

The Classroom Cure: Greece Struggles to Educate a New Generation of Refugees

Hayley Roth

In a Tortoiseshell: *In Hayley Roth's feature article for a journalism class studying the refugee crisis in Greece, she adopts **creative nonfiction techniques**, a risk-taking approach for hard news journalism. In this case, it's a tactic that pays off handsomely by contextualizing a serious topic and humanizing the figures quoted in her piece.*

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Two boys jostled each other beneath the hot Greek sun. They looked very similar—colorful t-shirts and shorts, same skinny frames, same buzzed haircuts.

As humanitarian workers approached, it became clear that they weren't playing. One boy jabbed his finger at the other and yelled in English, "Kurdish, no good, no good!" He was Afghan.

Sultan Ozcan, a nutritionist for the nongovernmental organization Save the Children, recounted the scene that she witnessed at a refugee camp in the small Greek town of Oinofyta.

"They started getting aggressive and loud towards each other," she said. Although just four and six years old, the boys refused to play together, insulting each other's countries and families.

According to a recent report from Save the Children, refugees under the age of 18 in Greece have been out of school for an average of eighteen months. And young children like the Kurd and the Afghan have not had the chance to start school at all.

"They are not disciplined," said Ozcan. "They don't know what is right and what is wrong."

Since the escalation of the Syrian civil war in early 2015 and a rise in violence throughout the Middle East, over one million migrants and refugees have come to Greece, the gateway to the European Union. The debt-ridden country is widely seen as the first step of a long journey to northeastern Europe, not as a destination for families looking to rebuild their lives. However, as the EU falters with its plans to relocate asylum-seekers among Member States, some refugees realize they may be here for a long time. Many others cling to plans to rendezvous with relatives in countries like Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, though chances look increasingly dim.

"As soon as you have people staying longer-term, I think you need to start thinking about investing in them," said Shareen Elnashie, Education Program Director for Humanitarian Support Agency at Kara Tepe, a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos.

According to Yannis Pantis, General Secretary of the Ministry of Education, around half of the 60,000 refugees currently in Greece are children under the age of 18. The overwhelmed Greek state has ambitious plans for the integration of refugee children into the national education

system, but it has yet to implement any concrete provisions. The dog days of summer have seemingly put a damper on the urgency of integration, and nongovernmental organizations like Save the Children and Humanitarian Support Agency are trying to pick up the slack on the ground until September arrives.

For adult refugees who speak neither Greek nor English, access to language classes is entirely subject to the capacity of the NGOs that are present in the camps.

“At a formal level, I would say there is nothing [for either children or adults],” said Giulia Clericetti, an Italian worker for the Swedish humanitarian organization I AM YOU. She is currently stationed at the Ritsona refugee camp about 70 kilometers north of Athens. “The [NGOs] have done a huge amount.”

But the NGOs are fighting an uphill battle as the government makes moves to close several of the primary camps in the greater Athens area and on the Greek islands. Many other camps are overrun, with families spilling out the gates and onto the sidewalks. Shelters for unaccompanied minors have hundreds on their waitlists.

Ozcan explained that the lack of education is a growing problem. Without government-regulated learning spaces, the children remain undisciplined, unable to develop their attention spans, and at risk for developing strong intolerances for other nationalities. Adults struggle to assimilate, partly due to the lack of a common tongue. Minor outbreaks of violence among different nationalities are not atypical occurrences in the camps.

Integrated education could be the cure, but is it a cure that Greece can provide?

On the ground: NGOs run the show

“What do you wish for?”

“I wish for pace. No, no, I wish for peace.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to go to Germany.”

“What do you like?”

“I like English.”

“What do you hate?”

“I hate ISIS.”

Underneath a flapping canopy at Ritsona, a man in a baseball cap and flip-flops responds to questions in hesitant English. His teacher, a woman working for I AM YOU, is significantly younger than he. Nine other men and women sit next to him on folding chairs, writing carefully in their notebooks.

