

Article

Governing Refugee Education Through Waiting: Temporality and Agency in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Minors' Narratives of (Dis)engagement with Schooling

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Abstract

In utilising a governmentality of migration and temporality theoretical lens, the paper illuminates the technologies of power, regimes of practices and rationalities that govern refugee educational reception, drawing upon a British Academy-funded study that documented unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's lived experiences in Southern European borderlands. Through an ethnographically informed research design that involved observations, interviews and focus groups conducted in two reception centres for unaccompanied minors in Greece, the paper examines their (dis)engagement with schooling, locating it at the interface of asylum and educational regimes and their respective temporalities. The participants' accounts, situated in the liminal context of asylum-seeking, illustrate the challenges they face with respect to access, reception and inclusive learning (or lack thereof) and the intricate ways that power, agency and temporality are interwoven in their narratives. Notwithstanding the educators' well-intentioned efforts, schools amplify the profound uncertainty characterising unaccompanied minors' lives, with waiting emerging as a technology of power through which their engagement with schooling is governed, and often resisted, poignantly pointing to the ambivalence of refugee educational reception and its exclusionary operation.

Keywords: refugee education; temporality; agency; unaccompanied minors; governmentality

1. Introduction

As of the end of 2024, 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced ([UNHCR 2025](#)), of whom 49 million were children under the age of 18. In an era of wars, protracted armed conflicts, persecution, and human rights violations, the population of forcibly displaced people tragically continues to increase, posing complex challenges to the international community and refugee-receiving countries, thereby bringing the reception policies of the latter to the heart of these debates. The present paper draws upon a British Academy-funded study that was conducted in two Greek hospitality (reception) centres for unaccompanied minors and qualitatively documented their lived experiences of asylum-seeking.

Greece has been at the epicentre of what has been termed in the public discourse as the 'European refugee (management) crisis', with more than one million people crossing its borders during 2015–2016, and ever more continuing to undertake perilous journeys seeking international protection and opportunities for a safer, more decent life in Europe. After 2016, as the geopolitical landscape shifted, the centre of gravity of refugee humanitarian governance also moved from rescue, emergency relief aid, and initial reception towards



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housing, protection, and education (Papataxiarchis 2017; Daskalaki and Leivaditi 2018). Through applying a governmentality of migration and temporality theoretical approach (Foucault 1991; Fassin 2011; Walters 2011; Tazzioli 2018), this paper examines the regimes of practices and rationalities that govern refugee educational reception in Greece. It builds upon earlier work that documented the ways in which violence, humanitarianism and (de)subjectification are implicated and intertwined in the governmentality of unaccompanied child migration in Southern European borderlands (Katartzi 2025). The present article focusses on unaccompanied minors' (dis)engagement with schooling, locating it at the interface of asylum and educational bureaucracies and their respective temporalities, thereby contributing valuable child-centred insights to the growing field of refugee education.

After examining the interplay between the governmentality of migration and temporality, this paper provides a brief overview of recent trends in the schooling of asylum-seeker and refugee (ASR thereafter) children and young people in the European context and in Greece more specifically. The study's methodological approach is then detailed, followed by unaccompanied minors' narratives, which illustrate how they are subjected to prolonged waiting for school access, reception, and inclusion. It is argued that waiting operates as a technology of power through which the (dis)engagement of unaccompanied minors with schooling is governed, and often resisted, poignantly pointing to the ambivalence of refugee educational reception and its exclusionary function.

1.1. The Governmentality of Migration, Temporality and Education

This paper utilises a Foucault-inspired (Foucault 1991; 2007, p. 108) approach that defines governmentality as 'the *ensemble* formed by the *institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics* that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population' (Foucault 2007, p. 108). In exceeding sovereignty and complicating the question of control, and in relying on political economy and policing technologies, governmentality 'relates the power and administration of the state to the subjugation and subjectivation of individuals' (Fassin 2011, p. 214). Governmentality is analytically useful for interrogating the contemporary migration dynamics characterised by the fortification of frontiers, the proliferation of (re)bordering practices and the securitisation of control with the use of surveillance and biometric technologies. According to Fassin (2011, p. 222), the governmentality of migration interrogates the 'ideologies and technologies at work in the policing of borders and the production of boundaries', as these relate to questions of sovereignty and identity, the interplay of which is integral to how migration is governed and experienced. Yet, the militarisation of migration, and its violent and often deadly effects, has been accompanied by the 'extension of the domain of humanitarianism as a complement to policing and at the expense of individual rights' (ibid., p. 221). This seemingly paradoxical assemblage has given rise to 'the reinvention of the border as a space of humanitarian government', crystallising it as 'a way of governing' and 'compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control' (Walters 2011, pp. 138–39). The humanitarian border entails 'transactions and imbrications between official governance and certain moves which contest it' (Walters 2011, p. 154), manifested in detention and reception centres where 'an uneasy alliance between a politics of alienation with a politics of care, and a tactic of abjection and one of reception' (p. 145), is held together in a series of contradictory processes and practices.

