

**Primary school of Kalamaria, Greece**  
***“A school without walls: Co-creating an open and sustainable learning  
community”***  
**by Maria Vlachaki, principal**

For the first time last year we accepted in our primary school refugee children because of the war in Syria. Native children weren't acquainted with the ethno cultural “other”.

Our important challenges were to confront:

- Prejudice and stereotypes of students and their parents about the abilities of refugee children according to a "deficit" approach.
- Low expectations of some colleagues and their lack of knowledge in intercultural, human rights and citizenship education.
- The knowledge centered curriculum and the lack of time for critical thinking and self-reflection.

Our project comprised educational activities which aimed to prevent discrimination and to support the inclusion of refugee pupils in our school community. Specifically, we created peer groups for cooperation and interaction among native and pupils with different descent. Native pupils took the initiative to familiarize refugee children with school life, the rules, the rights and responsibilities. It is worth mentioning that most of the refugee children didn't have any previous school experience in their own country because of the war.

In addition, we promoted communication and self-expression through the support of a network of mediators, both adults and elder pupils, who knew the languages spoken by refugee children. So we were better able to make refugee children's voice heard. At the same time, native children found out similarities among the Greek and the Arabic language. A lexicon with basic common phrases was made by pupils.

The daily school program was enriched with cross-curriculum activities which promoted the use of all children's cultural capital and the development of different skills. In our oral history project, children collected family stories which depicted the different past as well as connections of both refugee and native children. Greek society was multicultural due to different migration and refugee movements throughout the ages. A school archive of culture was created. Furthermore, children made a movie by synthesizing different life stories.

In addition, we applied cooperative teaching strategies such as action research and teams working in projects, which developed a sense of belonging to the community. The participation of children's relatives and other members of the local society was fostered. Learning process at school became more “open” based on dialogue and the interaction of different aspects. Diversity proved to be an important benefit. Respectively, social prejudices against the “other” were discussed and provoked.

Communication and critical reflection were developed among teachers in relation to their practices and the educational material they could use. Special meetings were organized and as a result the school program enriched with subjects and activities which promoted values such as equality and justice. Peer evaluation in relation to teachers' practices was applied.

Also, our school regulation was developed based on the values of mutual respect and collaboration. A collection of special educational material and sources on intercultural, human rights and citizenship education was created at school.

Notable changes were made such as a participatory school culture, the development of an open learning community, the systematic use of dialogical strategies and contexts, the promotion of human rights such as equality, justice and reciprocal respect.

This project is continuing, and we aim to develop a network with other schools by using new technologies to interchange educational experiences, promote communication and reciprocal communication and respect and support the idea of a school without walls.