Promoting Positive Attitudes toward Refugees: A Prejudice-Reduction, Classroom-Based Group Intervention for Preadolescents in Greece

Article *in* The Journal for Specialists in Group Work · August 2020

DOI: 10.1080/01933922.2020.1800878

CITATION
1

READS
308

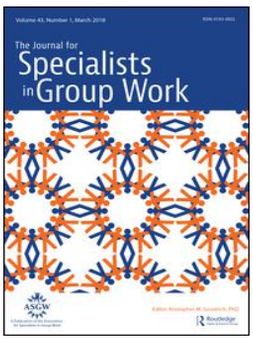
4 authors:

Stephanos P Vassilopoulos
University of Patras
97 PUBLICATIONS **1,084** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Andreas Brouzos
University of Ioannina
131 PUBLICATIONS **325** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Eleni Kasapoglou
University of Patras
1 PUBLICATION **1** CITATION
SEE PROFILE

Ourania Nikolopoulou
University of Patras
1 PUBLICATION **1** CITATION
SEE PROFILE



The Journal for Specialists in Group Work

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usgw20

Promoting Positive Attitudes toward Refugees: A Prejudice-Reduction, Classroom-Based Group Intervention for Preadolescents in Greece

Stephanos P. Vassilopoulos , Andreas Brouzos , Eleni Kasapoglou & Ourania Nikolopoulou

To cite this article: Stephanos P. Vassilopoulos , Andreas Brouzos , Eleni Kasapoglou & Ourania Nikolopoulou (2020): Promoting Positive Attitudes toward Refugees: A Prejudice-Reduction, Classroom-Based Group Intervention for Preadolescents in Greece, The Journal for Specialists in Group Work

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1800878

Published online: 05 Aug 2020.

THE JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK
https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1800878

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Promoting Positive Attitudes toward Refugees: A Prejudice-Reduction, Classroom-Based Group Intervention for Preadolescents in Greece

Stephanos P. Vassilopoulos[a], Andreas Brouzos[b], Eleni Kasapoglou[a], and Ourania Nikolopoulou[a]

[a]University of Patras; [b]University of Ioannina

ABSTRACT

The present study examined the effectiveness of a novel 6-session, prejudice-reduction group for Greek preadolescents. The sample consisted of 106 elementary school students aged 10–12 years, allocated to the intervention ($n = 55$) or control group ($n = 51$). Results indicated that, compared to the control group, participants in the intervention group showed more positive attitudes toward refugees as well as an increase in their general capacity for empathy. In addition, intervention group participants showed more tolerance and less xenophobia. Practical implications for the design and implementation of classroom-based, prejudice-reduction programs for older children are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received December 25, 2018
Accepted April 24, 2020

KEYWORDS
Preadolescents; refugees; group; prejudice-reduction; intervention; empathy

Migration itself is a fact of life, as well as one of the oldest human phenomena. Humans have always moved across communities, regions, states and continents, either to improve their life conditions or to avoid an imminent threat. Nevertheless, Greece is currently experiencing a dramatic rise in the number of immigrants and refugees entering the country, mainly due to the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). To face this refugee crisis, Greece had to rapidly set up a reception and integration system, without any previous experience in dealing with similar crisis situations. Inevitably, hosting significant numbers of refugees represents a major challenge, not only in terms of securing a reception place and access to social welfare and school services for them, but also in terms of ensuring that their hosts do not see them as a threat to social cohesion and security. The purpose of the current study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention program designed to improve positive attitudes toward refugees in elementary school children.

Reducing Prejudice toward Refugees

From 2013 to 2017, Greece received about 102,184 applications from asylum seekers, most of them coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. The majority of refugees cross the Mediterranean to reach the Greek islands of Kos, Chios, Lesvos, Leros and Samos. However, upon arrival only few of them are quickly dispersed to other areas of the country, and many settle temporarily in reception centers ("hotspots") in the aforementioned Greek

CONTACT Stephanos P. Vassilopoulos stephanosv@upatras.gr Laboratory of Relational Dynamic Education and Counselling, Department of Education and Social Work, University of Patras, Greece

islands while they wait for their relocation or for their asylum cases to be heard. Needless to say, this temporal settlement may last for months, even years, further adding to their anger and resentment (Refugee Observatory, 2019).

Unfortunately, relations between the local and the refugee communities in the Greek islands are far from harmonious (Refugee Observatory, 2019). The locals, not only they have to cope with the worst economic depression in the modern history of Greece, but they also fear that the uncontrolled flow of asylum seekers and migrants is putting such pressure on tourism, so that one of their major sources of income is now under direct threat. These fears have been exacerbated further by the local and national media, as well as the rhetoric of ultranationalists and far-right political parties that have entered the Greek parliament. This backdrop of intergroup tensions may adversely affect the attitudes of local children toward refugees (Dimakos & Tasiopoulou, 2003). Given that children of the refugees are only recently granted permission by the Greek Ministry of Education to enroll in local elementary schools (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children, 2017) – in an attempt of the Greek government to integrate them into the local community – it is essential that attempts made to dispel negative preconceptions and alleviate prejudice toward them. One way to achieve this might be to conduct universal, prejudice-reduction group interventions at schools.