Reception centres, in particular, constitute privileged sites for capturing the humanitarian border and its temporalities. Social theorisations of time stress how it consists of an entanglement of temporalities characterised by unevenness and multiplicity (Adam 2003; Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021). Taking temporal complexities seriously requires attending to the relations between the 'social framings of time (including abstract measures of time and

routines associated with state bureaucracy, capitalist production, social reproduction and cultural norms) and human experiences of time, as well as between the different tempos, paces and rhythms associated with different practices' (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021, p. 7).

Temporality emerges as a key analytical dimension that is increasingly scrutinised in the governmentality of migration scholarship. Focussing on the European border regime, and the Italian and Greek border-zones more specifically, Tazzioli (2018, p. 14) illuminates the 'specific temporalities that are at stake in the techniques and modes of migration governmentality' and their 'crucial role in the reshaping and the enforcement of migration controls'. Through the analytical lens of temporality, time is not only seen as an object of control mechanisms—'control *over* time'—but also as a technology of governing migrants' lives and their movements—'control *through* time'. A temporal perspective casts valuable light on the 'rhythms of governmentality', which refer to the 'disciplining of mobility through dates and "deadlines" that migrants have to comply with in order to become eligible for protection and for relocation, and to mechanisms of partition, selection and identification that rapidly change over time' (ibid., p. 16). In a similar vein, Rozakou (2021, p. 35) argues that control over time is located in the tension between acceleration and deceleration, with border-crossers constantly finding themselves 'chasing time' against the European/Greek border and migration regime, which, albeit under reconfiguration, with ever-shifting temporal rhythms, exerts its violent and brutal effects on them. Further, the European asylum regime constitutes 'a key site of bordering in which states regulate, allocate and occupy temporalities' (Meier and Donà 2021, p. 43), and in which accelerated pace and slowness are not just "ordinary" temporal experiences, but 'a form of governing, punishment and control' (p. 46) that seeks to regulate the lives of migrant and refugee 'others'. In asylum temporalities, time is 'a field of struggle between the governed and governing', with temporal deceleration, through administrative practices, policies and laws, operating to discipline asylum-seekers into 'waiting subjects' (Lilja et al. 2018, p. 154).

Children and young people are notably absent from the governmentality of migration and temporality literature, although scholars interrogate the role of reception regimes and asylum bureaucracies in subjecting them to open-ended waiting, exacerbating in this way their liminal status and its affective cost (Katartzi 2026; Kohli and Kaukko 2018; Vitus 2010; Wolter et al. 2023). The current paper contributes towards addressing this gap by utilising a governmentality-inspired approach that critically examines the under-played role of temporality in the context of refugee educational reception. Arguably, there has been a shift in global policy towards national and local integration as a viable and durable solution for refugees, in addition to repatriation and resettlement in third countries, with education, along with employment, becoming central to this agenda (Dryden-Peterson 2019). National and local integration initiatives, nevertheless, have a spatial emphasis on creating a safe, home-like place, which, albeit valuable, 'neglects the temporal dimensions of education and the ways in which refugees are often motivated by time' (Poole and Riggan 2023, p. 700). Temporality adds much-needed nuance to our efforts to capture the complexity of young people's educational trajectories in contexts of displacement, characterised by profound uncertainty and ever-shifting legal regulations (Jordan and Brun 2021). Young refugees' temporal experiences illuminate how time is lived and the ways in which past, present, and future are navigated across the education and migration nexus (Jordan and Brun 2021; Poole and Riggan 2020, 2023).

The paper builds upon and extends these valuable strands of scholarship through applying a governmentality-inspired approach that critically interrogates the temporality of young ASR's lived experiences and the technologies of power affecting their (dis)engagement with formal schooling. Further, education policies aimed at 'integrating' refugee children and youth can be seen as an 'entangled articulation of governmentality

with sovereignty in which knowledge, power and law interact' (Koyama 2021, p. 324). In a similar vein, the article documents the assemblage of actors, discourses, and regimes of practices implicated in the governance of young ASR's schooling, situating the latter at the interface of asylum and educational reception regimes (see also Christie and Sidhu 2006).

Through adopting a child-centred lens, the study upon which the paper is based sought to tease out foregrounded unaccompanied minors' agency, which, as a capacity to act and exercise control, is constrained in conditions of asylum-seeking. Agency is defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 970) as a 'temporally embedded engagement by actors of different structural environments [. . .] which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing situations'. In migration and forced displacement, where constraints are analysed and decisions are made within the context of border controls, agency, albeit limited, is in an ongoing battle with structure in the form of sovereign state power (Bloch and Donà 2019). Avoiding simplistic equations of agency with free will and choice, the article examines 'the intersection between migrant agency and sovereign power, where contestation and ambivalence prevail' (Mainwaring 2016, p. 294). The analytical focus is thus placed on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's lived experiences and on the intricate ways that agency, power and temporality are interwoven in their narratives of educational (dis)engagement. Before discussing the methodological and ethical aspects of the study, the following section offers a brief overview of the refugee educational reception in the European and Greek context.

