Developing an Educational Curriculum at Samos Refugee Camp
Greece
Bard College
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Our project had two main components. Firstly, our goal was to implement a sustainable school program for refugee children on the island. Secondly, we wanted to set up a sustainable library in the camp.

Currently, there are 600 children living in the Samos refugee camp, including 100 unaccompanied minors. Therefore, we had to focus on working with smaller groups to make the school program feasible. On Samos, there are many shelters where the most vulnerable families have been moved by Doctors Without Borders (MSF). In these shelters, formal education is possible as the numbers are small enough to hold a class and there are rooms to use as a school space.

Sam spent much of his time on the island implementing a school program at the shelters. At the largest shelter, he created classes with Samos Volunteers (SV) based on age and ability. Class was held every day in the morning with activities such as crafts, swimming, and sports every afternoon. We used our funds to buy notebooks, art and school supplies for these shelters to ensure the longevity of the program. While we were on the island a new shelter opened, and Sam created a program for the students aged around ten, and a nursery for toddlers. In these shelters Sam helped co-ordinate teacher volunteers, ran after school activities, and created curricula. Sam also created a large online database of worksheets, activities, and units that all volunteer teachers on Samos are able to access.

Most of the children living on the island have not attended school for many years, if at all. While the classes are based around learning English, they are also intended to give the students a sense of normalcy, encourage socialization and positive behavior, and introduce the concept of school in a positive way. In our three months working at the shelters we saw a notable improvement not only in language and math skills, but also in behavior and ability to communicate with others.

It was important for us to also work with the 500+ children living in the camp, who do not have access to the resources of the shelters. To create an informal educational program for the children in the camp, Eliza began a reading circle where children have access to books in their own languages. The reading circle meets for an hour every morning and is run by refugee volunteers. These volunteers encourage the children to read to one another as well as helping the younger and illiterate children work on their alphabets. This project would not have been possible without the involvement of volunteers from the camp, and their work ensures its sustainability. With our funds we bought over 400 children’s books in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, French, and Pashto. Each day we have over 30 children attending the reading circle under the olive trees by the camp.

In addition to the reading circle, Sam coordinated children’s activities every afternoon for the children in the camp, with around 100 kids attending daily. Each day we have many activities for kids of all ages including jump rope, hopscotch, origami, drawing, crafts, chess and building blocks. During our time here we thought a lot about best ways to ensure the activities and classes best fit the children’s needs, kept them safe and gave them a sense of normalcy. Refugee volunteers were instrumental in running games that taught the children basic skills like sharing and waiting for a turn.

All of our programs changed and developed significantly as we learned from our mistakes and successes. Almost every child in the camp suffers from trauma or PTSD in some form. We had workshops with psychologists, and discussed best practices with other long term volunteers and people from the camp in order to most effectively work with the kids. In addition to these programs, Eliza also ran a guitar class for the unaccompanied minors in the SV education center five times a week. This class was successful and very popular, with around 30 students attending each class.

Our second project was to build a library. Before traveling to Greece, we contacted an international bookstore to solicit donations. This bookstore made a huge gift of thousands of books in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Pashto, Turkish, French, Kurdish, and German. For $600 they donated $16,000 of books. These books made up the bulk of our new library.

With the help of other volunteers, we decided to split these books into two separate libraries. The first library is a collection of books that is brought up to the camp twice a week, where refugees can flip through our collection and check out books. It was important to us that people be able to check these
books out from the camp itself, as many adults rarely leave the camp. Eliza created a database with a reference number for each book and a catalogue for the collection, so refugees could pick out a book even when we didn’t have the whole library with us.

However, as many books are not returned to the camp library, we decided to set aside about 1,000 of the books to create a permanent collection in the SV center. This building is where all adult classes are held, and it has over 1,000 visitors a week. These books stay in the building and anyone is welcome to read them there. This way, even as the collection in the camp library dwindles over the coming months, there will still be books available in the education center. SV bought bookshelves as well as chairs and couches to create a comfortable, quiet space for people to study and read. To help the library collection grow, Eliza also started an Amazon Wishlist of books specifically requested by refugees. Recently, MSF made a large donation to SV to buy many of the books off of this list, and individual donors continue to help us buy books as well.

Our main goal for these projects was to make them sustainable. We worked hard to ensure these programs will continue indefinitely and to create best practices and guidelines for other volunteers to follow after we are gone. Because of SV’s continued presence on the island, these programs will continue into the future.

We faced many difficulties in each of the programs we created and worked to run. For example, the sustainability of the library was an issue as books are often kept by those who check them out. However, with donations and the continued support of SV, the library has been turned into a permanent feature of the organization and is extremely popular. With the school programs, Sam faced large hurdles overcoming cultural and language barriers. By working with other volunteers and MSF, he helped to create best practices for dealing with conflicts going forward, and mediated many conflicts between various children and even parents. In general, working in such an unstable and uncertain environment as a refugee camp, where people’s most basic needs and rights are neglected, presents many difficulties. As volunteers, we had to learn how to adapt to an ever shifting situation, and always work towards our broader goals of providing long term support and aid for those living in the camp. We strived to create some small sense of stability for the refugees by being reliable ourselves.

Through the hard work of all of the volunteers, our projects expanded in their scope, and continue to grow. All of these projects were greatly assisted by the hard work of refugee volunteers whose insight and knowledge was crucial in making them work. Our friends from Burundi, Syria and Iraq now run the library program, and teachers from Palestine will continue to run the classes we started after we leave. We are very proud of the work we have done here, and are very happy to see our initiatives continue.

It has been an immense privilege to work with the volunteers from SV, both those who came here voluntarily to help, and those who found themselves on this island after fleeing persecution and war. This summer has been a life changing experience for both of us. As a close refugee friend of ours said, “I used to think I would change the world, but then the world changed me.” This somewhat captures our feelings leaving the island. We are humbled by the immensity of the problems refugees in Europe face. We know we cannot save the world, but we are proud to help those that we can, and try our hardest in a very difficult situation. In September, we will be moving on to Zagreb, Croatia to continue working with refugees. This experience has given us many skills that we will use in our work going forward.

For us, peace means having the freedom to be oneself and pursue ones dreams. The refugee camp is far from a peaceful environment—fights are a regular occurrence and police brutality is the norm. Despite this environment, the aim of our work has been to extend a semblance of peace and normality to the lives of those living in the camp. Through the library project, we have helped refugees access literature, and return to some of their favorite books in their home language. Through the shelter school projects and organizing educational activities for children in the camp, we have tried to restore some normality, to give them the opportunity to play in a safe environment, and to teach them some language skills they will need in Europe.

This project has shown both of us how many people are living today without their most basic needs and human rights being met. Working with people living in camps showed us how even a small act can restore some dignity and personal agency to a person’s life. Working towards peace is a tirelessly job, and one can easily feel helpless in the face of far greater forces of violence and hatred. However, this project has taught us the importance of action, and of never being complacent in the face of injustice.
(Clockwise from top left)

Sam playing blocks at kid’s activities, outside the camp.

Sam awarding students with swimming certificates on a beach field trip.

Eliza organizing the new library at the Samos Volunteers Learning Center outside the camp.