

TRAUMATISED REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH AT SCHOOL: RESOURCES AND CONDITIONS OF SUCCESS

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Abstract

Refugee children and youth have been exposed to stressors that cause trauma. Research in the migration context assumes that complex trauma is the result of consistent or repeated traumatic exposure over a period. Many children and youth are exposed to different stressors over a long period and they are still exposed in the host country. The trauma symptoms have a broad spectrum, from impairment in school functioning and increased absence from school to decreased intellectual functioning and academic performance or lower rates of graduation.

In the present study, refugee children and youth, a widely neglected group within school-related research, were considered from the perspective of school and teachers. A model based on Flanagan's critical incident technique revealed the main challenges of schools with traumatised students. To identify such critical incidents, focus group discussions were conducted. The total sample included 55 teachers, 32 of whom were working in primary schools and 23 in lower secondary education in Germany.

The critical incident analysis showed challenges and conditions on different levels of the school, influencing traumatised students' education, integration and self-concept. In the incidents, the teachers referred to circumstances they knew about their students' traumatisation related to experiences in the country of origin, during flight and in the host country. Furthermore, they reported how trauma became visible at school. Beyond the findings on trauma sequelae in general, topics specific to the school context were revealed (e.g., the role of language and the legal framework), which should be considered with regard to their implications. The excessive demands of an unknown school environment were depicted as refusal to attend class, running away, crying for a long time or sitting under the table during the whole school day. Under these circumstances, teaching, learning and acceptance from the peer group could hardly succeed. Such behaviours decrease students' opportunities to socialise and integrate.

These results implicate that successful resources and conditions should be aimed from a systemic perspective. Mixed models of teaching in and outside the classroom enable both social contacts and options for withdrawing. Multi-professional teams would bring together the expertise and perspectives of different professions, raising awareness of trauma sequelae and symptoms in the classroom context. Moreover, the role of extracurricular support should be considered.

Keywords: *Models of teaching, refugee children/youth, school, trauma, trauma sequelae.*

1. Introduction

Statistics on migration highlight the need for both school-related research and classroom practices to address the education of traumatised refugee children and youth. In 2019, 80 million people worldwide, with 30 to 40 million of them being children and youth, were on the move because of war, violence, persecution or displacement (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). The current developments in Ukraine intensify displacement and migration in the European area. About 47% of the asylum seekers in Germany in 2019 were minors (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [BAMF], 2020). Many of the children and youth that have entered the German educational system and society after forced migration have been or are still being exposed to pressures causing traumatisation (Fazel & Stein, 2002). Thus, the present study concerns:

- (1) the backgrounds and circumstances of the traumatisation of students as reported by their teachers;
- (2) critical situations at school, where the trauma becomes visible;
- (3) resources and conditions that contribute to the traumatised students' positive development.

2. Traumatised refugee children and youth: Some backgrounds

The pressures that refugees are exposed to may occur in the country of origin, during flight and in the host country (Fazel & Stein, 2002). Young migrants are especially vulnerable to threats like human

trafficking, abuse and exploitation, particularly, when they travel alone or in the context of irregular migration. Research on migration assumes that many refugee children and youths have experienced not only one traumatic event. Complex trauma is the result of consistent or repeated traumatic exposure over a period. A traumatic experience is subject to individual perception; not every child or youth exposed to a traumatic event develops psychological problems. Nevertheless, there is an increased risk for long-term psychosocial consequences (Buchmüller, Lembcke, Busch, Kumsta, & Leyendecker, 2018). The symptoms of trauma vary, with the most frequent being social withdrawal, somatic complaints such as stomach pain or headache, attention and concentration problems and behavioural disorders (Buchmüller et al., 2018), as well as the resurgence of events by certain stimuli (flashbacks), including nightmares (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2013). Anxiety and depressive disorders have been documented (Jaycox et al., 2002). Such symptoms are also present in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but could also occur individually or as a comorbidity of PTSD. As a result, adverse effects on mental and physical health lead to detriments in all areas of life, such as family and school life or peer group dynamics. Also, trauma is related to impaired school functioning, including increased absence from school, decreased intellectual functioning, reading ability and academic performance, and lower rates of graduation (Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010).