1.2. Refugee Educational Reception in Europe: The Case of Greece

The unprecedented increase in the global forcibly displaced population, especially during the last decade, from conflict-affected countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, Iran and Lebanon *inter alia*, poses complex challenges for receiving countries and their key institutions. Education has increasingly become central to European policy responses in line with a global shift towards facilitating refugees' integration and inclusion within local and national communities. Yet, studies document the spatial and temporal separation of ASR students in European educational systems and the ways in which, in the absence of a holistically inclusive school ethos, the lack of tailored and needs-based support and the non-existent or limited offering of second language instruction and multilingual classroom assistance, accompanied by the inadequacy of specialised teacher education and professional development, contribute to their marginalisation and exclusion (Bunar 2023; Crul et al. 2019a, 2019b; de Wal Pastoor 2023; Lems 2020; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Pinson et al. 2010).

In the Greek context, refugee education, succeeding relief as 'the top stake of humanitarian governance' (Papataxiarchis 2017, p. 78; Daskalaki and Leivaditi 2018), has become one of its most dynamic sectors, manifested in a plethora of informal educational initiatives by Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Parallel to these developments in the informal sector, specific formal educational provisions were legislated by the Greek government that entailed the establishment of (a) pre-school education programmes within Reception and Identification Centres (camps); (b) Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs) operating in nearby primary and secondary schools during the afternoon hours (14:00–18:00) for children residing in camps; and (c) reception classes for children living in urban areas to support their participation in the morning mainstream programme of schools (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs 2017). A minimum number of nine students is required to form RCs for primary education and seven students for secondary education (Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sport 2025). RCs provide intensive Greek-

language instruction in separate settings, with the attendance varying from one to three years depending on host-language proficiency, while refugee students can also participate in selected general education subjects (e.g., mathematics, physical education). Also, the role of the Refugee Education Coordinator (REC) was established with the goal of facilitating the enrolment and participation of refugee children in Greek formal education, serving as a liaison among the refugee population, schools, the Ministry of Education, local educational authorities, and Intergovernmental and Non-Governmental Organisations ([Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs 2017](#); [Stergiou and Simopoulos 2024](#)). RECs are key mediators in the reception ecosystem with a major role in linking and forging informed and trusting relationships between refugee communities, educational institutions, and state and non-state actors ([Tsioupis and Paidá 2020](#)).

Following a series of policy measures, but also strategic partnerships with IGOs (especially UNICEF), positive steps have been taken to facilitate access for ASR children and youth to Greek formal education. However, a paradoxical situation has been created as a result of the differentiated educational provision on the basis of the residence of ASR children and not on pedagogical and psychosocial criteria ([Stergiou and Simopoulos 2024](#)). Further, refugee education policy is designed in line with the dominant emergency relief paradigm ([Brun and Shuayb 2024](#)), with short-term budgetary planning that results in the delayed and unstable operation of RCs due to the recruitment of substitute teachers on non-permanent contracts and the attendant high staff turnover ([Stathopoulou et al. 2025](#)). Although RCs are envisaged as transitional educational spaces that support ASR students to fully transition to mainstream classes, their potential is undermined by systemic deficiencies, the precarious and marginalised positioning of RC teachers within schools, and the lack of an inclusive ethos ([Stathopoulou et al. 2025](#)). Additionally, refugee educational reception takes place in a centralised and heavily under-resourced system, marred by a chronic lack of state investment and reform inertia that, despite its professed interculturality and inclusiveness, fails to provide equitable opportunities to socioeconomically disadvantaged and migrant students ([Giavrimis and Dimitriadou 2023](#); [Katartzi 2021](#); [OECD 2026](#)). Further, the social and educational inclusion of ASR children and youth is affected by anti-immigrant attitudes and the responses of some parents' associations and local communities ([Zsófia 2018](#)), where Reception Facilities and classes for refugee education have been operating. After examining the methodological and ethical considerations of the empirical study, the paper will illuminate the paradox of refugee educational reception through unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors' narratives of their engagement with formal schooling in Greece.

2. Methodology

In line with recent pleas by scholars to situate children more centrally within understandings of forced migration and displacement, the study placed at its core unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors as social agents and experts of their own lives. After a lengthy process of negotiating access, a common trend observed in studies with hard-to-survey groups ([Stathopoulou 2019](#)), the fieldwork was conducted in two hospitality centres (Κέντρα Φιλοξενίας) for unaccompanied minors in Northern Greece that had responded positively to the formal request from the author. An ethnographically informed research design was employed with two periods of intensive fieldwork (November–December 2022 and March–April 2023) in the two centres, each hosting 28 to 30 children and run by a national Non-Governmental Organisation. The fieldwork involved an initial phase of non-participant observation with a two-fold focus of forming trusting relationships with the unaccompanied minors and gaining insights into their daily lives and experiences in the two hospitality centres. This was followed by focus groups and semi-structured, repeat interviews conducted with 23 unaccompanied minors who met the study's inclusion

