

My name is Ioanna Peppas, and I am a Case Worker Team Leader in a Safe Zone area for unaccompanied minors in Elaionas camp, in Athens.

For me the issue of transition is synonymous with the issue of education. Education is amongst the most crucial aspects in a minor's life. It not only opens the mind, but it also provides a schedule and a goal in a child's life and having goals is crucial; particularly for unaccompanied minors, many of whom have been stripped of their vision for a future.

So, when I first started working in the safe zone, my dream was to ensure that all of our children would have access to education. Yet every year, enrolling them to school was a headache; more so, the farther back you look, as it meant addressing the school community's concerns with respect to children's vulnerabilities and, ultimately, working systematically and establishing collaborations to foster the conditions for the school environment to become more open to change. When this was finally accomplished, it was my most fulfilling professional experience!

I remember waiting every day outside the school to ensure that all our children would attend their classes. I can't really describe how happy I felt just seeing them with school bags outside the camp, or how proud I felt for them when we started receiving the most positive comments on how well they had managed to integrate in the school community. At first, this was the only thing I wanted: "school for everyone". And it worked, with scaling effects, because even for the children that were less inclined to resume their education, seeing their peers and friends going to school and engaging in extracurricular activities, triggered their interest and mobilized them!

Conversely, these past months during the Covid pandemic have been my highest disappointment. Disproportionate restrictions on their movement, coupled with distance learning led to the total marginalisation of refugee children, who lack the means, such as access to a stable internet connection, to be able to attend distance learning. The result was a sort of stagnation; an increased apathy. The day became the night and the night became the day, leading to increased anxiety disorders and internal tensions, as the only choice these children had was to sit all day in the camp with their phones in hand.

Yet even now, as schools resume, it doesn't mean that the system is ready to invest in children's abilities and knowledge. There is still a lack of a tailored-made approach that would also take into consideration children's educational or cultural backgrounds, or of sufficient preparation to ensure that the children can attend school in an equitable manner. For instance, preparatory language courses tend to start in December at best. This means that by the time they start, many refugee children have already become disheartened and disillusioned, as they have already lost half the school year and keeping up during the second half then becomes an impossibility.

This needs to be resolved. As soon as they arrive, unaccompanied children need to have access to preparatory courses for 3-4 months; to be supported in re-organising their lives and in deciding what they wish to do. Just the other day, we had a new minor arriving from the islands. He has been in Greece for four months, and in another three he will have reached

majority. He told us he wants to work. What can I tell him? How can we possibly prepare him for a smooth transition to adulthood, when he hasn't even had the chance to enrol to school?

Yet notwithstanding formal education, there is also an urgent need for life skills programmes and vocational training opportunities. We have many children that are highly skilled with manual labor activities; who wish to become carpenters or electricians or gardeners. Every day, you can see them trying to create small gardens in the camp on their own. There are so many things that they can do; so many things they can become, but lack a framework that can support them in developing their skills professionally. Yet there is room for hope.

A good direction that has been provided in cooperation with UNICEF and the Hellenic Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) is a pilot vocational training programme for intercultural mediators for children in transition. The only other time we had the opportunity to enrol children to such a vocational programme it was a complete success. All four children graduated and are now employed. And they were so happy. They had a vision! I really hope this new initiative can be the start of a new direction for children in transition. I think this would be a tremendous change.