How do refugee children experience their new situation in England and Denmark? Implications for educational policy and practice

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A B S T R A C T

As the number of individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and country of origin has increased rapidly in recent years, the need to understand how best to support such individuals, especially the youngest of them, becomes pressing. This study presents findings from interviews with adults who had arrived as asylum-seekers in one of two countries, Denmark or England, when they were children. Qualitative findings based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses demonstrate the participants' focus on *Language-based challenges that extend to further difficulties, Choosing to succeed, Gaining strength through social support, encouragement and guidance, Integrating two separate worlds into one* and *Seeing, hearing and understanding children's needs*. The participants have had time to reflect on their early experiences of integration, and their voices can inform researchers, educators and other practitioners currently working with refugee children and families.

1. Introduction

Because of the large number of refugee individuals who have sought safety in Western asylum-countries in the past years (UNHCR, 2016, 2017), there is an urgent need to facilitate their integration into asylum-countries and a way to do this is through children's school environment (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Luthar, 2015; Masten and Narayan, 2012). One way in which to examine how professionals can support refugee children's development is to access first-hand experiences. This study presents findings from interviews with refugee adults who have reflected on their recollections of arriving to Denmark or England as a refugee child accompanied by family members.

Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Theory* (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) provides a useful framework from which to examine the numerous contexts that influence refugee children's development, well-being and integration, including risk- and protective factors (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Timshel, Montgomery, and Dalgaard, 2017). This theory implies a dynamic perspective on the child's interaction with the environment, with children influencing, as well as being influenced by, numerous settings. Likewise, the framework is useful in terms of considering various contexts where prevention and intervention could be initiated (Betancourt and Khan, 2008).

In brief, Bronfenbrenner's perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) perceives the environment as nested within layers and structures, similar to a Russian Matryoshka doll (1977; 1979) and each system is included in the next. The developing individual can be seen as at the centre - with individual genetic and personal factors (Boxer et al., 2013). Subsequent systems include *Microsystems;* the child's immediate settings such as the home, playground, or school, *Mesosystems*; relationships and connections between two or more of the child's settings, for instance how a child's home context influences school and vice versa, *Exosystems;* settings in which the child does not participate, but that affect the child indirectly such as parental employment or unemployment conditions or parent's social network (Boxer et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), and *Macrosystems*; the organisation and structure of a society; policies, belief systems or financial crises. Finally, *Chronosystems*, such as life transitions or the passage of time affect children – especially refugee children and families. Thus, settings and systems that influence children extend far beyond their direct contact. An important term in the ecological framework is that of *reciprocity* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22), highlighting the mutual interaction between the individual and his or her environment as well as the complexity involved in understanding development. As stated by Bronfenbrenner, "*Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties*" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 9).

Refugees typically face potential risks and adversity pre-migration, during their flight to asylum-countries, as well as after their arrival in the asylum-country. Some risks are related to difficulties and delays with the asylum claim, and prolonged waiting time leading to severe stress, financial difficulties, social isolation, stigmatisation and

discrimination (Iversen and Morken, 2004; Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007; Montgomery, 2008; Montgomery and Foldspang, 2008; Pitman, 2010). Perceived discrimination and stigmatisation may be intensified by negative depictions and stereotypical discourses in the media and public debates in asylum-countries (Esses and Medianu, 2013; Greenslade, 2005; Shakya et al., 2014). These adverse conditions affect the whole family, including children.

Forced migration, traumatic experiences and loss affect parental responsiveness (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren, 2007), through macrosystem influences on the microsystem. When refugee parents are under severe stress, their ability to deactivate fear and attachment behaviour in their children may become impaired. Parental attachment representations of their children can be negatively affected (De Haene et al., 2007; Timshel et al., 2017) and some parents may be unable to provide a secure base for their children. In such instances, appropriate support in the asylum-country is vital.

Refugee children may experience increased responsibilities and new roles, and role reversals can develop within the family (Dow, 2011; Fazel and Stein, 2002; Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007; Papadopoulos, 1999; Timshel et al., 2017). Refugee children may take care of siblings and family members, and take on instrumental tasks (Shakya et al., 2014). For example, where refugee children learn the language in the asylum-country faster than their parents, they may also take on the role of interpreting (Fazel and Stein, 2002; Khanlou, Shakya, Islam, and Oudeh, 2014; Leavey et al., 2004; McKenzie, Tuck, and Agic, 2014; Shakya et al., 2014) leading to potential shifts in power and roles.

