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

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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)

- <u>Discussions about sensitive subjects </u>(10): travel, migration, differences, death, beliefs, violence, identity, family, life and discussion groups experience.

- <u>Rules</u>:
  - Everybody can talk freely
  - Everybody should adopt a non-judgmental attitude
  - Everybody should show mutual respect and respect confidentiality of shared information

- <u>Framework: </u>specific space and time framed by opening and closing rituals.

- <u>Language</u>: 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"

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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.

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From welcoming refugees to integrating them, the path is long

Thank you

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