Seve is a 23-year-old Kurdish Iraqi sitting in the back row. She has attended every offered class for the past month and a half. “I do not know when I will be able to leave,” she said. “But English is the first language in the world. [Whichever] country you go, you speak English. Then I will learn Greek.”

Seve is one of many refugees who is tempering her eagerness to leave Greece. She is gradually coming to terms with the country's language and culture, and I AM YOU is trying to help. "It's frustrating not to know how long you'll be stuck here," Clericetti explained. "It could be two weeks, it could be two years... No one wants to stay here."

I AM YOU is one of 76 bodies—including NGOs, universities, and solidarity groups—that sponsor educational efforts in refugee camps across the country. The Greek state, so far, is not among them. Without centralized organization, the groups are disproportionately concentrated in certain camps over others. In some locations, an alphabet soup of NGOs chaotically competes to bring refugees to their language classes; in others, no classes are offered.

"We cannot provide the basic structure that we're missing at the start," said Clericetti. "There is an awful lot of competitiveness, unfortunately. Coordinating is very hard."

"It's really tricky [to organize] because we've got so many different languages, so many different abilities," added Elnashie.

Clericetti said there is a large demand among migrant parents to educate their families.

However, the chaos sometimes makes it difficult for them to find suitable classes for themselves or their children. Many speak only Arabic or Farsi, and struggle to find teachers that cater to their native tongues.

Nassim, a father of two from Lebanon, is waiting to send his daughter to a proper Greek school. "If there is a chance to send my daughter to school, I will let her start," he said. "Only if there is a school for beginners. And myself too, I will have to go to school." (Nassim's name has been changed at his request to protect his family's identity.)

But as of now, there is no set curriculum for the makeshift classes. "People can learn," said Clericetti. "Kids can learn, but it's not recognized in any way."

The ambitious, underfunded state

Greece's Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs currently has its hands quite full. Pressure from the European Union, the Greek citizenry, and the growing refugee population—all with different priorities and agendas—has incited frustration among administrators at the lack of adequate funding from the European Commission.

The ministry recently established a committee to investigate the state of refugee education in Greece. "After evaluating the adequacy and suitability of all sites that have been created to accommodate activities with children, basic deficiencies have been found," their report said. "Also unsuitable conditions, which in many cases are deemed to expose participants to risk." They cited lack of schoolrooms, equipment deficiencies, poor hygiene, and lackluster supervision.

The committee also put forth an ambitious plan to provide a year's worth of preparatory classes for refugee children before their integration into the national educational system alongside Greek children. "Because all these children have [had] no experience for [several] years

in school, not only in the Greek language, but also in the parent languages, it is very important to have a special class to prepare,” said General Secretary Yannis Pantis.

However, implementation is complicated. “We have three problems to solve,” said Panagiotis Georgopoulos, Special Advisor to the Minister of Education. “The first is financial. The second is the chronic deficiencies that the state has in being able to adapt to a changing emergency situation. And the third is to make the necessary legal changes to do all the things that we’ve planned to do.”

The Greek state estimates that it needs at least €30,000,000 of direct funding from the European Commission to get the plan off the ground. However, the EU typically dictates the manner in which its funding to Greece must be spent, and the education of refugees is not its priority.

“The EU is using the migration crisis as a bargaining chip,” said Marios Andriotis, Senior Advisor to the Mayor of Lesbos. “It’s using refugees to get what it wants.”

Pantis seems undeterred by the not-so-promising prospects. “If we have not the funding, we will start,” he said. “We will start independent of the funding from the European Union.” This may be a Herculean task for a country already struggling under the weight of an economic crisis.

For NGOs, support groups, and the refugees themselves, state support can’t come soon enough. “Hopefully [the government] will get to a point where they don’t need us anymore,” said Clericetti.

But when?