criteria (who were under the age of 18, had arrived in Greece unaccompanied without a parent or guardian, and were in the process of seeking asylum) and agreed to participate (no incentives were given). The participants were 14–17 years old (average age 15.9), 16 identified as male and seven as female, and came originally from Afghanistan ($n = 9$), Syria ($n = 4$), Iraq ($n = 4$), Iran ($n = 4$), and Egypt ($n = 2$). The focus groups explored their initial experiences in Greece, their perceptions of the reception and asylum systems, their needs, challenges and coping mechanisms, and their access (or lack thereof) to social and health care and formal schooling. The in-depth interviews examined unaccompanied minors' perilous journeys across Southern European borderlands, their encounters with state and humanitarian actors (Katartzi 2025), and their socio-temporal experiences of the asylum regime (Katartzi 2026) and of educational reception, which is the focus of the present article. Additionally, informal interviews were conducted with NGO staff employed at the two hospitality centres (the managers of the two centres, social workers, psychologists, case workers, educators and interpreters), who were in direct, daily contact with the participants. The focus groups and interviews were conducted with the aid of the centres' interpreters in the participants' mother tongues (Arabic, Farsi and Dari); they were audio-recorded after being given permission (alternatively, handwritten records were taken) and then professionally transcribed. Pseudonyms selected by the participants are used throughout.

The study was ethically approved by the University of (deleted for anonymity) Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Prosecutor for Minors, who is the legal guardian of the unaccompanied minors living in the greater metropolitan area, and by the NGO running the two hospitality centres (shelters) for unaccompanied minors, the regional manager, and the local manager of each centre. Having secured the consent of the Prosecutor for Minors, who was in loco parentis (legal guardian) at the time of the study, informed consent was sought from the minors themselves, following group information sessions in their mother tongues facilitated by the centres' interpreters, and was renegotiated throughout the research process. Mindful of the methodological and ethical tensions and intricacies inherent in the empirical enquiry with minors who seek asylum (Hopkins 2008), the overall research process was conducted in the best interests of the participating children and in a sensitive and tactful manner. In addition to the principles of informed consent, no harm and distress, privacy, and confidentiality underpinning the conduct of all research with children and adults, particular attention was paid to overcoming suspicion and mistrust, with which the research with refugee minors is often fraught (Ní Raghallaigh 2013). To that end, the utmost effort was made to build rapport with the participants by maximising the number of interactions and informal conversations in the communal areas of the hospitality centres (hallways, kitchen, living room and courtyard). The interpreters also played a significant role in forging trusting relationships with the participants, as observed in other research with unaccompanied refugee minors (Vervliet et al. 2013).

A two-stage qualitative data-coding process was followed, starting with an open/initial round of inductive analysis¹ to identify emerging categories across the corpus of interviews and focus groups. A second iteration of pattern coding (Miles et al. 2020; Saldaña 2021) allowed for the identification of recurring categories, linkages and overlaps between and among them, leading to the revision, merging and refinement of the initial codes and the development of themes. Coding was assisted by the qualitative data organisation and management software NVivo. Further, the study placed particular focus on unaccompanied minors' narratives, as a unique methodological tool in the field of forced migration and displacement studies (Eastmond 2007). Restrictive migration and asylum policies and discourses have been argued to significantly shape and constrain asylum seekers' narratives. Adopting a narrative-discourse analysis (Taylor and Littleton 2006) approach involved

identifying the discursive resources and the relatively coherent lines of meaning-making and argumentation that participants recurrently use in their narratives. Through employing a narrative-discursive lens, unaccompanied minors' accounts of their encounters with formal education are analysed along three temporal modalities that entailed waiting (a) for school access, (b) for the operation of reception classes, and (c) for inclusion. The following sections contextualise these educational encounters, interrogating how they are mediated and affected by their wider experiences of and responses to uncertainty and open-ended waiting imposed by the European/Greek asylum regime.

2.1. Waiting for Access

This section examines in qualitative depth the challenges that unaccompanied minors experience with respect to access to Greek formal education. One of the key challenges ASR children and young people face globally involves accessing and participating in formal education, with structural barriers compounding as they gradually progress at higher levels. According to UNHCR (2025), 46% of refugee children globally remain out of school, with systemic factors obstructing post-primary education access and retention, as indicated by the average gross enrolment rate of 37% and 9% at secondary and tertiary levels, respectively. A study comparing the educational participation (or lack thereof) of Syrian refugee children in neighbouring and European countries with varied educational systems and institutional arrangements (Greece, Germany, Sweden, Lebanon and Turkey) powerfully demonstrates how the right to compulsory education does not always translate to school enrolment, with a significant number not accessing schools at all or accessing low quality, often segregated, education (Crul et al. 2019b). In the European context, educational access to formal education typically takes place within three months, yet, in practice, it varies for different sub-groups, as it is not ensured and, at best, is delayed for a longer period of time for unaccompanied minors and asylum-seeking children staying in reception centres (Crul et al. 2019b). For the study participants, the process of registration in Greek schools is mediated and supported by the NGO that run the hospitality (reception) centres for unaccompanied minors. As a young participant argues, 'school registration is done by the organisation, not by us. We just show up and everything is ready, we go directly to the class'. Notwithstanding this organisational support, participants highlight how their access to education has been delayed for several months due to asylum bureaucracy:

