

Promoting the Social and Educational Integration of Syrian Refugee Students by Developing Their Sense of Belonging to the School, Their Psychological Well-being and that of Their Families

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The context

- 2015-2016: Canada receives 46,700 syrian refugees, 47% of them are minors (UNHCR CANADA, 2017).
- Québec receives 7583 refugees (MIDI, 2017).

Experiences of violence lived by children of war

Traumas:

- Violations of their right to security and protection: danger of death, injuries.
- Exposure to violent scenes: killings, corpses, injuries.

Grief:

- Separations and losses: Human and material losses.

Psychosocial needs:

- Lack of care, food, health and education services.

(Papazian, 2004; Hassan, 2015; Sirin & Sirin, 2015)

The need of a different school

A school that provides:

- Protection and safety
- Healing opportunities
- Intercultural encounter

And promotes:

- Psychological well-being
- Sense of belonging

The research-action

Main objective:

To evaluate the influence of a short school action aiming the promotion of the psychological well-being and the sense of belonging of newly arrived young Syrian refugee students.

Participants: reception classes' students from 3 schools (1 elementary school and 2 high schools welcoming refugees)

Method

Kind of research:

- Qualitative action research

Data collection:

- Semi-structured interviews (before and after the action)
 - Reception class teachers
 - Intervention worker in school and community (ICS)
 - Supervisors
- Audio recordings of the discussion group sessions and the interviews
- Facilitators' field notes
- Counselling
 - Students showing signs of ill-being, their parents and their teachers
- Action documentation

Data analysis:

- Content analysis with QDA Miner (verbatim transcription of audio recordings and facilitators' field notes)

The action

(december 2016-May 2017)

1- Discussion groups (an action among others)

- Discussions about sensitive subjects (10): travel, migration, differences, death, beliefs, violence, identity, family, life and discussion groups experience.
- Rules:
 - Everybody can talk freely
 - Everybody should adopt a non-judgmental attitude
 - Everybody should show mutual respect and respect confidentiality of shared information
- Framework: specific space and time framed by opening and closing rituals.
- Language: French and Arabic (translation when children have difficulty to express their thoughts)

2- Psychosocial support for children showing ill-being signs and their families

Results

1. Expression of grief: enhancing the mourning process.
2. Expression of Traumas: enhancing healing.
3. Construction of a new meaning
4. Expression of emotions
5. Development of a well-being
6. Development of the sense of belonging to the class but not to the school.
7. A sense of exclusion and ill-being

1. Expression of grief: enhancing the mourning process.

R: "I lost my country"

A: "I lost my friends ... everyone missing in Syria, I lost it, every building, every park, every school, I lost a lot of things"

Ch: "I lost my house, I miss it a lot"

RT: "I have friends who died in the war"

M: "Last year ... I lost my grandpa (...) and I lost my uncle too, but not because of the war (...) the disease".

2. Expression of Traumas: enhancing healing

Exposure to the death of a loved one

Loss by violent death

Anxiety to lose a loved one

Death anxiety

View of corpses

Suicide attempt

- A: "I have a friend who died by accident and in front of me". (Tells the whole story with a lot of difficulty).
- RT: "I saw my French teacher in Syria how she left. How she was in front of me ... she was in front of me like this ..., just ... there is like ... a bomb (in Arabic) .. I was right next to me ... she died. I spoke to her like that ... she died in front of me "(trembling way, difficulties of expression).
- K: "I left my city ... I saw death in front of me. As before us ... (in Arabic) Animator: the army was in front of you and they were killing people in front of you. There was a sniper who was shooting...I saw 50 people die. "

3. Constructing a new meaning

- The **meaning of death**:

E: "If someone is dead (...) his spirit stays with us. He is like immortal "

- The **meaning of life**:

MR: "(...) now the most important thing to take care of people who have stayed (...) take care of the family".

- The **meaning of migration**:

K: "Because of these things we came (in Arabic) because it was not a human life"

- **Hope and optimism** despite everything:

E: "What happens with us or something, we can not change it, we will think about the future, not the past, the future"

4. Expression of emotions

- **Sadness:** tears, tears and distanciations: "I was sad", "it's sad".
- **Anger:** "I hate this disease," "I was angry at him"
- **Guilt:** Facilitator: "What M means is that when you lose someone you feel guilty (especially) when you can not see them before they die."
- **Fear:** "I'm scared because I have a friend... She has that disease »

5. Development of a well-being

Expressing feelings:

S: "We were able to give our ... as our feelings go out".

Developing a good relation with the teacher:

R: "I feel it's not just like a teacher with her students, like a family ... Yes, she was like with us always. She helped us a lot. "

Improving ties and empathy with other students in the class:

L: "We focused on each person. The person who is crying, he has feelings. Everyone has the same feelings. "

6. Development of the sense of belonging to the class but not to the school.

"Because when we are together there are people who feel alone ... (in the group) everyone is there for each person".

... but not to the school

7. A sense of exclusion and malaise

Violent and discriminatory gestures and words against young Syrian refugees:

- At school by other young people with an immigrant background, including Arabs.

"I say it's not just the [members of another Arab community] who hate Syrians, it's all."

- Outside the school –

"They were Quebecers. So he says they heard that we were speaking another language. So he started insulting them by saying Arabs, something like that. "

7. A sense of exclusion and malaise

- School Organization: Reception class students are marginalized:

"Here when a person sees a student of a regular class who speaks with a student of the reception class, it is said to him why you speak with those students, it happened several times"

Discussion: Challenges of integrating refugees into Quebec schools

1. Governance level:

- Organizing common activities between students from reception classes and regular students.
- Monitoring common areas and fighting discrimination and intimidation.
- Reviewing criteria and procedures of student classification .
- Organizing human and material resources.
- Supporting teachers .

Discussion: Challenges of integrating refugees into Quebec schools

2. Training level

- Continuing education of school actors on the themes:
- Psychosocial situation of young refugees, their mental health, pre- and post-migratory loss and traumas.
- School adjustment and learning difficulties and signs of ill-being.
- Trauma and loss sensible interventions in schools, activities that promote the well-being of students,
- Intercultural education,
- Professional development aiming the improvement of the educational relationship.

Discussion: Challenges of integrating refugees into Quebec schools

3. Professional services' level :

- Grief and trauma are natural reactions to violence. A non-medical and non-pathologizing approach is required.
- Primary psychosocial services can and should be offered at school.

From welcoming refugees to integrating
them, the path is long

Thank you

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