Refugee children at school: good practices in mental health and social care


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An international research project financed by the European Union is investigating the possibility of transferring promising interventions from one country to another.

David Ingleby and Charles Watters

Refugee children at school: good practices in mental health and social care

School has healing possibilities for refugee children and successful approaches from The Netherlands are to be tried out in British schools.

In recent years, public opinion in Western countries seems to have hardened against refugees and asylum-seekers. Surveys in Britain and The Netherlands have shown that people have exaggerated notions about both the size of this group and the financial burden that it represents. Media campaigns, the vote-catching strategies of politicians and, of course, “9/11” have all contributed to this toughening of attitudes.

Yet the humanitarian problem remains. However difficult it may be to make a watertight distinction between political and economic migrants and to check the factual basis of asylum-seekers’ stories, hundreds of thousands of them arrive in Europe each year, hoping to start a new life. Some will be turned back at the borders, but most will spend months or years waiting for their applications to be processed. The lucky ones – less than half - will get permission to stay, sometimes on a temporary basis; the rest will either disappear into illegality, move to another country, or go back where they came from.

Of the millions of victims of political violence in the world, those who manage to escape to peaceful and prosperous Western countries represent a small, and in certain respects privileged, minority. Nevertheless, many of them are in bad shape, both physically and mentally. Some are victims of violence; all have lost their homeland and their familiar environment. The flight itself and the period spent waiting for applications to be processed confront people who are already vulnerable with even more stress and hardship. And even when all these obstacles have been overcome, the barriers to successful resettlement - including the public hostility mentioned above - can be overwhelming.

Helping refugee children

For children, who form a quarter to a third of all asylum seekers, these threats can be especially daunting. Many arrive alone; even if they have parents or relatives with them, these persons may not be in a fit state to provide the needed support. Clearly, this group of children is “at risk” in terms of their physical and mental health and their all-round development. How can they be helped?

One alternative is simply to wait until children break down, become ill or cause social problems, and then offer individual therapy or counseling. Another possibility, however, is to adopt a preventive approach - to give the children support and encouragement, to show them how to confront their problems themselves, and to help them feel they are not simply being abandoned to their fate. Often, the school can provide an excellent context for carrying
Teachers are often willing to support children with social or emotional problems, in addition to carrying out their normal teaching programme.

As part of this study, an attempt will be made to implement the Pharos approach in British schools.

Of course, there are important differences between the school systems and the asylum procedures in Britain and The Netherlands, and the researchers do not expect that existing Pharos programmes can be taken over in a ready-made form. At the time of writing, consultations are under way about the adaptations that may be necessary and the best way to get such projects set up. The researchers are keen to hear from all those in the field of education and health, as well as refugees and asylum-seekers themselves, who have views on this initiative or would like to become involved.

The Pharos Programmes

A basic principle of the Dutch programmes is that giving attention to the children's problems and strengthening the support systems around them go hand in hand. The school has healing possibilities because it provides attention, structure and contact with peers, and can serve as a bridge to the new society and the future. Teachers are often willing to support children with social or emotional problems, in addition to carrying out their normal teaching programme.

Secondary schools

For refugee youth in secondary education, Pharos has developed the following programmes:

The Refugee lesson (from Vluchtelingen)en

A series of eight lessons focussing on the experiences refugee children have in common. The lessons are conducted by a teacher, together with a mental health care professional, with a group of 8-12 topics. Topics treated are:

- Living in the Netherlands
- Where do I come from?
- Who am I?
- Important things and days
- Friendship and being in love
- Prospects for the future

Refugee youth at school (Vluchtelingenjongeren op school)

This is a training manual, accompanied by video tapes, for teachers and others involved with this group. The themes are:

- Backgrounds of refugee youth
- Coping with loss
- Dealing with traumatised children
- Preventive activities in the classroom