Preventing traumatised students from such negative effects by ensuring successful access to school and peer groups entails new demands for teachers and educational staff. Addressing the special demands of students suffering from trauma due to displacement should be based on a resource-oriented approach as presented in this study.

3. Method

3.1. Procedure, sampling and data collection

The present study is part of the project ‘School for All’ at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, Germany. The project’s ultimate goal is to implement sustainable measures for the structural improvement of schools, educational institutions and universities, as well as introduce standards for new concepts in the field of education. In the present study, we used the critical incident technique (CIT), first described by Flanagan (1954), which aims at investigating significant events in professional fields with high demand, high levels of responsibility and a need for complex problem-solving. A detailed analysis of critical incidents enables researchers to identify similarities, differences and patterns and seek insight into how and why people engage in different activities (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2004). To identify such incidents, focus group discussions were conducted aiming at an empirical analysis of social subsystems, collective phenomena and supra-individual behaviours (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

CIT assumes that the participants of a certain study are subject-matter experts who have both expertise and practical experience in their respective fields. The sample included 55 teachers (49 females, 6 males) with a minimum of six years in the teaching profession, 32 of whom were working in primary schools and 23 in lower secondary education in Germany. The teachers were divided into seven discussion groups, with six to eight participants per group (Krueger & Casey 2014). The groups were structured to include teachers from different schools to achieve a more diverse and broader argumentation.

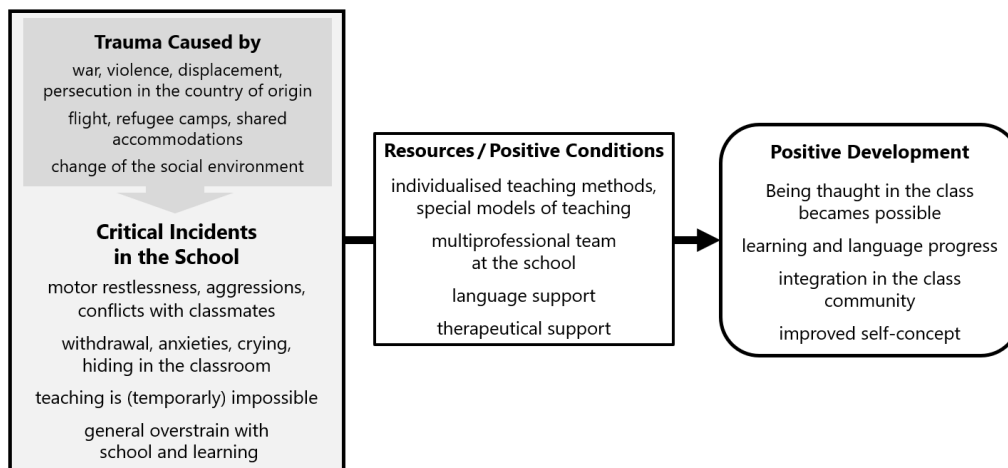
3.2. Analysis and validation

The group discussions yielded a total of 30 critical incidents concerning refugee children and youth at school. According to Flanagan (1954), critical incidents are to be analysed by creating categories and subcategories. Therefore, we used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The goal of content analysis is to reduce the material so that the fundamental content is maintained and employ abstraction to obtain a straightforward corpus that retains an image of the raw material. Altogether, 270 codings were encoded. To verify the analysis, two researchers encoded all incidents. First, inter-rater reliability (IRR) on the basis of percentage was used to verify the encoding. A consensus was reached when at least 80% of the categories were identically encoded (> 70% overall is considered satisfactory). IRR was initially .83 for all categories combined. To improve this, communicative validation was performed (Kvale, 1995). By revising some categories, a higher degree of selectivity and, thus, higher IRR was reached (.89). Additionally, Cohen’s kappa coefficient (κ) (Brennan & Prediger, 1981) was calculated. For all categories together, κ was .89, corresponding to ‘almost perfect agreement’ (Landis & Koch, 1977).

4. Results

Figure 1 displays the model resulting from the critical incident analysis. The teachers reported backgrounds and circumstances they knew about their students’ traumatising, events that reflected trauma in school, and resources and conditions considered to be a positive development.