School-Based Programs to Reduce Prejudices and Promote Positive Attitudes toward Refugees

Most of the intervention programs currently employed to promote positive outgroup attitudes in a school setting can be categorized into two broad types: Multicultural curriculum programs and anti-racist programs (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994). *Multicultural curriculum programs* are based on the premise that prejudice is caused by ignorance, so teaching children about the lifestyle and the culture of minority groups should reduce prejudice and, therefore, alter children's public behavior toward minority groups (Aydin, 2013). These programs usually involve a variety of media sources such as videos, books, games and activities. Nevertheless, only few studies (some of them already outdated) so far have investigated the effectiveness of multicultural education interventions, and these have demonstrated mixed results (see Cameron & Turner, 2010, for a review). For instance, Cole et al. (2003) reported a study in which both Israeli and Palestinian children viewed a TV series (Sesame Street), which presented messages of mutual respect and understanding. It was found that this media-based intervention led to more positive attitudes toward the relevant outgroup. Nevertheless, Koller (1977) found that reading 11-year-olds stories about Mexican Americans did not lead to more positive racial attitudes. These contradictory findings could probably be accounted by the fact that children are not just passive recipients of information from teachers, parents, or other adults, but rather construct their understanding, building upon what they already know. Thus, when children are presented with attitude-incongruent information, they may tend to ignore, distort or selectively attend to the information provided in order to keep their initial schemata intact which, in turn, may strengthen their stereotyped knowledge (Cameron & Turner, 2010).

*Anti-racist program*s, on the other hand, represent an alternative approach to reduce intergroup prejudice, which emphasizes student dialogue rather than passive exposure to information (Pederson et al., 2003). They are based on the premise that when individuals

are encouraged to actively recognize and confront racism and discrimination in themselves and the society, the resulting feelings of compunction (i.e., guilt and self-criticism) will have an impact on their actual reactions to out-group members (Cameron & Turner, 2010). Anti-racist programs emerged out of accumulating skepticism regarding the adequacy of multicultural education to combat prejudice and racism through "emphasizing the exotic aspects of cultures" (McGregor, 1993, p. 216). They are typically more interactive than multicultural education and usually involve group discussions and role playing as a means of provoking and challenging deeply rooted or unconscious negative attitudes and prejudice (Aboud & Levy, 2000; McGregor, 1993).

To the best of our knowledge, only two interventions designed to improve attitudes toward refugees have been evaluated in a school setting. Cameron et al. (2006) evaluated the impact of an intervention aiming to change 5- to 11-year old British children's intergroup attitudes toward refugees. The intervention was based on the "extended contact hypothesis" or "extended contact effect", which suggests that knowing about the cross-group friendships of others is sufficient to reduce prejudice. During the intervention, children read various stories that involved in-group members who had close friendships with outgroup members (i.e., refugee children). They were subsequently found to held more positive attitudes toward refugees, which supports the effectiveness of extended contact as a prejudice-reduction tool in children. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that the intervention changed older children's outgroup *intendent behavior*.

Turner and Brown (2008) set out to evaluate the impact of the Friendship Project, a program specifically designed to improve elementary school children's attitude toward refugees. In contrast to the extended contact intervention reported above, the Friendship Project – which came from both an anti-racist and multicultural approach – was already implemented in several schools in Dover, UK, at the time of investigation, yet a systematic evaluation of its effectiveness was lacking. To this aim, eighty-seven elementary school children (aged 9– 11 years) from three Dover schools received 4 weekly lessons based on the program. There was also a test-retest control group. It was found that the program resulted in more positive attitudes toward refugees one week after its completion, although this effect was reversed at the 7-weeks follow up. Additionally, the program increased the proportion of participants who showed a preference for the acculturation strategy of integration. Surprisingly, no significant change on participants' empathy toward the refugees was reported, even though two of the program's four lessons were specifically focused on this objective. This is an important limitation of the study if we consider the results of a recent meta-analysis of prejudice-reduction programs in children and adolescents, which suggest that successful training in empathy (along with direct contact) is perhaps "the most promising program content component" (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). Taken together with the findings from the Cameron et al. (2006) study reported above, these results leave more room for improvement in future prejudice-reduction studies. Finally, there is no published study which systematically evaluated a prejudice-reduction intervention program specifically designed for elementary schools in Greece.

