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REFUGEES EDUCATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF TEACHING
EXPERIENCES IN JORDAN

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Abstract

Refugees are very different from other kind of immigrants. This is because of their particular migration path which is characterised by forced displacement and painful experiences. In addition, they often suffer from difficult living conditions even in the host country, which adds a weight to the burden of their traumatising experiences. Those events can affect the health of the refugees and consequently their learning process as well. This calls the attention on this particular field of education, which is until now neglected by the literature. The aim of this research is to study how teachers react to the needs of this particular class of learners. To conduct this research, we have used an ethnographic approach, by making in-depth interviews and questionnaires to teachers that work with refugee students in Jordan, one of the countries with the highest presence of refugees in the world. The results of this study include an analysis of the teaching experience of our informants. More specifically, a look on the difficulties encountered by the teachers and their way to cope with them. The analysis shows that teachers from migrant or refugee origin show a better understanding of the problem which sometimes is correlated with a better help to the students. Finally, the impact that this working experience has on teachers is analysed. The conclusion focuses on the need of specialisation in this field, in order to provide a better support to both refugee students and teachers involved in their education.

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1. Introduction

Refugees and economic migrants are two different and well distinguished type of migrants. Economic migrants move to another country in order to improve their economic situation. They are generally in total control of choosing how, when and where to move. Differently, refugees migrate because they are forced to flee their country, with little or no possibility to choose the best way to do it, and often are not even in position to choose the place where to migrate to. Commonly, they go into a rather long and illegal journey in which their own life is at risk. In contrast to the case of immigrants, refugees often do not have a proper migration project, getting into a hope journey, usually, to get their lives saved (Mela, 2015).

Very often, refugees have suffered or witnessed violence and undergone family losses and separations which cause traumas. Nevertheless, their trip is also often long and traumatic, because they find on their way more violence and suffering from other family separations. Moreover, once reached the destination country, they not only have a precarious socio-economic situation but they might also suffer from detention and long asylum procedures which definitely increase their tensions.

All these conditions inevitably have an influence on refugees' psychosocial status which can potentially be altered and give rise to problems such as stress, anxiety disorders, depression, anger manifestations, somatic disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other mental disorders. According to Kirmayer et al. (2011), the factors that can affect the refugee psychosocial well-being are classified in function of the three periods of the migration: pre migration, migration and post-migration. That means that the whole migration process of the refugee hides potential threats to the refugee mental wellbeing.

Comprehensibly, a compromised psychosocial status can impact the integration process in the host country, and can affect the integration in the education system as well as the learning process itself. In this way, the education of refugees is a challenge for the school systems and the teachers, who need to find appropriate measures to deal with this particular class of learners.

2. Problem Statement

Refugees' education is a neglected field in the literature, probably due to the fact that the refugees issue is often conceived as an immigration problem (Pinson & Arnot, 2007). The attentions of the policy makers converge only to issues like multiculturalism (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). On the contrary, other aspects such their educational needs focus just on the linguistic integration in the host country, keeping the attentions out from all the other needs of this particular class of learners.

2.1. Refugees' education challenges

The very first problem that refugees face regarding their education is the access to the school system. In most cases, refugees do not have the documents that certify their previous studies, simply because they have lost them on the way to the new country or because they just could not manage to bring them with them. Moreover, the time that intervenes between their arrival in the new country and their admission in the school is generally very long.

In addition, they have often suffered from the interruption of their course of study in the country of origin due to war. In fact, war can cause the students to be unable to attend classes due to the difficulties of

reaching the school or because the schools were destroyed or became the shelter of those who cannot go back or have lost their house (Unicef connect, 2015).

The student who has lost school years finds himself in a situation of disadvantage compared to the host country peers. Subsequently, this condition could affect his integration in the school; he might feel isolated and also has to face the challenge of the adaptation and acculturation (Macnevin, 2012).

Inclusion in the new school system is not easy, after all, as the refugee student has often to adapt to a completely different education system. And when the adaptation to the new school curriculum fails, this could lead the student to the absenteeism or to leave school (UNHCR, 2013).

Other difficulties are represented by living far from schools and/or not having the means to get there. As well as not having the money to pay for the books (Al-qdah & Lacroix, 2010). Another issue that occurs is child labour, as often refugee minors go to work or are forced to beg in the streets while they are still children (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

2.2. Psychosocial wellbeing and educational disadvantages

These specific circumstances can affect learning and can result in an increased discomfort for the student, who could enter into a vicious circle of psychological suffering and educational failure.

The studies that have demonstrated the correlation between a traumatic past and learning achievement are various. Evidence has been proven that neglected and abused children are prone to behavioural disorders and also related with a lower school performance (Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1993). Similar findings are brought by Leiter & Johnsen (1994) on maltreated children, whom study shows negative outcomes in test results, final grade and absences.

Additionally, students that suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder have also been related with lower school performance (Saigh, Mroueh, & Bremner, 1997) and higher rates of school suspension. The latter, according to Lipschitz, Rasmusson, Anyan, Cromwell, & Southwick (2000), due to the possible externalization behaviours that are typical of this disorder.

