THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL AND REFUGEE FAMILY NETWORKS IN THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN CYPRUS SOCIETY

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The integration of the refugees in the host society refers to both changes taking place on a personal as well as on a collective basis as a result of the interaction of refugees themselves with their new environments. It is a multi-faced and complex process related to bunches of concepts and factors. The traditional way of research in the area had been the creation of indicators or benchmarks for evaluating the policies promoted for the integration of refugees. However, the voice of the refugees themselves and their perspectives are often neglected or they are occasionally taken into account. They seem to be of great importance in exploring the process of integration, especially in countries like Cyprus, which during the last years have become popular destinations for asylum seekers approaching the western/northern borders of Europe.

The focus of the present study is on the way refugees in Cyprus perceive and define the situation, the prospective or obstacles of the integration process in the host society. Special emphasis was given on how they perceive education and school-family relations to affect their own and/or their children’s integration in the society. In-depth interviews with 42 people who granted the refugee status were carried out and data from 125 questionnaires were used to describe the situation of integration or exclusion, the role of the social bonds and bridges developed in relation to school and family and how their interaction was perceived by the refugees themselves. The people were recruited with the help of counselors, social workers who assisted these people through the government resettlement programme taking into consideration the age, sex and ethnic group. The interviews were conducted in the language of the people by an interviewer who received an intensive training. All the interviews were recorded and transcribes for the analysis. The questionnaires also were translated in the language of the participants. In data analysis and interpretation categorical aggregation, searching for patterns and themes and direct interpretation were used certain categories which were examined through a complex interaction model of different factors.

Preliminary results indicate that in a society that seems to be highly assimilative, refugee parents seem to “grab” on the school as the main route towards integration while incidents of discrimination or racism are constantly related to social bonds developed between students rather than between teachers and students or students and parents. The results will be discussed in relation to certain actions that need to be taken in the area of family-school relation and the role of the community in which
these relationships are examined. Discussion focuses on the image of the educational system vis a vis the surrounding society as perceived by refugee parents and on how intercultural education through an holistic approach can be strengthened.

*Keywords*: Refugees, Integration, Social bonds, Discrimination, Racism.