The Current Study

To address the issues mentioned above, a classroom-based, prejudice-reduction group was created. As with the Friendship Project, the current program can be broadly defined as combining both the anti-racist perspective and the multicultural approach to prejudice

reduction. To this aim, children were encouraged in engage in interactive group discussions to start questioning their existing knowledge and attitudes toward refugees. In addition, the group facilitators used a variety of audiovisual materials (photos, video clips, diaries) to teach students about the culture, lifestyle, and experiences of refugees in the countries from which they originate. Overall, the main content topics of the program included imparting knowledge about refugees and asylum seekers, understanding prejudice and discrimination and promoting empathy toward refugees.

It was hypothesized that children in the intervention group: (a) would be more likely to display – compared to the no-intervention control group – positive attitudes and tolerance toward the refugees and asylum seekers, and (b) would be less likely to endorse xenophobic beliefs toward the refugees compared to a test-retest control group. We also expected that the prejudice reduction intervention would enhance their general capacity for empathy as well as increase their altruistic behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants were Grade 5 and 6 Greek children ($N = 106$) enrolled in two primary schools in north-western Greece, with a mean age of 10.57 (SD =.55, range 10– 12). All children were Caucasian and fluent in Greek. They were allocated either in the intervention (55 participants:27 males, 28 females), or in the no-intervention control group (51 participants: 29 males, 22 females). Experimental groups did not significantly differ in gender distribution, $\chi^2 = .64$, $p > .05$. However, regarding age, a significant group difference emerged, with children in the intervention group being slightly older than children in the control group, $t(104) = 2.28$, $p = .02$. To control for its effect on the outcome variables, age was entered as a covariate in the statistical analyses.

Participants were not assigned randomly to conditions, because they had to receive the intervention in their existing classes. All three intervention groups as well as one classroom in the control condition came from school A, whereas two more classrooms in the control condition came from school B. Participating schools were easily accessible, medium-size (up to 250 students) inner-city public schools. Their selection was based on their geographic proximity to research staff and no invited school, class or student declined to participate. It should be noted that participating classes were rather homogeneous, with students who were coming from similar ethnic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds. At the time of the study, no refugees were in attendance at both schools, so that participants' possible misconceptions about refugees and asylum seekers mainly originated from what they have heard from their parents or the media coverage.

Measures

Attitude toward Refugees

Children's attitude toward refugees was assessed by combining the mean score on six items: "I like refugees", "refugees are very nice", "I like to have refugees in my class", "I like to play with refugees in the playground", "I have much in common with refugees", and "Refugees like to do the same things I like to do". These items were taken from the

questionnaire used in the Turner and Brown's study (Turner & Brown, 2008). Responses to these items were coded so that a score of 1 depicts the most negative attitude and a score of 4 the most positive attitude. The alpha coefficient was .77 at pre-assessment and .71 at post-assessment.

Attitude toward Foreigners

In order to determine the generalization effects of the intervention, we also measured attitudes toward foreigners in general. We used the same items as before, but we replaced the word "refugees" with "foreigners." Responses to these items were coded so that a score of 1 depicts the most negative attitude and a score of 4 the most positive attitude. The alpha coefficient was .77 at pre-assessment and .71 at post-assessment.

In Greece, apart from refugees and asylum seekers, there are currently many economic immigrants (e.g., Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Pakistani, Somali, etc.). Some of them are working in the private sector and appear to be well integrated into the Greek community (e.g., Albanians): Still others are rather self-employed and display a preference for cultural separatism (e.g., Somali). According to Pettigrew (1998), successful prejudice-reduction interventions not only reduce prejudice, but ultimately lead to a reappraisal of in-group attitudes. Therefore, we further investigated whether the effects of the intervention are more target-specific (e.g., toward refugees and asylum seekers only) or generalize to all foreigners.

Empathy toward Refugees

One of the intervention's main objectives is to encourage empathy toward refugees. In the fifth group session (although the seeds of empathy have been already sowed during the fourth session), participants read aloud various real stories of child refugees (unaccompanied or not) fleeing to Greece and try to figure out what it means to be a refugee. The decision to try to engender feelings of empathy was based on the evidence of a recent meta-analysis, which suggests that prejudice-reduction training programs designed to promote empathy and perspective-taking showed the strongest effect sizes (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014).

Children's empathy toward refugees was assessed by taking the mean score from the following two items (also taken from the Turner & Brown's study, Turner & Brown, 2008): "It must be scary for refugees when they arrive in a new country" and ""We should be nice to refugees and help them settle in." Strong disagreement (1) with these statements represents low empathy, while strong agreement (4) represents high empathy. The alpha coefficient for this two-item scale was .52 at pre-assessment and .59 at post-assessmen.

