Social Network Platforms and Digital Games for Refugee Students in Transit

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ABSTRACT

The article is based on ethnographic research carried out in Eleonas refugee camps in Athens, Greece, from February 2019 to March 2020. Based on in-depth interviews with fifteen male and female Syrian refugee parents, the article studies the use of smartphone devices, network applications, and the digital games “Feed the Monster” and “Antura and the Letters” as essential tools of an informal educational process. Digital mobile devices dominate the everyday life of Syrian students in the camp, redefining the way they keep and reform family ties at a distance. They share experiences, comments, and photos. At the same time, digital games on smartphones are a powerful educational tool by providing children with multiple opportunities to have access to knowledge and acquire skills from different learning areas, such as language, mathematics, and science. Additionally, they encourage children to determine issues of the world around them as they share and negotiate different social and cultural experiences through their play. The interaction between play and learning is of primary importance for preschool and early school students since it contributes to the highest level of learning with the greatest degree of assimilative capacity. In this complex and ever-changing context, the article attempts to raise further questions regarding the use of digital games as part of a daily ritual play, an informal educational process, and a linguistic interaction within the family context.

Keywords: Digital games, informal education, refugee students, smartphones.

I. INTRODUCTION

The constant movement of the forcibly displaced Syrian refugees during the so-called “refugee crisis,” mainly from 2015 until recently, the uncertainty of their staying in Greece and the pursuit for asylum in European countries have kept children out of school for more than two years. At the beginning of the violent conflict in their country, these children were primarily displaced within Syria or living as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq or transit camps in countries like Italy and Greece. In this ever-changing and highly mediatized context, despite the intense xenophobic reactions from part of Greek society, there is an attempt to reintegrate refugee students into an inclusive school and a safe learning environment. However, Syrian refugee children who are attending Greek schools are often being taught in a language they do not speak or understand. Thus, as a large number of the families live in an unstable transit situation, their attachment to formal education is rather ambivalent. These complexities stress the urgency for finding innovative solutions to this “education crisis.”

Although the usage of mobile devices has been proposed to face this crisis and enhance refugee education, there has been limited research on mobile learning for refugee students. Given the proliferation of mobile devices in everyday life and the uncertainty and precariousness of refugee families, this paper attempts to continue the discussion on digital technologies, mobile learning apps, and education. It delves into the practices of Internet use, networked platforms, and digital games as entertainment and educational practices for refugee students, who either became refugees in their childhood or were born refugees in Greece. It is based on ethnographic research conducted in Eleonas refugee camp in Athens from February 2019 to March 2020, field note-taking, and in-depth interviews with fifteen Syrian refugee parents. Eleonas refugee camp was the first to open in mainland Greece, located on the western outskirts of Athens. Despite the initial plans for a few refugees, in 2020, it hosted 1,200 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and African countries (Konstantinou, 2023).

In the context of an intense migratory movement and polymedia environments (Madiou, 2014), the use of smartphones and digital technologies is also perceived as a way for an “informal” educational process for students of preschool and early school education who are either accompanied by both parents or by one member of the family. Drawing on cultural studies, media theories, and anthropological approaches, this ethnographic research
studies how digital technologies and social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and YouTube, through smartphones, help refugee families face prolonged separation. Thus, children from Syria have the opportunity of a digital “togetherness” as they communicate with their “connected” families who have remained at home or are dispersed in Europe (Konstantinou, 2023). Additionally, in the fieldwork, there is an attempt to observe the educational activities based on digital games, which lead to learning tactics. Given that preschool and early school students use digital platforms and sites as a way to understand the world, to express themselves, and to consume products of their culture (Prensky, 2010), there are raised further questions about their attitudes in these digital educational environments. To what extent has using mobile devices and network platforms contributed to strengthening the educational process? How do digital games combine entertainment and knowledge, so-called “edutainment,” in conditions of transit and precariousness? How do digital games in Arabic encourage learning through playful activities? How do these games provide students with a sense of achievement? How do social media “enhance” learning as a form of informal education in the context of family and community? How do digital apps enhance the learning of a language, geography, and/or history of their country, but also the pursuit of information about the host country?

II. DISCUSSION

During the summer of 2019, I met Hassan, a thirty-five-year-old refugee from Lattakia in Syria, in Eleonas refugee camp in Athens, where he stayed for more than four years with his wife and their children, a seven-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl. Overcoming the initial embarrassment, he described the difficulties of their passage to Turkey and the experience of their staying in Mytilene, a Greek island in the Northern Aegean Sea. He narrated his life “there” and the experiences “here.” He showed photos of their family members and friends stored in his smartphone memory or Google Photos apps. The smartphone was and continues to be the “essential tool” of connection with the family, the homeland, and their past (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 23). Moreover, smartphone use could be a process for building fundamental literacy skills in Arabic and enhancing psychosocial well-being for Syrian refugee children.

