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Listening to Loss: A Reflection from Cyprus

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Summary

In Cyprus, the 1974 Turkish invasion and ongoing occupation continue to shape silent forms of grief. Through intergenerational interviews between refugee grandparents and students, an educational project explored loss beyond property—framing home as memory, trees, and ties. Breaking long-held silences, these personal stories challenge dominant narratives and affirm the need to listen. Grief, when voiced, becomes knowledge—memory carried forward with dignity and care, and transformed into a shared space of learning, empathy, and resistance.

"We became refugees 21.07.1974."
A handmade embroidery by great-grandmother Panagiota Kenta from occupied Kato Zodia, brought by a student, became more than a keepsake—it became a site of memory. Rooted in lived experience, it held intergenerational grief and called for reflection on loss, belonging, and home. In the classroom, it bridged past and present, turning personal history into shared pedagogical meaning.

Description

Cyprus, a small island country at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, bears the historical trauma of division following the Turkish invasion of 1974. The occupation of the northern part of the island displaced over 200,000 Greek Cypriots, turning them into refugees within their own homeland. Decades later, the island remains divided, and this loss continues to shape the identities of new generations—in ways often invisible, as they involve a form of disenfranchised grief.

Within the context of an educational intervention with 11-to-12-year-old students, the concepts of loss and grief were explored through intergenerational interviews with refugee grandparents. The aim was not only to transmit historical knowledge but to create a space where personal memory could emerge as pedagogical knowledge. From these discussions emerged a deeply shared symbolic language of loss; while describing their houses, many refugees ultimately defined home through trees, fields, and neighbourhoods. In many cases, this dialogic encounter marked the first time these stories were shared aloud. A grandfather, for instance, recorded a thirty-minute oral testimony after decades of silence. Such testimonies underscore the importance of shifting the narrative—from speaking about refugees to listening to them.

Memory, grief, and identity are not abstract ideas; they live in the body and are often silenced. While refugee loss is frequently reduced to property claims, the stories gathered point to home as a relational and emotional experience. Institutionalising memory through official discourse risks distancing it from lived realities. In this light, education must embrace difficult knowledge and the pedagogy of discomfort. Grief—personal and collective—should be voiced, acknowledged, and transformed. Loss is a form of heritage: not only of what was taken, but of what may yet be remembered and carried forward.

This reflection also speaks to current realities. Today's refugees—whether in Cyprus or beyond—face similar forms of unrecognised grief. Honouring these parallel experiences, without erasing their specificities, opens space for new understandings of memory, solidarity, and justice. The educational task, then, is not simply to ask what was lost, but to cultivate the conditions for remembering—and to ask how this memory can be carried forward with dignity, voice, and agency. Even when it may seem too late, there remains an ethical urgency to arrive in time—for them, and for those yet to come.