Tolerance and Xenophobia toward Refugees

Children's tolerance and xenophobia toward refugees was assessed using the Tolerance and Xenophobia Scale (TXS; Van Zalk et al., 2013). It consists of two subscales each containing four items: Tolerance (e.g., "We must welcome the refugees that want to stay in Greece"), and Xenophobia (e.g., "Refugees increase criminality"). The subscales were scored on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = "do not agree" to 4 = "absolutely agree"), with higher scores indicating greater tolerance and greater xenophobia. The TXS has been shown to possess adequate internal consistency (coefficient alpha = .93 for both tolerance and xenophobia subscales, Van Zalk et al., 2013). In the current sample, the

alpha coefficient was .59 and .50 (for the tolerance and xenophobia scale, respectively) at pre-assessment, as well as .44 and .56 (for the tolerance and xenophobia scale, respectively) at post-assessment.

Children's Empathy

Children's general capacity for empathic responding were assessed using the the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ; Spreng et al., 2009). TEQ is a 16-item questionnaire that measures empathy as a primarily emotional process. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale from 0 = never to 4 = almost always to rate the items. Some sample items from the TEQ include "It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully" and "I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me". The scale's unidimensional structure has been confirmed in past research (Spreng et al., 2009). The questionnaire has been shown to have high internal consistency, construct validity, and test–retest reliability (Spreng et al., 2009). In the current sample, the alpha coefficient was .77 at pre-assessment and .81 at post-assessment.

Children's Altruistic Behavior

According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, 2011), empathetic concern can lead to altruistic behavior (or helping behavior, in general). Thus, we also investigated whether group members' helping behavior was also affected by program's emphasis on empathy toward refugees, although the current intervention did not specifically focus on enhancing children's altruism.

To measure children's altruistic behavior, an instrument developed for the Child Development Project by the Developmental Studies Center was employed (Child Development Project, 1988–2005). The measurement tool has been previously used in the project, presenting adequate reliability and validity properties (Battistich et al., 2004). In the current study, only the subscale "Altruistic Behavior-Elementary" was completed, which is a 10-item questionnaire measuring the frequency to which respondents have engaged in various altruistic behaviors during the last month. Participants used a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = "never" to 4 = "many times" to rate the items. Some sample items include "How many times did you help an older person?" and "How many times did you help someone who was being picked on?". In the current sample, the alpha coefficient was .76 at pre-assessment and .85 at post-assessment.

All the measures employed in the current study were first translated into Greek by the authors of this study and then back translated by a bilingual PhD candidate who knew nothing about these scales. Next, the first author compared and judged the differences between the back-translated versions and the original scales and finalized the questionnaires.

Procedures

Participation in the study took place during the first school trimester (November-December 2017) and was completely voluntary. After obtaining an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the school principals and the classroom teachers were informed about the program. Following approval, participating children were informed about the group function and its goals and asked to give their assent verbally. Parental consent was obtained

through an opt out procedure. No invited child was finally excluded from the study due to parental refusal or any other reason.

Students in the intervention group completed the outcome measures one week before the commencement of the program (pre-assessment). The group facilitators administered the questionnaires during regular class hours and circulated among the students to provide assistance as needed. The same questionnaires were also administered one week after the termination of the program (post-assessment). The three intervention groups were led by the same group facilitators for 45 minutes per session for six sessions in total, spread as evenly as possible over three consecutive weeks (two sessions per week). All group sessions were conducted on school premises during regular class hours. Group facilitators were two female graduate students at a Department of Education, University of Patras, who had attended a group counseling course and were conducting the intervention as a part of their undergraduate dissertation. The current group program was designed by the authors of this study to be conducted as a short-term, prejudice-reduction group for both primary school-aged children (9- to 11-year-olds) and junior high school students (12- to 14-year-olds). It was finally implemented to all three intervention groups as initially planned, with very few minor adjustments to the procedure due to the particularities of each classroom.

Overview of the Sessions

Session 1: Becoming Acquainted/being Introduced to the Group's Main Topic

After a warm welcome of the members, the group leader briefly informed them about the purpose of the psychoeducational group, the issues with which they will deal, and the ways in which they are expected to operate. Then, each group member presented himself/herself using only four words. Next, group members discussed what they knew about refugees (from school, family, peers and media). They are also asked if they have known any person (family member, relative or acquaintance) who decided to emigrate. Finally, children watched a relevant video (Angelina Jolie's message for World Refugee Day 2012 – "No one chooses to be a refugee") and then are asked to differentiate between immigrants and refugees. The session ended with a brief summary of what had occurred in the group and what the children have learned.

Session 2: Becoming Familiar with Refugee Issues/further Learn How to Differentiate between Refugees and Other Immigrants

Group members were asked to recall the 1st session's discussions and used a single word to describe refugees. Groups members worked in dyads and presented on the blackboard a list of differences and similarities between refugees and immigrants. Children were asked to pinpoint on the map of the class the potential routes of refugees arriving to Greece. Why do they want to enter Europe (with the help of group leaders)? Why do they flee to Greece? Where do they settle in after entering Greece (hotspots)? Where do they want to go and why? As a homework activity, children were encouraged to further inquire into the recent refugee crisis in the Middle East (causes and consequences).