The inclusion of refugee students in the formal education of the state, their integration into a school environment, and the endeavor of learning the language of the host country, as well as their language, are obligations for their legal protection (see UNESCO, 2017). In Greece, the number of refugee students cannot be defined with absolute precision, as they are in transit situations and are expecting to move to another European country. The inclusion of refugee students in the education system is influenced by the way they and their families perceive the “temporality” of the migrant experience and their lives in conditions of displacement. Despite this continuous movement and the long-term absence from school, recent studies have noticed that it is essential for families with children and/or adolescents to interact with their languages (UNESCO, 2017), either in the context of informal knowledge reproduced within the family or through non-formal education by the use of mobile technology and Internet-based platforms (Daskalaki et al., 2017, p. 28). Smartphones and digital apps, with the potentiality of texting, sharing new pictures, and video-calling, have changed everyday rituals, forming new habits for refugee families and their children (Gillespie et al., 2016; Madianou, 2014, 2017; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014; Salazar Parreñas, 2001, 2008; Smets, 2018; Taftaï & Williams, 2019). The technical features of these mobile devices, such as portability, fast access to the internet, lightweight touch screens, sound, voice orders, and optical zoom, make them essential tools, especially for children (Musawi, 2011). Marc Prensky (2001) describes the competence on mobile devices and digital platforms and characterizes children and young people as “digital natives” as they grow up in a world of digital devices, they “know” the digital language as well as their native language and spend significant time of their lives playing digital games (see also Coffman & Klinger, 2007; Connolly et al., 2012; Gee, 2003; Shaffer et al., 2005). Consequently, Syrian students, as efficient users of smartphone technology, participate in an informal educational process, “moving” quickly between different media and different sources of information and communication at any time and in any place (Ally et al., 2017; Coffman & Klinger, 2007; Drolia et al., 2022).

A. Social Networks, Digital Platforms, and Learning Process

Recent ethnographic research has studied the daily experience of children and adolescents as active users of networks, social media, and digital platforms (see Alencar, 2017; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Thus, these digital platforms are a “place” where young refugees “coexist” with the diasporic and peer groups and discuss issues related to their experiences in host countries (see Elias & Lemish, 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Salazar Parreñas, 2008). In my fieldwork with the Syrian students in Eleonas refugee camp in Athens, smartphones, social media, and digital games contribute to an effort for interaction with a broader social environment. However, they also offer information about their country, their cultural rituals, their history, and their language. Most Syrian refugees emphasize the importance of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger in everyday life and the possibility of being “digitally together.” For example, Mohammad, a forty-seven-year-old father of two girls, ten and twelve, mentions that WhatsApp is the main essential tool for the educational process, as “I am always with them on the mobile.” “Now, the girls are learning English [...], and because I speak English well, I can teach them, asking questions to understand what they have learned. I did the same when I was there [...]. As if nothing has changed.”

So, on the one hand, Syrian refugee students use smartphones in order to be digitally together with their family members, to interact with them, and to get information about the country and their “in-transit” situation; on the other, these mobile technologies turn out to be a “place” of informal education. Raed, a forty-year-old lawyer who has lived in the camp with his family for two
years now, mentions that his children, a four-year-old boy, and an eight-year-old girl, “watch various children’s programs in Arabic on YouTube in order not to forget their language [...]. Internet is a school too”. It is noticed that while the use of the Greek language is an important obstacle to refugee students’ inclusion in the education system, the awareness of their language is a priority. Thus, many of the digital games for refugees have mainly focused on teaching the language of the host country (Drolia et al., 2022), on strengthening the mother tongue, and on the acquisition of literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills. According to Taftaf and Williams (2019), the content of digital games used by refugee students is redefined, considering the length of stay and their in-transit situation in the host country. So, language learning sites, digital platforms, and digital games are used frequently by recently arrived refugees or refugees living in the camp or have settled in urban areas for a long time, aiming at educational issues.

B. Digital Games: Learning and Entertainment

Digital games are cultural goods, inextricably linked to digital mobile devices, time, and materiality (Willoughby, 2008). Refugee students can access them wherever they are through their parents’ smartphones and other portable devices. As Marc Prensky (2001, 2012) mentions in his research on digital education and childhood, these digital games provide an attractive way of engagement, combining fun, participation, interactivity, problem-solving, creativity, competition, and challenge. Based on specific rules, digital games keep learning objectives structured evolutionarily, reinforce previously acquired skills, provide flexible and active knowledge adapted to different subjects, evaluate responses, and reward successes, giving students a sense of success and motivation to continue playing. However, in order to contribute to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children, digital games attempt to entertain, cultivate the creative expression of feelings and thoughts, improve their relationships with others, and educate them (Avgitidou, 2001). Through their digital activity, students experiment with strategies and roles, try their presence in a social context, learn about the cultural environment, and investigate their limitations and possibilities. Recent studies on digital games also argue that students engaged in these rituals are forced to face obstacles, challenges, and problems; besides, they are involved in more complex learning activities than those they develop in their school time (Gee, 2004). Analytically, these digital-based activities contribute to learning through experimentation and testing, through imaginary and interactive environments, individually or in groups (de Freitas, 2006). They create motivation and strengthen the challenge, even if it sometimes leads them to failure (Beheshti, 2012; Coffman & Klinger, 2007; Shaffer et al., 2005). However, these unsuccessful attempts in digital games do not discourage students, but they create a contradictory feeling of “pleasant dissatisfaction”; they strengthen the belief that in the next attempt, after practicing with persistence and patience, it is possible to overcome the obstacles of the games (Gee, 2004). However, making these repeated attempts does not automatically mean that students “learn” to delve into texts or to solve complex problems (Jagoda, 2015). On the contrary, participation in digital games leads students to artificial conflict and competitive behaviors that undermine any sense of cooperation.

