



The mediational role of schools in supporting psychosocial transitions among unaccompanied young refugees upon resettlement in Norway



Lutine de Wal Pastoor*

The Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, Oslo, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Refugee students
Educational policy
Mental health
Psychosocial transitions
Mediation theory
Norway

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of schools in supporting unaccompanied young refugees in critical psychosocial transitions concerning processes of socialisation, integration and rehabilitation upon resettlement. Drawing from a qualitative research project based on interviews with students and staff conducted during fieldwork in five secondary schools in Norway, the findings suggest that the psychosocial support provided by schools is random and lacks a concerted effort among relevant professionals. Making schools refugee-competent calls for more comprehensive representations of refugee students and teachers, enhanced collaboration concerning psychosocial support as well as school-based interventions as an integral part of educational policy and practice.

© 2014 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

1. Introduction

If I should write a book about my life, it will have to be called 'Sad'... It cannot be just one book; it may be ten, twenty, there is so much to tell (Faiz, unaccompanied young refugee).

The above was stated by Faiz, a young Afghan refugee, who came to Norway as an unaccompanied refugee minor. Only 16 years old, Faiz started all alone on a seven-month long journey from Afghanistan to Norway – a journey under extremely harsh conditions. Four years later, traumatic memories of what happened before and during his flight still haunt him and cause anxiety, sleeping difficulties as well as concentration problems in school.

The term 'unaccompanied refugee minors' refers to refugee children and young people under the age of 18 who arrive in Norway unaccompanied by parents or other persons with parental responsibility (UDI, 2012). In the past decade, approximately 9000 unaccompanied minors¹ have arrived in Norway to seek asylum on their own (UDI, 2013). If the asylum application is approved, asylum seeking minors obtain refugee status, are granted residence and will be resettled in a Norwegian municipality.

Unaccompanied minors mostly left their home country due to serious threats to their own or their family's life and security, generally as a result of armed conflict and/or political, ethnic or religious persecution. The majority has experienced life threatening events and physical abuse prior to and during their flight, and suffers from the loss of parents, family and friends (Jakobsen et al., 2014). Due to being minors, along with being separated from their parents in an often extremely demanding life situation, unaccompanied refugee minors are considered to be a particularly vulnerable group of refugees in need of special protection and support (Fazel et al., 2012; Halvorsen, 2002; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009; UNHCR, 1994).

International studies of refugee children and young people in exile indicate a high number of emotional and behavioural difficulties, primarily related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleeping problems, anxiety and depression (Fazel et al., 2012; Huemer et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2004; Vervliet et al., 2013). Furthermore, the prevalence of mental health problems is much higher among unaccompanied refugee minors than among refugee children who arrive with their family (Bean et al., 2007; Derluyn et al., 2008; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009).

Without parental support, unaccompanied young refugees have to meet a number of psychosocial challenges associated with separation and loss as well as requirements of relocation and integration into a new society. Moreover, the developmental challenges of adolescence become more complex due to the traumatic nature of the refugee experience and the exile-related stressors faced upon resettlement (Berman, 2001; Vervliet et al., 2013). The developmental and psychosocial transitions unaccompanied adolescents experience not only bring about mental growth

* The Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS), PO Box 181 Nydalen, N-0409 Oslo, Norway. Tel.: +47 45 29 99 90.

E-mail address: lutine.pastoor@nkvtst.unirand.no

¹ Through the article, the terms 'minors', 'children' and 'young people' will be used interchangeably in relation to unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees under 18 years of age on arrival in Norway.

and psychosocial adjustment but also increased vulnerability and risk for maladjustment (Niesel and Griebel, 2005).

Although they may be vulnerable at times, young refugees who manage to come to a country of refuge on their own, despite adversity and harsh conditions during the flight, are resourceful young people exercising agency (Deveci, 2012; Eide and Hjern, 2013; Watters, 2008). Adequate education and care during the initial years of resettlement, along with their commitment to succeed, appear to be decisive factors in young refugees' mental health and long-term adjustment (Eide and Hjern, 2013; Kohli and Mather, 2003; Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009; Montgomery, 2011). A subject of increasing interest is how host countries' educational systems may support refugee children's sociocultural adaptation as well as inclusion in their new school environment (Hamilton and Moore, 2004).