Session 3: Differentiating between Stereotypes and Prejudices/becoming Critical of Prejudices Targeting Refugees

Group leaders discussed the concept of stereotypes and prejudices and provided relevant examples. A homemade video was shown containing excerpts from TV News referring to the refugee crisis or testimonies/interviews from natives who came into contact with refugees. Group members were asked to watch the video and identify any stereotypes/prejudices expressed. Next, group members wrote down on a sheet of paper the first things that pop into their mind when they hear words like "refugee", "immigrant", "reception centers (hotspots)", etc. They then discussed the role of stereotypes and prejudices in their life and started to refute them.

Session 4: Finding Similarities between Us and the Refugees/becoming Sensitive to the Ongoing Plight of Syrian Refugees

At the beginning of the session, photos from refugee's everyday life in the country of origin were displayed and group members are asked to compare them to the life of natives in the host country. An 8-min. video was shown to the group depicting the plight of Syrian refugees fleeing to Greece and their everyday life in Greek hotspots (the video was made by the students of a Greek primary school themselves and was awarded by the Greek Ministry of Education). Via brainstorming (but also with the help of pictorial stimuli and refugee diaries), participants first identified the differences between them and the refugees (different religion, language, hardships experienced) and then they gradually came to realize the subtle but existing similarities (similar food and music preferences, similar children's games, a common need to feel safe and connect with others, etc.). For homework, members were provided with real stories of child refugees to prepare for discussion next time.

Session 5: Cultivating Empathy/becoming Tolerant and Less Xenophobic Toward Aliens, Including Refugees

First, a brief overview of what was addressed in the group so far was provided by group leaders. Then, group members read aloud various real stories of child refugees (unaccompanied or not) fleeing to Greece. The group tried to figure out what these children have been going through and how they might be feeling/behaving. For the following activity, a video was displayed depicting a male Syrian adult refugee who was the target of discrimination at a hospital (in the host country), until it became evident that he was a bone marrow donner (this short video was part of the Greek Government's campaign against xenophobia and prejudice). Next, group members discuss about their attitude and behavior toward minority groups, including refugees. For homework, group participants are required to make a drawing about refugees and give a title to it.

Session 6: Revision of Concepts or Skills Learned in Previous Sessions/farewell

In the final group session, children's drawings are displayed in the group. A brief revision follows of what has been learned in the previous sessions. Group member share what they have gained from their experience in the group and how they are going to use it after the group is ended. Group leaders provide children with a list of

websites containing important and timely information about refugees, give them a portfolio of what they accomplished in the group and, finally, bid them farewell.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Data were first screened for skewness and kurtoses. Table 1 shows correlations among outcome measures at pre-assessment. Descriptive statistics for study's outcome variables at pre- and post-assessment are shown in Table 2. There were significant between group differences at pretest, with the intervention group appearing as being less tolerant and less empathic toward refugees as well as holding less positive attitudes toward foreigners, compared to the control group (*F*s > 6). Thus, the analyses to follow were repeated using ANCOVAs, in which the pretest scores of the dependent variables were entered as the covariate. Nevertheless, the pattern of results remained the same. Univariate post-hoc tests were performed to evaluate the pairwise differences between the means, using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

Attitudes toward Refugees

Changes in children's attitude toward the refugees were examined using a mixed ANCOVA with Group (intervention vs. control) as the between-subjects factor and Time (pre- vs. post-intervention) as the within-subjects factor, with age as the covariate. As expected, the interaction of time by group was significant, F (1, 103) = 6.58, p = .01, partial η^2 = .06. Post hoc comparisons revealed a significant increase in positive attitudes toward refugees in both the intervention, F (1, 54) = 42.41, p < .001, and the control group, F (1, 50) = 12.17, p = .001 (see Table 2). Nevertheless, analysis of change scores showed significantly greater increases in positive attitudes following intervention (M = 2.63, SD = 3.00) than in the control condition (M = 1.09, SD = 2.24), t(104) = 2.96, p = .004.

Attitudes toward Foreigners

A highly significant interaction of time by group was found, F (1, 103) = 16.16, p < .001, partial η^2 = .14. Post hoc comparisons revealed a significant increase in positive attitudes toward foreigners in the intervention group, F (1, 54) = 50.43, p < .001, but not in the control

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the six outcome variables at pre-assessment.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	M	SD
1. Tolerance	–	.01	.39***	.28**	.41***	.12	.20*	9.91	2.44
2. Xenophobia		–	–.05	.01	–.08	–.04	–.001	8.67	2.44
3. Attitudes toward refugees			–	.38***	–.60***	.47***	.37***	15.50	4.25
4. Empathy toward refugees				–	.33***	.45***	.20*	6.44	1.63
5. Attitudes toward foreigners					–	.39***	.18	14.65	4.70
6. Empathy						–	.48***	45.37	9.32
7. Altruistic behavior							–	25.04	5.35

*p <.05. ** p <.01. *** p <.001.

group, F (1, 50) = 2.15, $p > .05$ (see Table 2). These findings confirm that the effects of the intervention were not specific to refugees and asylum seekers but generalized to all foreigners.