Still, digital games in the context of informal education outside the classroom contribute to the strengthening of direct communication and cooperation of those involved, the search for the correct answers, and the development of the imagination. Digital games can easily be transformed into powerful teaching tools and enhance the consolidation of the already acquired knowledge, develop strategic thinking, the organization of a schedule, group decisions, and negotiation skills; they facilitate the learning experience, according to the students dynamic and learning ability (Connolly et al., 2012; Prensky, 2001; Shaffer et al., 2005). Consequently, on the one hand, these games aim at reading and writing fluency for lifelong learning by developing the skill to decode letters, letter combinations, and words; on the other, they support students’ interest, action, and entertainment (Gee, 2004; Shaffer et al., 2005). Moreover, there has been an intense discussion lately on the “gamification” of education, about the use of game techniques in order to give an amusing and attractive appeal to education, to increase commitment, loyalty, and active participation regarding specific practices and behaviors (see Fuchs et al., 2014).

In the refugee camp of Eleonas, it is noticed that students from Syria are often playing the digital games “Feed the Monster” and “Antura and the Letters,” which are mainly designed to provide a journey of discovery and friendship, to answer the questions by discovering the correct Arabic letters, the syllables, and the words, to help the monsters evolve, grow, and prosper, and thus to strengthen the lessons of language. Motivated to ensure that Syrian children have an opportunity to learn reading and writing Arabic and continue their lifelong learning process, “Feed the Monster,” a project of Apps Factory, The Center for Educational Technology, and The International Rescue Committee, implements a stimulating technique for the learning process. Children enjoy playing through different levels with minimal or no adult supervision, collecting and raising their pet monsters while achieving the planned objectives of improving literacy and learning how to read and write fluently in Arabic (Koval-Saifi & Plass, 2018). On the other hand, “Antura and the Letters,” funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and developed by a German Game Lab, Video Games Without Borders and Wixel Studios, is a free-to-play digital game for children aged five to ten years old. Students, with the help of a dog named Antura, are trying hard, through many adventures, to search for the hidden letters of a word, to solve puzzles, and finally to win awards. These two games provide enjoyable questions about letters and syllables and offer Arabic reading and writing lessons, word puzzles, and vocabulary memory games. The activities are related to reading and writing skills, such as phonological awareness, phonetic letter recognition, pronunciation, vocabulary, and word comprehension. They enable users to have unlimited practice, continuous feedback, and phonological explanations, even when children are not connected to the internet. Thus, through the daily repetition of these games, students can check their progress, obtain the explanations provided after several attempts, determine the degree of
difficulty, and celebrate the correct answer to the questions. For example, Raed, a father of two children, six and eight, in one of our discourses on the camp, mentions that these games affected the mood of his young son, so he was not complaining so much about reading, while “he doesn’t get bored while reading.” Meanwhile, Omar, a young father from Syria, talking about his son’s behavior on digital games, says that “it is like being at home again”; he feels so pleased when he wins, and the dog rewards him by shouting, “Good job.” Thus, these digital games form a familiar place, a “home,” offering a connection with their past, where these digital heroes were the familiar protagonists of their everyday lives.

III. CONCLUSION

Syrian children in Eleonas refugee camp are living under the extreme stress of a prolonged conflict. They use family smartphones as “toys,” participate in network platforms to communicate with their relatives in the diaspora or back home, search for information, listen to music on YouTube, learn their language, or look up the meaning of Greek words. At the same time, as they use digital technologies in early childhood education, they are engaged in learning activities, exploring questions and searching for possible answers that lead to a reward (Prensky, 2001). Consequently, as “active participants” in learning to read and write the Arabic language, they achieve the intended impact in literacy.

To sum up, the increase of digitalization in education is faced with enthusiasm on the one hand, with a dystopian hypothesis about continuity on the other, with optimism for learning activities, but also with a critical and reflective mood. However, the way children access knowledge through the use of digital games, the impact of innovative digital educational activities accessible to children out-of-school through smartphones, and the relations they develop or redefine in the context of the family could be questions for future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