Other studies have also found correlation between being exposed to violence, post-traumatic stress and reading deficits as well as low IQ between children. The exposition to violence has been proven to be related to the reading skills and the IQ level. Moreover, the co-presence of violence and post-traumatic stress can cause lower levels of reading skills and Q.I. (Delaney-black et al., 2002).

Finally, in the context of war trauma, there is evidence of correlation between the exposure to trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and lower grades (Mosallam & Thabet, 2016).

2.3. The role of teachers

Although the presence of refugees is in a constant growth, most of the countries that host refugees do not provide a specific training for teachers which have instead to learn from their personal experience (Mcbrien, 2005). As the preparation of the school system is still lacking, some students can be lead to drop out of school. That because some teachers are not ready to deal with their behavioural problems, and failing in how to handle the problem (Al-qdah & Lacroix, 2010).

In some cases, teachers can experience frustration for not being able to help the refugees (Gilbert, 2009). Also, they can feel the need for a more appropriate training, willing to know more for example about the post-traumatic stress disorder so that they know how to behave with this kind of students (Macnevin,

2012). Nevertheless, the preparation of the school system about this is still lacking and this can cause serious problems. In fact, the insufficiency of a specific training can lead some students to drop out of school (Al-qdah & Lacroix, 2010).

However, since not all refugee students need therapeutic treatments, teacher contribution most of times only requires to provide the students with listening and attention, and at the same time accompanying them into regular school and recreational activities, supporting the development of resilience (Melzak & Kassabova, 1999).

Finally, along with a better knowledge of psychosocial factors, it is really important that teachers have a good sociocultural knowledge of the refugee's country. In fact, teachers from the refugee linguistic and cultural background facilitate the refugee integration in the classroom by reducing the confrontation with the new environment. Actually, the similarity of the culture of the host country helps the integration process and reduce the outcomes of the trauma (Geltman et al., 2015).

3. Research Questions

Despite the worldwide growth of refugees' presence and the demand for their integration in the host countries, the existing studies that address the specificity of these subjects as a particular class of learners are scarce. Our main hypothesis is that refugees can have peculiar learning needs, specifically related to their status. In order to better understand this reality, we aim at analysing:

- What are the problems of the refugee students.
- How teachers react and cope with refugees learning difficulties.
- If and how working with refugee students have an effect on teachers lives.

4. Purpose of the Study

The education of the refugees is a neglected area in the literature. By this work, we want to contribute in filling the gap in what in 2007 Pinson & Arnot call the "wasteland of refugee education research".

The aim of this study is to understand whether refugees face specific learning problems as students. The origin of these problems will be analysed. Specifically, to know if they are related to their refugee particular socioeconomic situation in the host country, to the previous experience in the home country or if they are due to the effect of the migration process. Moreover, we will focus our attention on how teachers provide their help to them. Finally, we will concentrate on the effect that this work can have on teachers themselves.

5. Research Methods

In order to carry out this study we have used an ethnographic approach. This kind of methodology allows a deep understanding of the research field, by being in a strict contact with the research context reality. More in detail, we have used in-depth interviews and questionnaires with teachers who work with refugee students in Jordan. The location of the study was chosen because of its high rate of refugees' presence. In fact, Jordan is the second country in the world for the share of refugee population compared to the own population (89 refugees per 1000 inhabitants) and hosts 740,160 refugees (UNHCR, 2018).

The teachers of the study were selected for being teachers who work with refugee students. The technique used for the selection was the snowball sampling. This method allows to recruit study subjects thanks to a known subject. In this research, two subjects personally known by one of the researcher have represented the way to contact in chain all the others, by asking them their availability to participate in the study.

In total, we have carried out three in-depth interviews and thirty questionnaires. The interviews regarded the experience of the teacher with the refugee students, specifically about the faced problems, the way to solve them and the overall personal teaching experience with the refugees. The questionnaires were based on the same themes of the interview and were formed by 39 questions, mostly open. Google Docs platform was used to distribute the questionnaire, in order to ease the procedure by reaching the respondents in their own home.

As most of the respondents were only able to speak Arabic, the help of an interpreter and a translator was needed in order to carry out both the interviews and the questionnaires. The questionnaire was then made available in both English and Arabic languages to be filled by the respondent preferred language. In total, six questionnaires and one interview were answered in English while the other twenty-four questionnaires and two interviews were answered in Arabic.

The respondents are predominantly female teachers (23 out of 33), while the males are about one third of the sample (10 out of 33). The education level of the respondents is broadly represented by Bachelor (31 out of 33), while higher education level is not common (only 2 cases out of 33). The teachers of the study were from different schools and areas of Jordan as follows: 14 teachers from Irbid, 4 from Naur, 4 from Mafraq, 3 from Amman, 3 from Ramtha, 3 from Zarqa, 1 from Azraq and 1 from Ajlun.

In order to cite the fragments of interview and questionnaire in the following section, we will use a code that identifies each informant by at the same time, guaranteeing the anonymity. The code will be formed by "T" (standing for teacher) and a progressive number, in order to differentiate the informants. For example: T1.