Empathy toward Refugees

In the ANCOVA on children's empathy toward refugees, a near-significant main effect of time, F (1, 103) = 3.85, $p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, was qualified by a highly significant interaction of time and group, F (1, 103) = 31.20, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Post hoc comparisons revealed that children in the intervention group evidenced more empathy toward refugees compared with their baseline scores, F (1, 54) = 30.66, $p < .001$, whereas, in the control group, there was a nonsignificant trend for lower empathy toward refugees over time, F (1, 50) = 2.87, $p = .09$ (see Table 2).

Children's Tolerance and Xenophobia

A significant time by group interaction was found, F (1, 103) = 5.94, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. In line with our initial hypotheses, post hoc comparisons revealed a significant increase in tolerance after intervention, F (1, 54) = 14.77, $p < .001$, whereas no significant change was evidenced in the control group, F (1, 50) = .02, $p > .05$ (see Table 2).

In the ANCOVA on children's xenophobia, the time by group interaction was also found to be significant, F (1, 103) = 13.71, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. Post hoc comparisons revealed that children in the intervention group appeared less xenophobic toward refugees compared with their baseline scores, F (1, 54) = 22.39, $p < .001$, whereas no significant change was evidenced in the control group, F (1, 50) = .07, $p > .05$ (see Table 2).

Children's Empathy

Study's hypotheses were tested using a mixed ANCOVA with Group (intervention vs. control) as the between-subjects factor and Time (pre- vs. post-intervention) as the within-subjects factor, with age as the covariate. The analysis of TEQ scores showed a significant interaction of time with group, F (1, 103) = 11.64, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Post hoc comparisons showed a significant increase in empathy after intervention, F (1, 54) = 17.01,

Table 2. Means (and standard deviations) of outcome variables for each group on each occasion of testing.

	Intervention group (n = 55)		Control group (n = 51)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Tolerance	9.20 (2.48)	10.23 (2.32) [a]	10.68 (2.15)	10.72 (1.88)
Xenophobia	8.69 (2.21)	7.21 (1.79) [a]	8.66 (2.68)	8.72 (2.47)
Attitudes toward refugees	15.30 (4.50)	17.94 (3.37) [a]	15.70 (3.99)	16.80 (3.51) [a]
Empathy toward refugees	6.07 (1.74)	7.03 (1.27) [a]	6.84 (1.43)	6.58 (1.49)
Attitudes toward foreigners	13.12 (4.67)	15.52 (4.52) [a]	16.29 (4.19)	16.74 (3.64)
Empathy	44.78 (9.89)	47.85 (9.43) [a]	46.01 (8.72)	45.11 (9.08)
Altruistic behavior	25.10 (5.73)	25.07 (6.61)	24.98 (4.96)	25.41 (5.65)

[a]Pre- vs. Post-assessment means differ significantly (p <.05)

$p < .001$, whereas participants in the control group reported a nonsignificant decrease in their initial scores, $F(1, 50) = 1.00$, $p > .05$ (see Table 2).

Children's Altruistic Behavior

Means and standard deviations for children's altruistic behavior at each stage of assessment are presented in Table 2. The analysis of children's scores showed no significant main effects or interaction (Fs < 1), suggesting that children's altruistic behavior was not significantly altered over time.

Discussion

This study investigated the effectiveness of a school-based, prejudice-reduction intervention for preadolescents. In line with most of our initial hypotheses, the results of this study indicate that participation in a class-based, prejudice-reduction group led to an increase in empathy, as well as in positive attitudes and tolerance toward refugees or foreigners in general. Furthermore, children's xenophobic beliefs were significantly reduced as a result of their participation in the program. These results largely corroborate the findings reported by previous intervention studies (Cameron et al., 2006; Turner & Brown, 2008). They also add to a large body of evidence suggesting that participation in a school-based intervention can promote empathy in children and adolescents (Malti et al., 2016). Finally, they support the effectiveness of a prejudice-reduction approach to reduce xenophobia and increase positive attitudes toward minority populations in both younger and older children (for a review see Aboud et al., 2012). Nevertheless, there was no evidence that children's altruistic behavior was affected by the intervention.

