

Education as “distinction” – Issues of differentiated “habitus” in informal educational provision for refugee children, in the island of Lesbos

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From the summer of 2015 some of the Aegean Islands (mainly Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros, Samos) have received a huge influx of refugees, which by far exceeded existing capabilities in reception and hospitality. Under the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, migrants arriving in Greece are now expected to be sent back to Turkey if they do not apply for asylum or their claim is rejected. That, in combination with the increasing anti-immigration rhetoric in some EU countries of the Central and Eastern Europe, and the ensuing tightening of the EU border controls, started to create a sense of an “entrapment” of the newcomers (migrants/refugees) inside the Greek territory.

Refugee who decided (unwillingly or not) to apply for asylum in Greece, have –among other things— to rapidly adapt themselves to the new socio-economic environment. Their offspring are required by law to register in the local public schools, either through special “reception classes”, or through the so-called “Refugee Educational Support Classes”, which may be run during the morning or evening hours, and can be offered even inside the ‘Reception and Identification Centres’ (RICs) set up by the Greek Asylum Service.

This paper focuses on the case of Lesbos (the biggest in size of all the Aegean islands, and the one that received the biggest inflow of refugees in the last four years), and it attempts to capture key aspects of educational provision for refugee children/adolescents (6-17 year old) at: 1) an official RIC, 2) a municipal host-camp, and 3) a refugee shelter run by NGOs and Solidarity groups. The study’s target population is educators working in the RIC, the camp and the shelter, who offer courses to refugee minors, as well as general support services to their families. The field research combines semi-structured interviews with those volunteers and participant observation at the sites where they carry out their learning activities.

Initially, informed by the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his notion of habitus (1977, 1984, 1998), we attempt to explore the conscious or unconscious formation of differentiated “horizons for action” between native educators, on one hand, and refugees/students, on the other, in the sense that each individual based on her/his own habitus, which is heavily conditioned by certain qualities and quantities of “economic”, “social” and “cultural” capital, exercises widely contrasting strategies and develops diverse actions resulting in differing outcomes. Then, based on the theoretical work of Michel Agier (2011, 2016) concerning the temporal, social and spatial dimensions of the “border ritual”, we will study the way those involved in those very “fluid” educational settings, create, reproduce and quite often enforce new kinds of educational “borders” upon their (vulnerable) subjects. Finally, we assume that a socio-spatial segregation is reproduced with different spatial practices between three camps: “PIKPA” (open and solidarity camp, in a welcome space with participatory practices), “Karatepe” (“open-closed”, very controlled municipality camp, in an intermediate space) and “Moria” (“closed-open”, official camp, in a alienating, precarious space, where the education is privilege).