I started school a month ago, until that point I was not able to enrol because things were not clear, once more the bureaucracy. I was in the camp in Diavata, then at the hotel in Agio Athanasio, then here. I did not have the triptyxo [document that verifies their asylum-seeker status] so I could not go to school. (Pahlavan, 17, Afghanistan)

Even with non-governmental organisational support in place, these asylum bureaucratic procedures subject unaccompanied minors to prolonged waiting for school access. It is important to note that the document that the young participant refers to verifies that they have registered with the asylum service and thus have entered the initial stage of their asylum claim determination process; in practice, the issuing of this document significantly delays asylum-seeking minors' school registration. Horst and Grabska (2015, p. 10) powerfully argue that conflict and displacement create, inter alia, profound levels of precarity, which are then 'maintained or heightened by the actions of states', generating what they define as 'radical uncertainty'. In this radically uncertain context, the inability to gain essential information and reliable knowledge leads refugees to feel that 'their future is in the hands of authorities and bureaucracies that they do not understand' (ibid.). Inspired by this work, Franczak and Lutz (2024) illuminate, through the perspectives of parents and teachers, how 'radical uncertainty' profoundly affects Ukrainian refugee children's experiences in Polish schools. In the Greek context, unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors'

accounts capture their navigations of the labyrinthine landscape of asylum and educational bureaucracies, as the latter subject them to state-imposed waiting. Tiger, a young participant from Iraq, has been in Greece for 10 months, yet he had to wait all this time to be able to access formal education:

I started school a week ago. I had asked to go to school before, but because I didn't have the document [verifying his asylum-seeker status], they wouldn't let me go to school without this official paper. That's why I waited for so long. (Tiger, 15, Iraq)

Living in uncertainty, awaiting the asylum-seeking documentation and the outcome of asylum applications, entails open-ended waiting for adults and children alike. Unaccompanied minors, in particular, as 'the par excellence subjects of care and protection' are condemned by the European/Greek migration and border regime to detention and prolonged waiting (Rozakou 2021, p. 34). Temporal experiences in migratory contexts entail, as Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021, p. 3) posit, both 'quotidian forms of waiting, including waiting for public services and bureaucratic decisions, and more prolonged and open-ended forms of waiting, for regularisation, justice and uncertain futures'. This two-fold, state-imposed waiting emerges as one of the fundamental challenges that unaccompanied minors have to cope with, with the following account poignantly capturing its effect on them:

My opinion is, because I have spoken with other children about this, that it would be better if all these state issues were improved, the bureaucracy, so as the children's future is clearer sooner, so as the children who seek asylum to be able to work straightaway, to be able to study straightaway, so as our fate not to be so unknown to us in the present. (Pahlavan, 17, Afghanistan)

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors experience uncertainty without vital familial support and guidance, while they are subjected to bureaucratised waiting for access to education, but also for age-appropriate housing and protection, refugee recognition and employment opportunities. Arguably, access to schooling in displacement unfolds at the interface of asylum and educational bureaucracies, and their respective temporalities, and cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration these wider socio-legal conditions in which young ASRs are subjected to quotidian and prolonged forms of waiting for their impossible-to-predict futures (Katartzi 2026; Dryden-Peterson 2017). The following section further unpacks unaccompanied minors' accounts of their reception in Greek schools, illustrating how the latter further amplify the liminality and unknowability that texture their everyday lives.

2.2. Waiting for Reception

In the Greek context, the type and location of ASR children's accommodation determines the type of school they can enrol, thus creating a two-tier educational provision (Stergiou and Simopoulos 2024) with (a) children accommodated in Reception and Identification Centres attending the Reception Facilities for Refugee Education (RFREs) run in nearby schools during the afternoon shift, after the end of the regular school day, and (b) those who reside in urban areas, either with their families or as unaccompanied minors in shelters or in semi-independent living arrangements, attending the mainstream morning programme of public schools with the support of reception classes (RCs thereafter). In the case of the study's participants, their residence in suburban hospitality (reception) centres for unaccompanied minors renders them eligible to enrol in the public schools in proximity to their accommodation and attend the mainstream programme, supported, in principle, by RCs on offer in each school. Yet, NGO staff and unaccompanied minors alike attest to the significant delays in the operation of these classes, as the 16-year old Omid narrates:

I have been attending school in Greece for six months, in Lyceum [he smiles]; at the beginning I did not understand anything; I still don't understand a lot. It has been two weeks now that we have a Reception Class, it is a class for learning the language. (Omid, 16, Afghanistan)