As mentioned above, the current program did not appear to have a significant effect on children's altruistic behavior. We had predicted an effect mainly based on the empathy-altruism hypothesis, according to which generating empathy can lead to more altruistic, prosocial and helping behaviors (Batson, 2011). The nonsignificant results could be accounted by the fact that the current program was not specifically focused on improving children's general altruistic behavior. In retrospect, we believe that they may provide some evidence for the program's discriminant validity. The absence of an effect on altruistic behavior – despite the program being effective in changing children's attitudes – is also in line with previous studies suggesting that attitudes and behavior are not so closely related (Aboud et al., 2012). For example, Cameron et al. (2006) found that the effectiveness of extended contact in changing children's outgroup *intended behavior* was more limited than it was for attitudes. Furthermore, the questionnaire used in the current study measures children's general altruistic behavior and not behavior directed specifically toward the target group. Had we used a measure that focused on intended behavior toward refugees, we might have found more significant results. It may also be that changes in children's actual behavior constitute a slow cumulative process – compared to cognitive changes – that is unlikely to occur in the short term. Had we included a 3-months or 6-months follow up of the intervention, we might have come up with more significant results. More research is needed on this point.

Albeit promising, these results are preliminary and must be interpreted with caution. Firstly, the quasi-experimental design of the present study does not allow the generalization

of the results to the accessible population and perhaps to all preadolescents in Greece. Also, the positive changes reported could not be attributed exclusively to children's participation in the program, as other factors not taken into account might have influenced the results. Future research should adopt a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, which will reduce or eliminate the effect produced by various confounding variables (e.g., classroom climate and teacher-student relationships). Traditionally, experimental research on groups is complicated by the fact that observations often are non-independent due to the aggregation of individuals into groups. Since the current study does not escape this limitation, future research should manage this non-independence without loss of potentially important information regarding individual group members' responses to causal factors (e.g., using random coefficient models). In addition, almost all the measures used (e.g., the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire) were translated into Greek for the needs of the current study so the full psychometric properties of the Greek versions are still unknown. Furthermore, some of the measures used (e.g., the Tolerance and Xenophobia Scale) presented reliabilities below the accepted value of 0.7. However, reliabilities of this magnitude are not uncommon for scales that include only a small number of items (Hair et al. (1998). In addition, back-translation of the scales suggested that the original items and the back-translated items had the same meaning. Finally, in the absence of a follow-up assessment (e.g., three to six months after the termination of the group), the long-term impact of the current group program is still unknown.

Implications for Prejudice-Reduction Interventions

The number of people seeking protection in Europe and other parts of the world has grown dramatically in recent years, posing significant challenges for reception and educational facilities in many countries, Greece included (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Within the school setting, in-class group work may prove to be a valuable first step in combating discrimination and xenophobia as well as in promoting a positive stance toward minorities, refugees and asylum seekers included. Although the current group program was specifically designed to address discrimination and xenophobia against Syrian refugees entering Greece, we believe that – with minor adaptations – it could be used to facilitate the assimilation of refugees into preexisting societies in any part of the world.

One of the strengths of the current study was the successful promotion of empathy in group members. The important meta-analysis carried out by Beelmann and Heinemann (2014) convincingly showed that the most successful prejudice-reduction, structured programs were those that included an effective empathy and perspective taking component. We believe that the use of various refugee diaries and video clips in the current study was instrumental in fostering empathy as children appeared to be both interested and engaged in these experiential activities. The videoclips and the diaries used in the current study were selected on the basis of their estimated capacity to induce empathy and deconstruct common myths about the refugees. The decision to include diaries and videos depicting refugee children's everyday life in their country of origin or at a reception center was partly prompted by the profound impact that the *Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 2003) can have on children's empathic understanding of the Holocaust (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018; Roessing, 2005). As Chisholm and Whitmore (2018) put it "In many ways, the challenge of teaching about Anne Frank is a challenge of empathy. Teachers and students are asked

initially to hold at arm's length the millions of victims, survivors, resisters, bystanders and perpetrators as they create a relationship with one adolescent girl" (p. 5). We suggest that, asking group members to read various refugee diaries and reflect on what it means to strive for safety and reunion with your family members in another country, might have had a similar impact on them.

In sum, the results tentatively suggest that a classroom-based, prejudice-reduction group combining elements from both the anti-racist perspective and the multicultural approach is effective in improving Greek children's attitudes toward refugees. Its effects were not specific to asylum seekers, as a change in attitudes toward foreigners in total was observed. The program also appeared to have an impact on children's general capacity for empathy as well as on their empathy toward refugees. We hope that the group model presented here serves to provide school counselors and educators alike with intervention strategies to combat discrimination and xenophobia and increase empathy within a classroom setting.

Ethical Statement

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Research Committee of the University of Patras and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Finally, this article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Stephanos P. Vassilopoulos, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Counselling in the Department of Primary Education, University of Patras, Greece. He is also director of the Relational Dynamic Laboratory of Education and Counselling.

Andreas Brouzos, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Primary Education at the University of Ioannina. He is also director of the Laboratory for Educational Psychology, Counseling and Research.

Eleni Kasapoglou is a graduate student in the Department of Primary Education at the University of Patras.

Ourania Nikolopoulou is a graduate student in the Department of Primary Education at the University of Patras.

References

Aboud, F. E., & Levy, S. R. (2000). Interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination in children and adolescents. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Reducing prejudice and discrimination* (pp. 269–293). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publisher.

