. Asylum seekers and refugee populations have experienced prolonged lockdowns and restricted movement since the pandemic began [10]. Particularly, the poor sanitary conditions in the overcrowded camps led to extended lockdowns at all refugee structures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 preventing the access of refugee children to school as well [11]. The current COVID-19 pandemic revealed the country’s weakness in providing the services required taking into account that Greece hosts a large proportion of refugees compared to other European countries.

The global public health emergency was reflected in the field of education forcing the school communities around the world to make an emergent transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning [12]. Due to this transition refugee children's access to education was further challenged by several factors related to the prevalence of distance education [13]. The current situation had a serious impact on refugee education, highlighting the existent educational inequalities [14]. The emergent shift in education from traditional classroom learning to computer-based learning might be one of the largest educational experiments to date. Over the last few years, the prolonged massive school closures in Greece have provoked significant constraints for refugee children to access formal education [15]. Moreover, the transition to distance learning began in a quite chaotic way [16] (and the following shutdowns caused by COVID-19 exacerbated the existing achievement gaps and decreased the provision of educational support [17]). During this crucial period, the learning outcomes of both native and refugee students depended on technical factors such as access to distance learning and the quality of remote instruction as well as on the degree of engagement, motivation, home support as well as the place of residence [18,19]. The Greek education system was not built to deal with extended shutdowns like those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the last few years, and as a result, failed to effectively support refugee children and adolescents by applying intercultural principles in distance education [20].

As stated by Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton [21] “the COVID-19 pandemic represents the first large-scale event for which digital inequalities become a major factor of vulnerability—both to the health-related impacts of the exposition and the spreading of the coronavirus, and the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic” (p. 7). A large number of issues concerning various forms of diversity (cultural, linguistic), financial problems, mental well-being, the lack of knowledge about the educational system, and early school leaving have been multiplied due to the COVID-19 consequences [22].

Over the last few years, teachers have struggled to address the increasing diversity in classrooms supporting refugee children and young people [23–25]. Teachers are called not only to support migrant and refugee students in their new educational environment, but also to foster intercultural interchange and mutual respect among all pupils [23]. Consequently, the pandemic increased their efforts to keep the learning process alive. Despite teachers' key role in the success of distance learning, teachers' voices about refugee education during distance have been scarcely explored and the issue is poorly understood.

The objective of this qualitative study is to offer insights into the learning situation of refugee students during school closures from the perspective of prospective teachers who have worked with refugee children providing online lessons as per contract non-permanent staff. A recent review of the Greek literature on the topic indicates that this is the first study in the Greek context that aims to identify, describe, and discuss the prospective teachers' attitudes and concerns about the refugee education provided in Greece in times of COVID-19. The study was conducted in Greece from March to June 2021. The research questions were the following:

1. What are the main difficulties that refugee students face during distance education?
2. Can distance education provide an effective and qualitative educational process for refugee students?
3. How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the inclusion of refugee students in Greek schools?
4. Could the post-pandemic education system provide a more qualitative education to refugee students?

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants

Thirty-two third-year undergraduate students (N = 32; 27 women and 5 men) who attended Education Departments in Western Macedonia in Greece during the academic year 2020–2021, were included in this study. In Western Macedonia, there is the University

of Western Macedonia which has Departments of Education in Florina city. Participants had experience working with refugee students providing online lessons as per contract non-permanent staff. The mean age of the students was 20 years. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. In this non-probability sampling method, the selection of the sample is based on the availability and willingness of the individuals to participate in the study [26,27]. The inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be native and to pursue studies in Education. The distribution between male and female participants was not equal because of the limited number of male students enrolled in early childhood education programs.

4.2. Instrument

The qualitative approach was used because qualitative methods permit a holistic perspective answering the “why” and “how” questions in keeping with the complicated aspects of human behavior [28–30] (Individual semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with participants in order to deeply investigate their needs, expectations, and concerns about refugee education [31]. This type of interview allows participants to express themselves more freely changing the structure of the interview as well as exploring new aspects as the interview unravels [32].).