The young participant from Afghanistan narrates how unaccompanied minors like himself had to wait for almost six months for an RC to operate in their school. Research evidence from the Greek formal education context suggests (Stathopoulou et al. 2025) that the long wait for the operation of RCs exacerbates the uncertainty of ASR children's and young people's lives, thereby contributing to them being disaffected and dropping out. Based on Greek teachers' accounts, studies (Stergiou and Simopoulos 2024; Stathopoulou et al. 2025) report on the long delays in the functioning of RCs, while stressing the need for their more efficient and timely operation in order to improve ASR students' motivation, self-efficacy, engagement and retention. Although teachers' and school leaders' perspectives are undeniably valuable in shedding light on educational disengagement and exclusion, the voices of ASR children and youth, including those who eventually leave school, are equally critical in refining our understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon. This would require delving deeper into young asylum-seekers and refugees' educational biographies, which are typically characterised by limited and irregular patterns of participation. As 17-year-old Ehlam narrates:

I have not been to school for many years in Afghanistan. Everybody knows what the situation is like; the teachers are underpaid or not paid at all, so they did not come to school as they could not work for free. Also, with the war neither the teachers nor the students could attend regularly. Six years attended school but I could not attend regularly, the conditions were not good. Here, I started school in September when the school year started. Now I am in a reception class that started recently. Until that point, we were attending the regular classes without being able to understand anything. (Ehlam, 17, Afghanistan)

For unaccompanied minors, like Ehlam, re-engagement with schooling takes place after years of interrupted attendance. This pattern is powerfully echoed in participants' accounts from Syria and Afghanistan, whose educational biographies are indelibly marked by armed conflict and human rights violations, rendering schooling a difficult topic to discuss. In the words of a young participant, 'I have attended school in Afghanistan for seven years. It was very tough and I would not like to talk about it'. It is in conflict-ridden contexts, wherein the human right to safely access and participate in education is being routinely violated or, in the case of girls in Afghanistan, completely denied, leaving 1.5 million out of school since 2021 (UNESCO 2025). As Trista, a 14-year-old girl, explains, 'from a very young age I wanted to go school but it was not possible; I have not gone to school at all in Afghanistan'.

Attending to the biographical context of ASR students' violent and interrupted trajectories is critical in grasping more fully and addressing more effectively educational disengagement and exclusion. In the Greek context, the long waiting period for the functioning of RCs leaves ASR students unsupported in the mainstream morning programme of schools without any transitional and preparatory learning scaffolds in place. This modality of waiting is a technology of power that operates in a temporally violent and neglectful manner to amplify the vulnerability and uncertainty that characterise the lives and the educational biographies of displaced children and young people. Focussing on refugee students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), Hos (2020, pp. 1038–39) illustrates how newcomer programmes in the United States context fail to provide appropriate provisions to meet the complex and holistic—socio-emotional, academic and second language

learning—needs of this group. In the case of unaccompanied minors, the complexity of their multifaceted needs is further compounded by the de facto absence of parental guidance in navigating an unfamiliar educational field. For the study's participants who have enrolled in formal education yet after a period of time abandoned it, it is the lack of institutional support that contributes to their disengagement and decision to drop-out:

I have been in Greece for 6–7 months and I was attending school all these months, only recently I stopped going. It is now 20 days that I do not go. For the time I went to school, I have not learnt anything, not even to write. If I try to study on my own little by little it will be better I think. (Amir, 16 Afghanistan)

As unaccompanied minors get immersed in mainstream classes without any additional support, while waiting for the RC to start operating, the lack of progress with their learning exacerbates their sense of alienation from schooling, further questioning its purpose and value in a context that fails to deliver its purpose. This echoes Bunar's (2023) critical review of varied reception practices in the Swedish context, where having newly arrived migrant students directly placed in mainstream classes might be deemed as 'inclusionary', yet leaving them without proper support crucially undermines their learning and social inclusion. Overall, what becomes evident in this section is the paradoxical functioning of educational reception in the Greek context. Schools, in subjecting ASR children and youth to prolonged waiting for meaningful reception, amplify their sense of liminality and contribute to their disengagement from education as they fail in practice to supportively, as opposed to rhetorically, include them. This poignantly points to the urgent need to move away from a reductionist view of educational inclusion, towards a support-based framing and enactment of the concept, where 'shared spaces are accompanied by individually tailored and adequately enacted support, positive discourses, and efforts to remove barriers in the wider school context' (Bunar 2023, p. 85).

When state institutions, instead of *supportively including* young ASRs, subject them anew to waiting, they heighten their 'radical uncertainty', which has 'a powerful governing effect on people, rendering them extremely vulnerable and consequently often unable to act' (Horst and Grabska 2015, p. 10; see also Biehl 2015). In the educational context, dropping out of school becomes, for some unaccompanied minors, a way of contesting this imposed waiting through abandoning the institutions that, rather than disrupting their already liminal status, heighten it, and rather than empowering them, they render them more vulnerable. Education-induced uncertainty *through* waiting indeed has a governing effect on young ASRs, but instead of rendering them 'unable to act' (Horst and Grabska, *ibid.*), it pushes them further to the margins of the schooling community, where leaving it emerges as the only way to resist its power and reassert their agency. The following section further illuminates the mechanics of educational reception as they are further compounded by exclusionary dynamics.