An uncertain cure

In Athens’s Port of Piraeus, tents are haphazardly erected beneath a roaring overpass. Children run helter-skelter across the asphalt, and women hang laundry out to dry. The Greek government has set multiple deadlines for the relocation of the refugees that live here; the most recent, July 20th, has come and gone without effective state intervention. In the temporary community, makeshift boundaries have arisen.

“[There is] a need to keep Syrians and Afghans separate,” said Katerina Tzanini, a volunteer for the Greek support group known as Refugees Welcome to Piraeus. “They equally love the [volunteer] workers, just not each other. The division occurs naturally, organically.”

Segregation of nationalities is a common phenomenon among the camps. In Kara Tepe, the management enforces this segregation by dividing the camp into four “ethnic neighborhoods” to help form support networks among refugees who share a common background and speak the same language.

However, alongside this support within nationalities is the threat of growing tension between them. In late spring, riots broke out among adolescents in Moria, the refugee registration center and detention camp on Lesbos. There have also been minor scuffles in camps throughout the mainland. The argument between the two young boys at Oinofyta is symptomatic of the trend.

“The kids can’t play if they don’t speak the language,” said Clericetti. If the language gap can be breached, cooperation becomes more viable.

The preparatory classes planned by the Ministry of Education could provide a potential forum for so-called “wild children” to adjust to a coeducational, multinational learning environment and counteract the animosity that stews in the camps. It could also ease culture shock and help families assimilate into Greek life.

“If we have the money, we can have [the teachers] by tomorrow,” said Georgopoulos emphatically.

In the meantime, NGOs and support groups continue their work. Tomorrow may be a month from now, a year from now, or never.

Author Commentary

Hayley Roth

“The Classroom Cure” was an experiment in long-form journalism. I wrote it as a participant in Princeton’s inaugural five-week international journalism seminar, “Reporting from the Front Lines of History in Greece,” in summer 2016. Three days into the course, I met Sultan Ozcan through a chance encounter at the Port of Piraeus, where she had been briefly stationed by her NGO, Save the Children. She described many of the difficulties facing her organization, including the complexities of providing basic education to young children of different ethnicities and cultures who spoke a variety of languages. Although the basics of the European refugee crisis were already heavily covered by mainstream news outlets in America, I saw the chance for an overlooked story to come to light. I settled on refugee education as the topic of my final reporting project.

The article is divided into four main sections: 1) introduction, 2) On the ground: NGOs run the show, 3) The ambitious, underfunded state, and 4) An uncertain cure. This structure allowed me to present multiple perspectives on the subject. For an article to accurately represent an issue in an unbiased manner, it is necessary to recognize that there is no single reality. I did not want to write just from the refugees’ perspective, or from the perspective of the NGO workers; I also needed to speak with the Greek state to hear their reasons why no official education programs had been implemented in the refugee camps to date. Fortunately, our six-student reporting team was capably assisted by a local Greek reporter—a “fixer,” as journalistic jargon has it—who helped to set up our interviews and organize our logistics. Over the course of two weeks, he made arrangements for me to meet with everyone from the former prime minister of Greece to a group of unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan. As I learned from the process, a good fixer is essential for international reporting.

Once the research and interviews were over, the writing began. It was a laborious process. I spent hours extracting succinct quotes from audio recordings and distilling long explanations into short statements. The article attempts to break form with traditional reporting by incorporating elements of creative storytelling without becoming flowery or verbose. I learned this technique from Professor John McPhee, whose creative nonfiction seminar for sophomores continues to inspire my writing style. My ultimate goal was to hold the reader’s attention throughout the course of an extended narrative that diverged from conventionality while still adhering to the basic standards of journalism. It was a challenge and a thrill to tell this story.

Fellow Commentary
Harrison Blackman

The island of Lesbos is the third-largest island in Greece, located off the coast of Turkey. Its proximity to Turkey makes it an epicenter of the European migration crisis, the first foothold for many refugees and migrants seeking to start a new life in Europe. As a result, Lesbos is simultaneously a large and small place, making it a challenging and compelling space for finding the journalistic story. Along with Hayley, I also had the privilege of attending Princeton's inaugural journalism seminar abroad, tasked with learning about the refugee crisis in Greece, particularly in Lesbos.