Figure 1. Model of traumatised refugee children and youth in school: backgrounds, resources and development.



4.1. Backgrounds and circumstances of the traumatising of children and youth

The teachers reported different backgrounds and circumstances of traumatising of their students. The majority of the teachers referred to a single context in which children and youth were exposed to trauma. In some cases, they referred to exposure to a variety of stressors.

In six incidents, teachers reported experiences of war, violence, religious and ethnic persecution and displacement in the country of origin. ‘The boy’s father was murdered in Afghanistan. The father went to his mother’s funeral and was murdered with a headshot in a mosque due to a vendetta. The family was sent a picture’ (PS_6_4). ‘The parents are Iraqi Christians. Family members were murdered before the eyes of the family’ (PS_7_7). In some events, the students’ fathers were forced to be soldiers or were detained and persecuted. In 14 incidents, representing the majority of those reported, teachers described traumatic experiences their students suffered during flight. Here, teachers often referred to the flight by boat in the Mediterranean Sea. Some children and youth were separated from their parents or siblings during flight and often lost contact with their parents. ‘A refugee child, a 7-year-old boy, came from Somalia with seven years, first passing through Italy. The mother and the child were separated during the flight; the mother could not be traced’ (PS_3_10). Some children and youth were physically and sexually abused during flight, in refugee camps, accommodations or foster families. Many of them stayed in accommodations under harsh conditions. Furthermore, the teachers referred to the students’ traumatising by the sudden shift into an unknown social environment. This is mostly accompanied by additional difficult circumstances: ‘A 8-year-old student from Ethiopia, with a cleft lip had surgery in Germany. She completely refused to use the German language. She understands but she does not speak at all. She is traumatised by the sudden cultural change, the language change and the surgery’ (PS_3_11).

The teachers further reported that a few children and youth suffered trauma in more than one context. ‘A boy from Somalia, in the second grade, fled. His mother could not be found during nine months in Italy. He was taken into care by a foster family, where he was abused. Then, the family was reunited in Munich [...]. Then, he was raped in a refugee home’ (PS_3_9).

4.2. Critical incidents: how does trauma become visible in the school context?

Teachers reported that trauma often became visible as motor restlessness, classroom disturbances and conflicts with classmates. Restlessness disturbed the classroom and disrupted the learning processes. ‘He is very restless in motor terms, easily distracted and able to concentrate only for a short time’ (PS_7_3). Furthermore, teachers reported an inability to follow the rules and routines of the class mainly caused by restlessness and difficulties to sit quietly during class. Disruptive behaviours were mostly directed towards classmates. ‘A student with special learning needs who lives in refugee accommodation is traumatised. He constantly gets negative attention and displays violent behaviour against his classmates’ (PS_4_7). The teachers attributed some of the behaviours to the specific traumatising experiences. For example, a teacher referred to a student whose father was a soldier in the civil war, while the mother and the children were living in Germany. ‘As he felt unjustly treated, he threatened some classmates: “When my father comes to Germany on vacation, he will shoot you with his rifle”. The other children are scared on their way to school and during break’ (PS_7_3). The teachers also reported withdrawal, for example, students would not speak at all for weeks or months, would cry in the classroom or hide under and behind some furniture. ‘A Syrian boy fled to Germany without his parents. He was

enrolled in the first grade in July. [...] He did not speak at all, was permanently unsettled and cried continuously' (PS_3_1).

Furthermore, events when teaching traumatised students in the classroom was impossible, either temporarily or permanently, were reported. The teachers described either externalising and internalising behaviours or a 'complete rejection to attend school' (PS_3_12) and enter the classroom. Other students entered the classroom but were not able to take part in class and social life. 'A refugee child, a 7-year-old boy, arrived in Germany from Somalia. He sits completely frightened under the table. Teaching him is not possible' (PS_3_1). Other students ran away from school several times (PS_3_11).

Apart from that, some teachers depicted an excessive demand of some students: 'A brother and a sister fled from Ethiopia, [...]. They had no academic socialisation at all. They were enrolled in the second grade but were overburdened with all school processes' (PS_1_3). Such situations characterised the sudden change in the migrant students' life in the social, linguistic and educational environment.