The interview guide consisted of a schematic presentation of the questions around the core topic. The questions included in the interview guide focused on participants’ attitudes on issues related to refugee education in Greece in times of COVID-19 (for example “*What are the main difficulties that refugee students face during distance education?*”, “*Could the post-pandemic education system provide a more qualitative education to refugee students?*”, “*In which way does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the inclusion of refugee students in Greek schools?*” etc.). Except for the initial questions, prompts were also used for clarification during each interview depending on the participants’ responses [33]. Prior qualitative research studies were helpful in considering the design of the interview questions [34,35].

4.3. Procedure

All students were informed about the voluntary character of the participation. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of students and at times when they were able to talk freely and confidentially and they were conducted by the researchers. The average interview lasted between 50 and 60 min. Notes were taken by the researchers during the interviews and were summarized before the next interview. Anonymity and data confidentiality were assured to the participants as well as their right to withdraw at any point in the study without retribution. Their names were replaced with pseudonyms as well as the names of anyone else or the place names they mentioned. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed into a written format for data analysis. The researchers also made field notes after each interview highlighting areas of key significance in the interview.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. According to Weber [36], “content-analytic procedures operate directly on text or transcripts of human communications” (p. 10). The coding scheme was developed in order to organize data into categories and then the process of coding was performed so that participants’ words with identical or similar meanings were clustered together. All the categories were validated through a systematic review of the material. Particularly, the following clusters were proposed:

- Cluster 1: Challenges, obstacles, weaknesses, barriers in remote teaching.
- Cluster 2: Course content, teachers’ explanations, instruction methods, relationships with teachers, students’ engagement, students’ interest, students’ understanding.
- Cluster 3: emergency responses, marginalization, student equity, COVID-19 outbreak, increased vulnerability, widening inequalities, isolation, education gap.
- Cluster 4: consequences, new opportunities, lessons for new crises, advances in education, post-crisis, comparisons, redesigning refugee education.

5. Results

The aim of the present study was to examine the perceptions of Greek pre-service teachers on refugee education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that the emergence of distance education had a catalytic effect on the education of refugee students in Greece. Table 1 presents the coding scheme that was used in the present study.

Table 1. The coding scheme.

Categories	Sub-Categories
1. Refugee students' difficulties during distance education ($n = 32$)	1a. Access to device with internet capability ($n = 10$) 1b. The new experience of the distance learning environment ($n = 15$) 1c. The language barriers ($n = 7$)
2. The educational process for refugee students during distance learning ($n = 31$)	2a. Inadequacy of the existent school curriculum ($n = 20$) 2b. Ineffective communication between the teacher and refugee students in distance learning ($n = 11$) 3a. School drop-out risk for refugee students ($n = 4$)
3. The role of the COVID-19 pandemic in the inclusion of refugee students in Greek schools ($n = 32$)	3b. No opportunities to create interpersonal relationships between native and refugee students ($n = 12$) 3c. Distance learning does not facilitate the acquisition of Greek language by refugees ($n = 9$) 3d. Distance learning increases the bias and prejudice against refugees ($n = 7$)
4. The education of refugee students in the post-pandemic education system ($n = 30$)	4a. Distance learning as an additional means for the refugees' learning needs ($n = 6$) 4b. Better preparation and adaptation in times of crisis due to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic ($n = 20$) 4c. No improvement in the post-pandemic education system due to multiple difficulties ($n = 4$)

The coding scheme was developed based on prior research [34,35]. As the table indicates, there are four main categories each of which has specific subcategories.

Next, selected excerpts from these interviews will be presented to highlight the results of the study. The respondent number interview code (e.g., P1, P2) is added within single parentheses after the quote in line with the anonymity process for personal data.