Aboud, F. E., Tredoux, C., Tropp, L. R., Brown, C. S., Niens, U., & Noor, N. M. (2012). Interventions to reduce prejudice and enhance inclusion and respect for ethnic differences in early childhood: A systematic review. *Developmental Review*, *32*(4), 307–336. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2012.05.001

Aydin, H. (2013). A literature-based approaches on multicultural education. *The Anthropologist*, *16* (1–2), 31–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2013.11891333

Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. Oxford University Press.

Battistich, V., Schaps, E., & Wilson, N. (2004). Effects of an elementary school intervention on students' 'connectedness' to school and social adjustment during middle school. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, *24*(3), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.1023/b:jopp.0000018048.38517.cd

Beelmann, A., & Heinemann, K. S. (2014). Preventing prejudice and improving intergroup attitudes: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent training programs. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *35*(1), 10–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/08851700.1989.11670299

Cameron, L., & Turner, R. N. (2010). The application of diversity-based interventions to policy and practice. In R. J. Crisp (Ed.), *The psychology of social and cultural diversity: Social issues and interventions* (pp. 322–351). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444325447.ch14

Cameron, L., Rutland, A., Brown, R., & Douch, R. (2006). Changing children's intergroup attitudes towards refugees: Testing different models of extended contact. *Child Development*, *77*(5), 1208–1219. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00929.x

Child Development Project. (1988–2005). *Student questionnaire: Child development project for elementary school students*. Developmental Studies Center. Retrieved July 24, from https://performwell.org/index.php/find-surveyassessments/outcomes/social-development/social-competencesocial-skills/altruistic-behavior-elementary#

Chisholm, J. S., & Whitmore, K. F. (2018). *Reading challenging texts: Layering literacies through the arts*. National Council of Teachers of English. New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315164069-7.

Cole, C. F., Arafat, C., Tidhar, C., Tafesh, W. Z., Fox, N. A., Killen, M., Ardila-Rey, A., Leavitt, L., Lesser, G., Richman, B., & Yung, F. (2003). The educational impact of Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim: A sesame street television series to promote respect and understanding among children living in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, *27*(5), 409–422. https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250344000019

Dimakos, I. C., & Tasiopoulou, K. (2003). Attitudes towards migrants: What do Greek students think about their immigrant classmates. *Intercultural Education*, *14*(3), 307–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/1467598032000117097

Frank, A. (2003). *The diary of Anne Frank: The revised critical edition*. Doubleday Books.

Hair, J., Anderson, R., Tatham, R., & Black, W. (1998). *Multivariate data analysis* (5th ed.). Prentice Hall International.

Koller, S. (1977). The effect of listening to excerpts from children's stories about Mexican-Americans on the attitudes of sixth graders. *Journal of Educational Research*, *70*(6), 329–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1977.10885017

Malti, T., Chaparro, M. P., Zuffianò, A., & Colasante, T. (2016). School-based interventions to promote empathy-related responding in children and adolescents: A developmental analysis. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, *45*(6), 718–731. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2015.1121822

Mansfield, E., & Kehoe, J. (1994). A critical examination of anti-racist education. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne De L'éducation*, *19*(4), 418–430. https://doi.org/10.2307/1495340

McGregor, J. (1993). Effectiveness of role-playing anti-racist teaching in reducing student prejudice. *Journal of Educational Research*, *86*(4), 215–226. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1993.9941833

Pederson, A., Walker, I., Rapley, M., & Wise, M. (2003). *Anti-racism—what works? An evaluation of the effectiveness of anti-racism strategies*. Centre for Social Change & Social Equity, Murdoch University.

Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *49*(1),65-85. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65

Refugee Observatory. (2019). *Why Greece should open the Islands*. University of the Aegean. Retrieved April 15, from https://refugeeobservatory.aegean.gr/el/node/650

Roessing, L. (2005). Creating empathetic connections to literature. *The Quarterly*, *27*(2), 1–6. https://archive.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2229

Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children. (2017). *Refugee education project*. Greek Ministry of Education. Retrieved July 24, from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/125422/refugee-education-project.pdf

Spreng, R. N., McKinnon, M. C., Mar, R. A., & Levine, B. (2009). The Toronto empathy questionnaire: Scale development and initial validation of a factor-analytic solution to multiple empathy measures. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *91*(1), 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223890802484381

Turner, R. N., & Brown, R. (2008). Improving children's attitudes toward refugees: Evaluation of a school-based multicultural curriculum and an anti-racist intervention. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *38*(5), 1295–1328. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00349.x

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018). *The Europe situation*. The UN Refugee Agency. Retrieved July 20, from http://www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html.

Van Zalk, M. H. W., Kerr, M., Van Zalk, N., & Stattin, H. (2013). Xenophobia and tolerance toward immigrants in adolescence: Cross-influence processes within friendships. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *41*(4), 627–639. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-012-9694-8