4.3. Resources, positive conditions and consequences

The critical incident analysis revealed a positive direction of the development due to positive conditions and resources in different areas and groups of persons.

On the teaching level, individualised teaching concepts, and particularly models of variably teaching traumatised students in and outside the classroom, were advantageous. Such models enabled children and youth to spend at least part of the day in the class community and, thus, build relationships. 'In order to enable further evolution, the boy repeated the first grade. However, he was maintained in the same class with his classmates to give him more opportunities to speak and remain integrated' (PS_3_3). Such concepts allow teaching where it was initially impossible. 'Severe separation anxiety is caused by the sudden cultural change. First, the child was taught outside the class and she made rapid progress. The number of hours the student was taught in the classroom increased over the weeks. She could be fully integrated into the class.' (PS_3_12). These concepts supported the integration in the class community and fostered the 'acceptance by the peer group' (PS_3_10).

On the school level, the support of a multi-professional team contributed to positive development. These teams are composed of regular teachers, special needs educators, social workers, school psychologists, professionals from the area of language and educational assistance staff. 'A student is extremely burdened by his mother's severe illness and his experiences during war and flight. He can be comprehensively supported by a multi-professional team with teachers, special needs educators and social workers' (LS_5_1). The composition of the team differed according to the students' specific needs. 'An unaccompanied minor boy from Syria enrolled in the first grade was supported by the class teacher, social worker and an expert in second language acquisition from the very beginning. However, his severe insecurity did not improve. In order to achieve stability, a context was created where the student was supported by a smaller group' (PS_3_1). The collaboration of teachers and special needs professionals, for example, to 'create individual educational plans' (LS_5_1) was a cornerstone in enabling teaching.

Other resources on the school level concerned the language. The measures to support language skills ranged from 'carefully introducing students to the language of instruction during the lessons' (PS_3_11) to concrete measures such as the 'promotion of literacy in a small group for three hours per week' (LS_5_1) or 'the individual support of a small group with four children having the same language level helped overcome language barriers and achieve rapid progress' (PS_3_1). This progress enabled access to the learning content and academic advances. In turn, this contributed to communication and inclusion and, therefore, positive experiences for children and youth who often experience rejection. Therefore, positive effects on the self-concept were reported. 'The boy has made much progress and has developed into a bright student that is eager to learn' (PS_3_1).

Positive development on a structural level was closely connected to extracurricular support, especially, psychotherapeutic services. 'After being raped in a refugee home, the student's personality structure collapsed. With the support of the psychotherapist, the boy could attend class again' (PS_3_10).

5. Conclusions: Implications from a systemic perspective

The concepts and measures need to consider different levels and groups of people in school.

- *Mixed models of teaching in and outside the classroom enable both social contacts and options for withdrawing:* Such models could be modified and adjusted to the students' development and needs. These models also facilitate the integration into the educational system and everyday school life.
- *Multi-professional teams bring together the expertise and perspectives of different professions:* Collaboration enables the implementation of the aforementioned teaching models and support plans. Professionals like social workers offer different perspectives and help students beyond

the context of academic competition. Linguistic barriers may interfere with trauma-related symptoms, cognitive and language delays or normal adjustment to a new language (Langley, Santiago, Rodríguez, & Zelaya, 2013). Thus, professionals with expertise in these areas could help distinguish these symptoms.

- *Language support is an interface of educational development*: Addressing language in class or through additional support is a key element for teaching traumatised students. There is pressure to act in educational settings that are marked by a monolingual orientation (Siemund, Gogolin, Schulz, & Davydova, 2013). Concepts such as plurilingual didactics could initiate development.
- *Schools need extracurricular support, especially from psychotherapists*: The school is not the only institution responsible for the children/youth and their wellbeing. Schools need to pursue collaborations with partners, such as local mental health agencies or child welfare institutions. Psychotherapeutic support is of special importance. Thus, a structural demand is to enable access to psychotherapeutic services for refugee children and youth, as soon as possible after their arrival.

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