5.1. Refugee Students' Difficulties during Distance Education

One of the major refugee students' difficulties during distance education which was mentioned by most respondents was the access to internet-enabled devices. According to one interviewee

"The majority of refugees do not have access to the internet or access to distance education equipment. Therefore, distance education is difficult and demanding for them". (P12)

Another prospective teacher also reported that

"Access to internet-enabled devices affects the schooling of refugee students during distance education because they are not available for everyone. In most reception structures I imagine that there is no connection and a corresponding device so not only is it difficult to study, it is impossible. I think that even refugee families living outside the camps will not be able to provide their children with the appropriate device and the necessary connection". (P10)

A great number of participants believed that the new experience of the distance learning environment, its requirements, and the adaptation to it, were also a serious difficulty for refugee students during the current pandemic. One respondent stated that

“Initially, regardless of the child’s age, we cannot say that all children use an electronic device equally well, as they all have different starting points and knowledge”. (P2)

This point of view has also been confirmed by another participant

“I believe that this new situation for these children with the forced use of technology that may not have had any previous experience is the biggest problem-difficulty faced by refugee students. But it is also quite difficult for children to constantly stare at a screen”. (P11)

Another significant difficulty according to many teachers is the language barrier which becomes even more visible during distance education. One teacher of the sample claimed that

“Many refugees do not have sufficient knowledge of the Greek language. So, since many students do not know the language, they do not even participate in online learning”. (P3)

One respondent explained the reasons for it

“It is weird for students to attend a course in a language they do not know well remotely”. (P15)

5.2. *The Educational Process for Refugee Students during Distance Learning*

The quality and the effectiveness of the educational process for refugee students were also among the primary concerns of teachers about refugee education.

Twenty teachers of those interviewed indicated that the existing school curriculum is insufficient for refugee students during distance education. One teacher mentioned that

“Before distance education, the curriculum had not been adapted, so refugee students’ needs and the pandemic only made things worse”. (P6)

The same opinion was expressed by another interviewee

“The existing curriculum is not adaptable or expanded and as a result, teachers do not escape from their traditional teaching methods despite the changes that distance education imposes”. (P20)

The majority of respondents reported that due to the lack of physical contact the communication between the teacher and refugee students during distance learning is ineffective. One of the participants revealed that

“Due to remote learning, there may not be a substantial interaction between these students and teachers and thus the optimal level of learning may not be achieved”. (P14)

According to another respondent

“They do not have the opportunity to have the physical contact with the teacher who can be by their side and guide and help them at any time”. (P5)

5.3. *The Role of COVID-19 Pandemic in the Inclusion of Refugee Students in Greek Schools*

Prospective teachers also commented on the role of COVID-19 pandemic in the inclusion of refugee students in Greek schools.

The school drop-out risk was obvious for refugee students both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic era according to a small number of interviewees. In particular, one participant stated that

“The risk of dropping out of school is always visible to all students when they feel compelled to endure a suffocating environment and they do not notice any benefit from it. Much more when you are a refugee and you have additional difficulties (linguistic, cultural, and financial) staying in such a school does not seem tempting at all”. (P10)

This is also confirmed by another interviewee who stated that

“It is very likely that some refugee students will drop out of school after the end of the pandemic. This is because many of them did not have access to online lessons; they lost their interest in school. Social restraint which prevailed during quarantine increased their discouragement”. (P15)

In addition, a large number of respondents referred to the lack of physical interaction between native and refugee students, making difficult the development of social and communication skills. One of the interviewees reported that

“The difficulty in the socializing process is a significant problem”. (P3)

One participant also argued that

“Students do not come into contact with their classmates, which would help them both to integrate into society and to better learn the language of the host country”. (P15)

Distance learning does not facilitate the acquisition of Greek language by refugees according to some respondents. According to one teacher

“Distance education is not the appropriate method for educating refugees because it does not meet their language needs”. (P4)

Another respondent claimed that

“Refugees have a greater need for face-to-face learning to achieve the desirable learning outcomes and to overcome their language difficulties. Given their different first language, distance education is particularly difficult for the refugee children, thus making the whole process, possibly ineffective and less qualitative”. (P21)

Several participants claimed that distance learning favors the bias and prejudice against refugees. From the point of view of an interviewee

During distance education refugee students feel isolated by other students because of their refugee status. When someone older does not talk to a child about the difficulties these people have faced, then the native student cannot accept the “different and display racist behaviors”. (P22)

Another respondent also claimed that

“It is not surprising if refugee students during distance education face bullying or rejection by fellow students and their teachers”. (P11)

5.4. The Education of Refugee Students in the Post-Pandemic Education System

Prospective teachers in the sample were also asked about how they imagined the post-pandemic Greek education system for refugee students.

