

Chapter 33

Youth to Youth: An Educational and Social Integration Model

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to tell a story, a story about how the Youth to Youth (Y2Y) Program, an innovative educational and social integration program, came to develop in the midst of a crisis, as a natural response to it. The factors that led to the development of this program, namely the fundamental beliefs and values that define ACS Athens as aligned with its informed commitment to serving humanity, are being discussed in depth. The program-specific information in regards to teaching methodology and curriculum development are described and explained in how they helped achieve inclusivity. The ongoing impact of the Y2Y Program is further discussed along with lessons learned.

“Every human being strives for significance; but people always make mistakes if they do not see that their whole significance must consist in their contribution to the lives of others” ~ (Adler, 1931, p.7)

YOUTH TO YOUTH: EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION PROGRAM

Factors that Led to the Development of the Program

In the beginning of 2015, Greece, among other European Countries, was in the middle of a humanitarian crisis due to population displacement as a result of civil wars in countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people left their homes seeking a better life in other places of the world. Greece, because of its geopolitical position and its proximity to these countries and to central

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7760-8.ch033

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Europe accepted a great number of the refugee population. For most of them Central Europe was (still is) the final destination of their journey, with Greece representing merely the gateway. This was the reason why in a short amount of time the Greek islands close to the coast of Turkey became flooded with adults and children who arrived having survived their dangerous voyage in the Aegean Sea. A bit later on, when the borders to Central Europe regretfully closed many had to move to the Greek mainland, among them a large number of unaccompanied children; these minors are currently placed in camps or shelters of various organizations.

Some of these unaccompanied minors currently residing in Greece are waiting for their refugee status to be confirmed by the Greek state or to reunite with family members who have already settled in Central Europe. Regardless of their refugee status, integrating and educating these minors is one of the main challenges that needs to be addressed by authorities, organizations and the community at large. Ever since the beginning of the crisis the American Community Schools (ACS) of Athens assumed leadership in establishing a comprehensive educational and social integration program to support the unaccompanied refugee minors; ACS Athens is a private, large JK-12 international school located in Athens, Greece. The school embraces the American education philosophy and follows the American curriculum (Tokatlidou, Avgerinou & Pelonis, 2020). ACS Athens' blended learning approach in the K-12 has allowed for the development of the i²Flex methodology, a model designed to address the diverse directions and complex demands of Education in the 21st century. The i²Flex model aims to improve educational opportunities in the classroom and beyond, by offering individualized learning to ACS Athens students facilitated by technology, so as to optimize the learning outcomes (Avgerinou et al., 2014).

In alignment with the school's mission, vision and educational technology philosophy the idea of this innovative initiative came to life as if naturally emerging through the school's core foundations and principles. It was decided that this unique educational and social integration program would be coined "Youth to Youth" (Y2Y) to signify its true nature: a program offered to youth by youth. Within the context of this initiative ACS Athens students were invited to realize their unique potential and to thrive as responsible global citizens. On retrospect, it is clear that this program would have not been realized had it not been for the youth; the youth, who enthusiastically engaged and went on to create meaningful and deep connections that, go beyond any perceived differences. And it was the youth's whole-hearted participation that led to this rather timid, at first, initiative to soon expand and evolve into a part-time (Saturday) program with a Business to Youth (B2Y) component as well as a full-time (everyday) program.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE Y2Y PROGRAM'S HISTORY

Ever since 2015 when the refugee crisis became more pronounced, the entire ACS Athens community was mobilized to visit refugee camps in Chios island and Piraeus, so as to provide support and assistance to the refugees, by donating food and clothing aiming to promote social inclusion and raise awareness. In the summer of 2016, fifteen unaccompanied minors (12-17 years of age) were invited to participate in the 2016 ACS Athens summer camp, and full-time scholarships were offered to 4 of these students to enroll at ACS Athens. Despite the challenges, inclusion of these students into the school community was very successful for 3 out of the 4 students. This positive outcome led the school's leadership to collaborate with the newly then established organization "The HOME Project", a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) aiming to address the needs of unaccompanied refugee minors in Greece. ACS Athens and the HOME Project share the same holistic approach of educating and attending to the needs of the youth.

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