In this piece, Hayley adopted a risk-taking approach to a journalism assignment about this crucial topic for our times. Hayley utilized several essential components of hard-news reportage, including nut graph (the thesis and outline of the story); a narrative that complicates in telescopic (interlocking and compounding) fashion; the interweaving of interview- and document-based sources; and a clear discussion of the consequences of the problem at hand—the challenges of refugee and migrant education in Greece. Hayley's approach takes risks because she also adopts elements of narrative nonfiction, components that develop scenes of refugee camp life that give detail to what might be the public's cloudy picture of such a situation. It pays off, however, in that this approach allows her narrative to generate empathy with refugees, a crucial duty of a journalist faced with telling the story of a vulnerable population. Briefly, I will go into the work's strengths as a narrative, the effectiveness of the nut graph, the power of the piece's interviews, and its keen grasp of literary style.

From the article's opening, we are given scenes in more detail than most feature stories might include:

Two boys jostled each other beneath the hot Greek sun. They looked very similar—colorful t-shirts and shorts, same skinny frames, same buzzed haircuts.

As humanitarian workers approached, it became clear that they weren't playing. One boy jabbed his finger at the other and yelled in English, "Kurdish, no good, no good!" He was Afghan.

By giving us specific details about the nature of the scene at hand, Hayley does important journalistic work, as the average reader may have little idea of what refugee children look like or the general sentiments of a Greek refugee camp—so often defined by the hot sun.

Following the vivid opening, Hayley makes sure to contextualize the situation through her "nut graph"—the outline of the situation framing the article with the paragraph that begins with "Since the escalation of...". This is a trademark of journalism, and Hayley briskly explains the context, which is impressive because it is such a complex situation.

What is also stunning about this piece is Hayley's journalistic digging. Her extensive and challenging interview work has culminated in choice quotes, such as the quote from Seve the Kurdish Iraqi, "But English is the first language in the world. [Whichever] country you go, you speak English. Then I will learn Greek." The multiple language barriers faced by journalists in this situation make these interviews difficult—if someone did not speak English, a journalist had to hope that someone around spoke Arabic, Farsi, or Greek.

Finally, Hayley makes sure to emphasize the consequences of the story she is telling and does so through literary repetition that is artful and damning. In her conclusion, she writes:

"If we have the money, we can have [the teachers] by tomorrow," said Georgopoulos

emphatically.

In the meantime, NGOs and support groups continue their work. Tomorrow may be a month from now, a year from now, or never.

Hayley's riff on Georgopoulos's quote helps keep the conclusion grounded in the actual story while making a sobering appraisal of the situation on the ground.

We include Hayley's feature as a model piece of journalism and a showcase of how to take a news story and make it into something with creative nonfiction components. As one of her classmates—also faced with the weighty task of turning the complicated situations and scenes we witnessed into news pieces that could turn the spotlight back on the needs of those affected by the refugee crisis—I was even more impressed.

Bios

Hayley Roth '17 is a Woodrow Wilson School concentrator from Memphis, Tennessee. Her academic focuses are human rights and public interest law, journalism, and Italian language and culture. Outside the classroom, she plays with the Princeton Pianists Ensemble, sings with the University Chapel Choir, broadcasts for the local radio station, and searches endlessly for warm, sunny places to appease her southern roots. She wrote this as a senior.

Harrison Blackman '17 is the editor-in-chief of *Tortoise* and previously served as a Head Fellow for the Princeton University Writing Program, as a features editor for *The Daily Princetonian*, and as a Princeton International and Regional Studies Fellow. He was born in Southern California and lives in Maryland. A history major and creative writing certificate student, he wrote his senior thesis on Cold War architecture in Greece and a thriller novella about climate change scientists in Antarctica, two subjects that are not eclectic at all. He wrote this as a senior.