From the perspective of some teachers, distance learning could be an additional means for the refugees' learning needs. Distance education could function as a supplementary tool to traditional teaching so that refugee students achieve better learning outcomes. One interviewee stated that

“The education system after the end of the pandemic can provide a better-quality education to refugee students with the help of distance education, because distance education might have helped teachers to detect refugee students' difficulties and learning deficiencies”. (P5)

The same opinion is expressed by another participant

“Distance education could be used for extra learning courses which would be offered to refugee students and would focus on Greek language competence”. (P8)

Over half of the teachers replied that the experience of the current COVID-19 pandemic would allow the Greek education system to better adapt and to be more prepared and flexible in the future. One of the respondents mentioned that

“Reconsidering what was successful and what was not during distance education and taking into account the needs of refugee students, we could create schools where children, interact, share experiences and learn from each other”. (P18)

According to one teacher

“Similarly with other difficult cases, after we overcome a new challenge, we evolve. Therefore, the same could happen with the education system after the end of COVID-19”. (P3)

Just a small number of respondents mentioned that the post-pandemic education system could not be ameliorated due to the multiple difficulties of refugees and due to various issues in the educational process that remain unsolved. This became clear from an interview with one of the teachers who claimed that

“It takes a lot of effort and several changes in order to have quality education for refugees. Starting with the teachers training, creating an appropriate climate of acceptance in the classroom and then working with other classmates and the families of both refugee students and natives. In no case can these changes be made directly in the post-pandemic education system”. (P12)

Another participant reported that

“Major changes should be made in the curriculum so that refugee students can normally participate in the school, and fill their learning gaps. Equality for all students in the school is not feasible in the post-education system”. (P27)

6. Discussion

The results of the study show that teachers have many serious concerns about refugee education in times of COVID-19 which according to them is and it continues to be a neglected issue during this crucial period.

The lack of necessary technical infrastructure for online-learning is considered to be a fundamental dimension of digital inequality in the context of distance education [37]. Access to both a computer and a stable internet connection is not always feasible for refugee and asylum-seeking children especially for those residing in camps. The exposure of refugee youth to ICTs was very limited due to the lack of technological tools [38]. As a result, these students are excluded from the educational process. Even if an internet-enabled device such as a smartphone is provided, it cannot facilitate students to study and to prepare for the schoolwork which is digitally assigned [37].

Students with a refugee background, especially new arrivals, may initially underperform academically, especially when they do not receive the required additional support. However, the improvement of their school performance is obvious over time when the adequate support is provided, as refugee youth aspire to reach a better life [8]. Nevertheless, according to a large number of prospective teachers of the study the new learning environment affects their attendance rate. Even if natives and refugee students were given free devices and Internet access, the disparities would continue to exist due to the different starting points of the majority and minority groups. Refugee students struggle with their school and social adaptation, and many of them lack the knowledge of how to operate technological devices or the parental support they need to succeed in distance learning.

The language barriers are also included among the primary difficulties that refugee students face in times of COVID-19 as mentioned by the teachers of the sample. The findings of the study conducted by Fujii et al. [37] also confirm that limited refugees' language skills hinder their educational participation and they enhance the risk for their exclusion. For many refugee learners arriving in Greece, the physical school space initially consists of a classroom designated for learners who do not speak the language of instruction

in mainstream classes. Because of the prolonged school closures, language barriers would significantly contribute to serious learning losses during distance learning affecting the acquisition of fundamental skills. In addition to language difficulties being one of the most significant challenges for refugee children, they could also hinder their participation in European education systems, which discourages them, increasing the risk of dropping out of school and further discrimination [39].