Furthermore, studies have found refugee children to be at higher risk of mental health difficulties compared to native and migrant children (Dalgaard, Todd, Daniel, and Montgomery, 2016; Fazel and Stein, 2003; Leth, Niclasen, Ryding, Baroud, and Esbjørn, 2014; Thommessen, Laghi, Cerrone, Baiocco and Todd, 2013). In England, Fazel and Stein (2003) found more than a quarter of the assessed refugee children to be at risk of psychological difficulties; a higher percentage than both migrant and native English participants. Refugee children scored significantly higher than migrant children on the *emotional difficulties* and the *total difficulties* score on the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997; SDQ). Compared to native children, refugee children also scored significantly higher on *emotional difficulties*, *hyperactivity* scores, *peer problems* as well as the *total difficulties* score. In Denmark the SDQ has similarly been used to compare the mental health of refugee-, migrant- and native Danish children (Leth et al., 2014), where refugee children were found to score significantly higher than native Danish children on the *conduct disorder* and the *peer problems* scale. These results indicate that refugee children may benefit from support initiatives, based on their specific needs, within schools. Furthermore, these studies also highlight the critical need to intervene appropriately. The present study aims to provide information that could be useful for the development of such initiatives.

Besides the family, school is the setting in which children spend most of their time (Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2012). Schools can provide structure and restore a sense of normality to children's lives, particularly after war and forced migration. The school setting can provide necessary predictability as well as the opportunity to interact with peers and competent adults (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Masten and Narayan, 2012). Schools therefore have possibilities for supporting positive integration, and teachers and mentors can facilitate this process (Luthar, 2015). Schools may be particularly important for refugee children and youth, because a sense of belonging in school can affect positive integration and well-being (Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007).

School contexts can provide relationships outside the family context, which can be particularly important for vulnerable children. Although early attachment relationships shape the lens through which children view later relationships (e.g. Ainsworth and Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1977; Bretherton, 1992; Fonagy, 2001) peer groups, friendships, teachers and mentors can ameliorate negative effects of early experiences (Luthar, 2015). School based peer support and friendships

may be particularly important in situations where refugee children's families are unable to provide sufficient emotional support and effective parenting (Luthar, 2015).

Adapting to the school context in the asylum-country may pose difficulties for refugee children due to language challenges, social barriers, and challenges arising from gaps in education (Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007). Berthold (2000) has argued that schools contexts are of importance for both prevention and intervention for refugee children, and draws attention to refugee children and youth who may be suffering in silence, as silence is typically valued and rewarded by teachers, thereby leaving potential distress unnoticed. Whilst schools can provide a context where friendships can develop, schools can also be a place of discrimination, victimisation or bullying. As such, schools can either alleviate or intensify risk factors for refugee children (Masten, 2014).

In addition to the psychological risks and social stressors that refugees face, they may also be negatively affected by the way in which they are portrayed in policy and public discourses in asylum-countries (Esses and Medianu, 2013; Greenslade, 2005; Shakya et al., 2014). For instance, when being described as helpless victims, passive burdens, unable to contribute to society, or draining the asylum-country financially (Shakya et al., 2014), these perspectives are likely to influence integration and well-being.

As the sections above highlight, refugee children are vulnerable because they may be affected by their own adverse experiences as well as those of their parents (Dalgaard et al., 2016). Refugee children are affected by conditions in all of the systems outlined by Bronfenbrenner, from their core environment and interactions with parents (*Microsystems*), roles and responsibilities related to bridging the home and school context, such as interpreting for parents and teachers (*Mesosystem*), the effect of parental trauma (*Exosystem*), political decisions (*Macrosystems*), and last but by no means least, external factors such as war and political conflicts, leading to the major life transition of having to flee their of origin (*Chronosystem*), (Betancourt and Khan, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

1.1. Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the needs and experiences of refugee children as they adjust and integrate into the asylum-country. Such an examination is vital, in order to facilitate their positive development and to increase their chances of well-being and future opportunities. Bronfenbrenner's framework provides a theoretical perspective that acknowledges the various different contexts that affect development – as well as an understanding of the different levels at which prevention and intervention can take place.

It is hoped that findings from the present study can inspire further research in this area and thereby inform intervention strategies for refugee children, and that educators and practitioners, who work with these children, can benefit from them.

1.2. Ethical considerations

Researchers, educators and policy makers in Western and European societies are likely to have very different backgrounds compared to refugees, which may affect the way in which views are expressed, explained, perceived and understood (Pain, Kanagaratnam, and Payne, 2014). Through the qualitative method and open-ended questions in the present study, we aimed to avoid preconceptions. As individuals with a refugee history may have experienced events and situations where their voices and opinions were not respected or valued, making an effort to avoid imposing further harm (Masten and Narayan, 2012) was deemed to be critical. De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren (2010) have argued that research participation may in some cases reactivate feeling of distress or disempowerment in refugee individuals. The present study did not examine trauma or symptoms, but instead, aimed to