6. Findings

From the teaching experience of our informants it is clear that refugee students suffer from peculiar situations that make them have specific learning problems as well. Teachers' role in refugees' resiliency is essential and as shown by the results of this study, needs to be supported by specific training.

6.1. Refugees learning difficulties

The difficulties that the teachers of our study have faced during their experience with refugees are mainly summarized into two type of problems. One it properly regards the education path and learning and the other the refugee psychosocial sphere. According to the first case, refugees face problems concerning the difference of school programs between the country of origin and the host country. Answers like the one of T1 are common between our informants:

"Jordanians achieve more than the refugees because books are different in Syria and also the program. Sometimes subjects are taught in different years so they don't have some knowledge about something because of the different system" (T1).

Another problem strictly related to the education level is the loss of school years because of war, that because as one of the teachers says *“they have some problems in catching-up with their level/age skills, because they miss the school for three and four years in some cases”* (T2). Other difficulties regard the harsh living conditions in which most of refugees are. As our informants show us, sometimes *“the school is in the camp, in caravans. The difficulty is to meet the requirements of teaching and the environment in the camp is not suitable for teaching”* (T3). Another particular condition that affects many refugees is child labour, because *“some students work in restaurants, or vegetables shops or mechanics. This affects the availability of time for preparing their lessons and the revisions”* (T4).

When it comes to the psychological conditions, many are the causes that affect the school performance. The students sometimes suffer because of parent(s) or relatives loss as expressed by the following words:

“Some female students suffered psychological problems because of the situation (...) For example a relative has dead in front of a student, so she has problem with everything” (T5).

Sometimes their psychological situation reflects on their behaviours in the class by mistreating the teachers, as one of them says, *“the psychological condition is very difficult and they don’t respect teachers”* (T6). Finally, from another point of view, there is wide agree on the idea that the particular condition of the refugees affects their learning motivation and interest. For example, one of the teachers says that *“refugees suffer no stability, fear, and not feeling safe. This led to being careless about study”* (T5).

6.2. Ways of facing the learning difficulties

Under a teaching approach point of view, some teachers try to cope with the differences of level by trying to recuperate the lost knowledge of the students, as T7 says, *“I start with their level then going up gradually”* (T7). Additionally, the common idea between the teachers is that it is important to keep the students busy with the study in order to distract them from the thoughts of what they have passed through. For example one of the teachers says *“I try to help them by consoling them and keeping them busy in activities so they don’t stay tired and away from focus on classes”* (T8). Similarly, T4 expresses that the study is the main way to improve the students’ situation, by saying:

“Hope in a better future by keep studying to change the current situation” (T4).

Despite the teachers’ attempts to provide their help to those students, many of them think that there is a need for a specific training in order to teach in this kind of classes. Expressions as the following show this necessity as a need for *“training teachers on how to help students getting out of frustration and loosing hope and losing the desire for education and dealing with people who came from wars and disasters”* (T9). Also, teachers who have relatives in Syria or that they are from immigrant or refugee origins, show a better understanding of the students and seems providing a better help to them and also see other teachers’ treatment of the students as unfair due to their conditions. It is for example the case of T1 that referring to teachers with relatives in Syria says: *“we have more compassion than other teachers, sometimes they treat them worse because they are not Jordanians. If a student starts to talk about his problems the teacher tell to shut up”* (T1).

6.3. Impact of working with refugee's students

Generally, giving lessons to refugee students makes the teachers feeling proud for helping others and more content about their own life. This is a common feeling that it is shown in expressions such as “*I’m totally different person since I started working with the refugees, I feel more positive about my personal life. I appreciate it!*” (T2). Nevertheless, the satisfaction given by helping others is sometimes accompanied by a contrasting feeling due to the compassion for them, which may affect the teachers’ psychological status as well. For example, one of them tells us that she feels divided “*between joy and frustration*” (T9). Finally, working with refugees seems being different than working with other students, due to the sensitivity that the firsts carry with them. This sometimes generates in the teachers a sense of duty towards the students and can make them feel the burden of their role because they feel they “*have big responsibility*” (T10).

7. Conclusion

Refugees learning difficulties are mainly caused by two types of problems. The first one regards properly the education. It concerns the school years loss, the difference of school programs between the country of origin and the host country and the poor teaching conditions due sometimes to their living situations. The second type of problem is more strictly correlated to the refugee psychosocial sphere. Refugee students could suffer from relatives or parents loss, as well as having witnessed their death during the war, but also might be affected by the lack of stability and a feeling of fear. Furthermore, their particular psychological situation can have an effect on their conduct in the class, with more aggressive behaviours towards the teachers. In order to face these problems, teachers try first to cope with the differences in the level of the education, by recuperating the lost knowledge. Secondly, they provide them with psychological support, trying to motivate them to study as a mean of resilience. Nevertheless, a need for a specific training for teaching refugees emerges, first for better knowing the situation of the refugee’s country of origin and secondly to get adequate knowledge on the way to treat their difficulties. Finally, the need for a specific training is also necessary in order to prevent the feelings of frustration that working with vulnerable subjects like refugees can give.

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