The school curriculum is considered to be ineffective for refugee students during face-to-face learning and even more during distance learning. The national curriculum requirements were already difficult to accomplish for refugee students in traditional education since this was not adapted to refugee students' past and current experiences. The weaknesses of the curriculum are made more apparent during distance learning since no structured and targeted activities are included to address the needs of refugee students. A significant amount of ground is lost to these students as a result. The changing needs of distance education with a focus on the educational participation of refugee students are neglected so that these students experience digital inequality [37].

Teachers of the sample referred to another problem that arises during the online educational process that is the teachers' failed efforts to stay in contact with refugee children and to communicate effectively with them. A recent study conducted by Primdahl et al. [35] concluded that teachers had difficulties communicating with refugee learners remotely due to their limited access to virtual communication platforms and language barriers. These communication difficulties and the lack of physical co-presence not only made teaching highly challenging but interrupted their work to support students,, including maintaining daily schedules and facilitating social closeness between learners. The lack of communication with their teacher can lead refugee students not to get any instruction and support at all.

According to some participants' perspectives, school shutdowns could not only cause disproportionate learning losses for refugee students—compounding existing gaps—but also lead more of them to drop out. Indeed, about 11 million primary school and secondary school students could end up dropping out taking into account only the factor of the income shock [9]. Even before the current COVID-19 pandemic, refugee students were twice as likely to be out of school than other children [40]. Although in Greece inclusive education is regarded as an effective educational policy, the Greek education system still has to cope with serious difficulties so that inclusive practice is successfully implemented for all diverse students including refugee students [41]. A lack of technology for distance learning clearly increases the risk of school dropout, thereby reducing future socio economic prospects [42]. This could have long-term effects on these children's economic well-being, on their integration into the host country and on the Greek economy as a whole.

The lack of physical interaction among students was also reported as one of the main problems that the current COVID-19 pandemic brought by the inclusion of refugee students in Greek schools. Refugee children are deprived of the chance to become socialized in the physical school space. The physical school space has also been observed to facilitate peer support for newly arrived migrant and refugee learners [43]. Although the socializing process is not forbidden through an online platform, students need time to adapt to distance learning and to get used to interacting with each other via electronic means [44].

Due to the lack of linguistic support in distance education, the COVID-19 pandemic did not aid refugee children in dealing with their language difficulties effectively. Greek teachers believe that communication difficulties are negatively affecting the traditional educational process due to the lack of a mediation language, according to a recent study [45]. As a result of the tough efforts required and the lack of intensive teacher support to refugee students, a recent study [37] indicates that teachers have a difficult time supporting refugee students in host language acquisition during distance education. It becomes evident, then, that language barriers are exacerbated during distance learning, and the already existing disparities between refugee and native students could be expanded at a greater degree. This results in refugee students not having sufficient knowledge and understanding of

the language of the host country. Some teachers mentioned that distance education favors the cultivation of negative attitudes towards refugees. This is not surprising since the role of physical contact is vital for the reduction of bias and prejudice. At the interpersonal level, just a simple use of physical contact (i.e., a casual touch) during interactions also improves the evaluations by the teacher [46]. The findings of some recent studies [47,48] also confirm that the intergroup contact with refugees increased the sense of solidarity, whereas it decreased the effects of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments. This is also confirmed by a recent study conducted by Nikolaou and Samsari [49] showing that the interaction effect of seeing a refugee, meeting a refugee and discussing with a refugee explained a significant proportion of variance in attitudes towards refugees.

According to some participants' opinions, distance education could be an effective additional tool so that refugee students achieve better learning outcomes. First and foremost, technology could offer educational opportunities to students who live in difficult-to-reach areas or have limited mobility [50,51]. Moreover, the findings of the study conducted by Taftaf and Williams [38] showed that Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) have successfully been used in a variety of different educational settings offering quality educational opportunities to young refugees. The implementation of ICTs in refugee education does not concern only the host language acquisition, but also the development of basic academic skills [52], the cultivation of creativity and a better understanding of the diverse perspectives through learning activities such as digital storytelling [53] and the reinforcement of protective factors of mental health [54]. The technological interventions cannot, however, be considered panaceas for refugee education, especially when designed to be free of coordination or when they are decontextualized from the learning context [55]. Prospective teachers already know that and therefore propose that in the future, online learning should be combined with face-to-face learning so that the educational process would be enriched.