2.3. Waiting for Inclusion

Unaccompanied minors who attend the RCs of the neighbouring secondary schools, after having persevered through a long wait for their operation, tend to portray rather positively their initial educational experiences. As a young participant narrates, 'school is a great positive experience because I learn things', with other unaccompanied minors making specific references to their peers' respectful attitudes and their teachers' hard efforts to support their learning, as reflected in the quotes below:

School is good but it is very difficult with the language, we cannot understand. The teachers try but we cannot understand. All teachers are very good and respectful but language is very difficult. (Fatima, 17, Iran)

We cannot understand the teachers yet here, we cannot talk with them. I would like as quickly as possible to learn the language. The teacher is trying a lot with us to make us understand, this aside there is not anything else that is positive. (Dounia, 17, Iran)

The role of RC teachers in the participants' accounts is couched in the discursive repertoire of struggle and striving, as educators are perceived to be making every effort to improve ASR students' Greek language learning. Nevertheless, unaccompanied minors' narratives capture the ambivalence with which the Greek formal schooling is experienced; on one hand, recognising the RC teachers' well-meaning efforts, and on the other hand, referring frustratingly to their lack of understanding and the slow pace of their progress. This becomes more evident in the accounts of participants who discursively problematise the operation of the RC:

I don't have much contact with other children because I'm in the reception class for two hours where we only have language lessons. Then I'm with my compatriots, my peers from the house [Shelter] during the break and I don't have any contact with others. (Aref, 16, Afghanistan)

Through their language-intensive nature, RCs by design tend to separate ASR students from their peers, thereby heightening their sense of marginalisation. Unaccompanied minors' accounts offer a problematisation of RCs as spaces for intensive Greek-language instruction that nonetheless limit their contact with local peers. Evidence from other refugee-receiving countries (Bunar and Juvonen, 2022; Crul et al. 2019a; Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018) attest to the marginalising mode of preparatory, introductory or welcome classes, as they are alternatively termed in other national contexts, which exclude through separation *within* mainstream schooling. Linked to this, limited proficiency in the receiving society's language constitutes a major challenge that unaccompanied minors encounter in the Greek formal educational context, acting both as a cognitive and relational barrier. As a young participant eloquently narrates, linguistic difficulties impede his engagement and relationships with his classmates, thereby contributing to a feeling of exclusion:

Of course the first problem is the language, when you don't understand it. During the two or three months here in Greece school was very, very difficult. I could only tell just a few words to my classmates, barely simple, small talk (. . .) Language is a tool for communication between people, so that was a big problem, it makes you feel excluded. (Fanush, 16, Afghanistan)

For unaccompanied minors, like Fanush, who most commonly arrive in Greece without any prior knowledge of the host society's language, the latter, a tool of communication, becomes a vehicle of relational exclusion. Yet, as Fanush indicates, language is the first but not the only factor that hinders ASR students' inclusion and the formation of meaningful relationships with peers and educators. Omid, another young participant from Afghanistan, makes a particular reference to the role of teachers and how 'some are nice and some don't even say good morning to us, they just don't talk to us, even if we know some words, they don't talk to us at all'. Studies in other refugee-receiving countries (Lems 2020; McBrien 2016; Picton and Banfield 2020) document how discrimination and biases contribute to educational exclusion, with some teachers positioning refugee students as outsiders, conflating host language proficiency with capability and, in so doing, deeming them incapable of participation in the school community. Notably, the role of teachers is critical in brokering refugee students' sense of (un)belonging, thereby disrupting or enabling inclusion in the educational community and beyond (Anderson et al. 2024). Unaccompanied minors' experiences in the Greek formal education context echo this, with a recurring discursive repertoire in their accounts revolving around their felt exclusion in mainstream classes:

I am in a Reception Class and everything is in Greek, we learn only Greek. The teachers are good but when we are in the classroom with the Greek students they understand but we don't understand what is the subject they are talking about. They don't treat us bad, everything is fine; they don't talk badly about us, but even if they did we would not be able to understand them. (Pahlavan, 17, Afghanistan)

The study participants unequivocally lament their complete lack of comprehension when they return to mainstream classrooms, where again the subject content is taught exclusively in the host country's language, therefore rendering it only accessible to Greek-speaking students. Monolingualism as a pedagogical practice and ideology is observed in other refugee-receiving contexts from Germany and England to the United States and New Zealand (Anderson et al. 2024; Koyama 2021; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018). Ethnographic evidence from the German context of preparatory (reception) classes illuminate teachers' monoglossic practices and how they exclude refugee students' home languages and repertoires, thereby constantly reproducing 'hegemonial monolingualizing ideologies' (Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018, p. 404). The authors argue that this practice of 'linguistic assimilation' aims at facilitating integration into the educational system, not only by 'disciplining the students but also via the students' self-discipline' (ibid.). In the Greek context, unaccompanied minors poignantly articulate the agony they experience in the monolingual formal educational field:

The toughest thing is the language. If the teacher knew Farsi we could have done our school work in a better way, we could have our lessons without any problem. Of course, that's out of the question, to have someone who knows Farsi so that we can better learn in schools. (Pahlavan, 17, Afghanistan)

The young Afghan participant sarcastically points to the scenario of utilising his mother tongue, Farsi, to facilitate instruction and improve learning outcomes, albeit perceived as 'out of question' in the Greek educational practice. Nonetheless, deploying multilingual personnel, also referred to as bilingual classroom or multilingual teaching assistants in international literature (Franczak and Lutz 2024; Kakos 2025), when insufficient knowledge in the host language is deemed as an obstacle to learning, constitutes a support measure of the utmost importance for fostering pedagogical and social inclusion. Multilingual classroom assistance is based on the 'recognition of students' first language as a leverage for learning' (Bunar 2023, p. 91), with no other support measures being able to fully compensate for its absence, as it uniquely and directly addresses the interconnections between language, knowledge and inclusion. The lack of multilingual classroom assistance arguably contributes to the pedagogical and social exclusion of ASR students in the Greek formal education context.

3. Concluding Reflections

The article utilises a governmentality of migration and temporality approach (Christie and Sidhu 2006; Fassin 2011; Tazzioli 2018; Walters 2011) that critically interrogates the regimes of practices and rationalities implicated in refugee educational reception in a key Southern European country (Greece). Drawing upon a study conducted in hospitality centres for unaccompanied minors (shelters), the paper documents their lived experiences of access to and (dis)engagement with Greek formal education. The participants' narratives articulate with poignancy the paradox of refugee educational reception as it operates to exclude through subjecting them to prolonged waiting for school enrolment and for the operation of reception classes. While schools nominally grant ASR children access to formal education, they leave them in mainstream settings for significant periods of time without any transitional or tailored support, undermining in practice their opportunities to learn

and feel included. Positioning ASR students on the margins of the educational community contributes to the questioning of the value of education and to eventually abandoning it.

Unaccompanied minors' lived experiences in the Greek educational field convey a sense of ambivalence, oscillating between formal 'inclusion' and exclusion; on one hand, they deeply value the opportunity to learn and appreciate the laborious efforts of teachers that support them; on the other hand, they feel disempowered from making meaningful progress with their learning and excluded from the educational community. This ambivalence, it is argued, cannot be fully explained if solely educational structural arrangements and processes are taken into consideration; rather, it is the product of intersections between the educational and asylum bureaucracies. The latter make the ultimate decisions regarding key aspects of asylum-seekers' futures, thereby heightening their 'radical uncertainty' (Horst and Grabska 2015), which operates as a mechanism that governs their lives (Biehl 2015), including ASR children's and young people's access and engagement with education (Franczak and Lutz 2024).

The state-induced and prolonged temporariness that textures the everyday lives of young ASRs in Europe and elsewhere has a pervasive impact on their sense of agency, leaving them in a state of profound uncertainty regarding their futures (Katartzi 2026). In a similar vein, Dryden-Peterson's (2017, p. 16) work illuminates the role of education in the 'unknowable futures inherent to refugeehood and the ways in which individuals can navigate, and shift, the structures that circumscribe them'. In the Greek context, notwithstanding the well-meaning efforts of RC educators, schools, rather than operating as sites that empower and nurture learning, stability and belonging, subject ASR children and young people to yet another modality of waiting, thereby amplifying their uncertainty and vulnerability. Nevertheless, unaccompanied minors narrate their resistance to educational temporalities through critiquing and often abandoning these very institutions that disempower and alienate them, thereby reasserting their agency and vision about their future; yet, this abandonment is still teleologically oriented, not to a near-future through education, but to a distant future through migration (see also Poole and Riggan 2023).

In moving beyond a reductionist vision of refugee education that focusses merely on access and enrolment rates (Brun and Shuayb 2024), the paper offers a child-centred perspective that focusses on the dynamic process of (dis)engagement with formal schooling as it unfolds in the socio-temporal milieus of young ASRs' lives. It is where the regimes of educational practices, characterised by instability and lack of support-based inclusion (Bunar 2023), intersect with the asylum bureaucracies and their respective temporalities that unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors' (dis)engagement with schooling—a deeply future-looking endeavour—can be made sense of, with state-imposed waiting operating as a governing mechanism.

In hostile political environments in Europe and beyond, where the right to refugee protection becomes ever more elusive and subordinate to the agenda of migration control (Fassin 2011), ASR children and youth continue to remain invisible in policies and practices that concern them, or at best seen via a deficit, trauma-focussed and assimilationist lens (Anderson et al. 2024; Pinson et al. 2010). In foregrounding how agency, power and temporality are interweaved in unaccompanied minors' narratives, the article argues for further comparative research that documents the richness of their lived experiences and the centrality of their voices to the enactment of socially just refugee education policies and inclusive, high-quality education for all.

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