A great number of teachers of the sample believed that in the post-pandemic era, the Greek education system would be more prepared to provide an effective educational process and more flexible to address the students' needs at a possible upcoming school closure. The COVID-19 pandemic was the reason for re-evaluating significant aspects of education in all education levels [56]. The past experience would give the opportunity to design a collaborative learning system which enhances the students' sense of belonging to a school community within the framework of distance education [57]. Policymakers and educators should grasp the chance to renegotiate the terms of the current educational practices and the implementation of the educational theories in order to meet students' academic and psycho-social needs [58]. There is a need for more research into the evaluation of refugee education policies and practices used during COVID-19 so that the post-pandemic education system will be able to benefit from the acquired experience and avoid some of the mistakes that were made during this difficult time.

However, as stated by some participants, the improvement of education system in the aftermath of COVID-19 is utopian. Refugee children cope with miscellaneous barriers to accessing schools which vary from enrolment issues to lack of available instruction and language difficulties [40]. These prospective teachers believed that despite the efforts, distance learning cannot provide the quality of education for refugee students and adolescents that is delivered in the classroom due to the multiple difficulties that these students face and due to the various issues, that arise at the online educational process. The numerous learning gaps of refugee students that existed were expanded during the school shutdown and they could not be overcome in the post-pandemic era. The rapid advance of digital technologies due to COVID-19 created significant educational challenges and widened the divide among students belonging to different groups setting aside the goal of holistic education [58].

7. Conclusions

Education is a key element for refugee and migrant children's social inclusion in host communities [8]. Although refugee education has a higher cost than the education of natives, it is regarded as a social investment for a productive and peaceful pluralistic society. However, over the last few years, the public health crisis imposed new challenges in the educational context for all students, especially for those students who along with the requirements of distance learning had to overcome their traumatic experiences, face various difficulties, and quickly adapt to the culture and the society new host country. Students around the world seemed to experience the school closures differently. The concerns raised in this presentation not only highlight the significance of the physical school space and closeness in refugee education but also shed light on the vulnerabilities of this group of children and the urgency to address their needs.

Greek prospective teachers feel "helpless" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Few intensive teachers' training programs in distance education met some basic needs on the operations of the main distance-learning platforms that were used at school closures, but unfortunately had an additional oversight in not focusing on how to support students from refugee backgrounds with online learning. For this reason, it would not be surprising if the level of teachers' self-efficacy decreased and the level of occupational stress increased during the restrictive periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for those who teach refugee students. Thus, it is recommended that further research should be undertaken in the above areas. Moreover, in light of the results of this study, future studies should focus on developing a teacher's initial training curriculum with special emphasis on developing culturally responsive teachers even in times of future pandemics or other crises, since teachers' competencies, as well as their readiness to face differences among refugee students (cultural, linguistic, etc.), is a precondition for enhancing their inclusion in the school system.

The findings of the study conducted by Hill et al. [59] confirm that the current pandemic sheds light on serious problems (i.e., racist behavior, and inequalities) that perpetuate in the school and social context calling for the urgent need to cope with these issues and to focus on students' development and well-being reassuring the access to education for all. In the post-pandemic education system developing accelerated education programs and providing efficient linguistic support for refugee children who have experienced significant disruptions to their education and who face serious language barriers, is of great importance. Caarls et al. [60] concur with the study's findings that modifying national curricula to be more culturally inclusive and eliminating discriminatory content can improve academic performance and support effective adaptation, especially when paired with mental health and psychosocial support programs. Moreover, as presented in our study, building positive relationships -both face-to-face and online- favors the school achievement of refugee students [61].

To summarize, it is important to note that despite the efforts to forecast infection cases, deaths, and courses of development during the current pandemic, the future that lies ahead remains uncertain. Hence, based on the knowledge of the previous years, the Greek education system should ensure that all refugee children are enrolled in the coming school year providing smooth and uninterrupted school access not only to refugee children but to all children belonging to socially vulnerable groups providing them effective learning support and diminishing the disparities among them.

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