Despite the fact that several studies document mental health problems in refugee young people (Bean et al., 2007; Fazel et al., 2012; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2004; Vervliet et al., 2013) little is known about the psychosocial issues encountered upon resettlement and what they mean with regard to young refugees' functioning in everyday life in general and school in particular. Gaining a further *contextual* understanding of unaccompanied young refugees' psychosocial challenges, school experiences and needs is of utmost importance for developing adequate support (Groark et al., 2011; Lustig et al., 2004; Ungar and Teram, 2005). However, there are only a limited number of international studies on this subject, and only few address refugee students' psychological and social adjustment upon resettlement. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007), examining the school experiences of Somali adolescents resettled in the United States, claim that psychosocial adjustment, belonging and connection to school has not been investigated before among resettled refugees. There is thus a great need for more comprehensive knowledge concerning young refugees' school experiences as well as their psychosocial needs during resettlement.

The present study seeks to contribute to bridging the existing knowledge gap by interviewing educators as well as unaccompanied young refugees themselves regarding psychosocial issues impacting school functioning. The main objective of this article is to explore and call attention to the mediational role that schools may play in supporting the psychosocial challenges unaccompanied young refugees face upon resettlement. Based on sociocultural and ecological developmental approaches as well as on empirical data from a Norwegian research project, the article will discuss how schools may enhance psychosocial adaptation and well-being in resettled young refugees.

2. Unaccompanied refugee minors: from uprooting to resettlement

From the late nineties onwards, the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Norway has steadily increased. In 1996, less than 100 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum, whereas in 2013 1070 unaccompanied asylum seeking minors arrived (UDI, 2013).

The majority, about 80%, of the unaccompanied minors arriving in Norway are male. Most of them are between 15 and 17 years of age; only about 10% are under 15 years old on arrival. In 2012, the largest number came from Afghanistan, followed by Somalia and Eritrea; in 2013, Afghanistan and Somalia swapped places in the ranking (UDI, 2013).

The unaccompanied refugee minors who have been granted residence in Norway often originate from countries where their schooling has either been disrupted or where access to formal schooling has been difficult. Most young refugees show high motivation to attend school as they consider education a decisive

means to a better future. However, the unaccompanied young refugees not only have salient educational needs, they also require psychosocial support in connection with the various challenges faced upon resettlement.

2.1. The Norwegian school context for young refugees over 16 years old

The ten-year compulsory school in Norway comprises two main stages: primary school (grades 1–7) and lower secondary school (grades 8–10). General upper secondary education lasts three years, though vocational study programmes involving apprenticeship last four years.

While access to education for asylum seeking children of compulsory school age (6–16 years) is enshrined in the *Education Act (1998)*, asylum-seekers aged 16–18 years do not have the same rights and access to education. Adequate schooling for this age group is often ignored during the asylum process (Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009).

As soon as refugee minors over 16 years old obtain a residence permit, they have a right to further education. However, students above compulsory school age who have not completed Norwegian compulsory schooling or its equivalent first need to follow a 'condensed' compulsory school programme, equivalent of lower secondary school (1–3 years), under the auspices of Adult Education.² This educational provision was initially organised to offer adults who had dropped out of compulsory school a second chance to complete their schooling, but nowadays most students are minority young people (Dæhlen et al., 2013).

Minority students in general and male students from non-Western backgrounds in particular, have a high dropout rate, i.e. 60%, when they first enter Norwegian upper secondary education; especially in vocational training the dropout rate is very high (Pastoor, 2013; SSB, 2014). The causes of school dropout among language minority students may include educational, socioeconomic and cultural factors. However, regarding young refugees, the challenges concerning mental health and well-being may also have an impact.

It may seem paradoxical that even though most refugee students show high motivation, the majority fails to complete upper secondary education. Consequently, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of why this happens and how young refugees can be supported to reach their full potential in school.

3. Psychosocial well-being and psychosocial transitions

During resettlement, unaccompanied young refugees' psychosocial well-being is affected by the close interplay between the psychological aspects of past and present experiences as well as the relationship with their new social environment. It is important to recognise that resettlement implies more than a change of places, it also involves *transitions*. Changes are situational, for instance moving to a new country and may happen from one day to the next. Transitions, on the other hand, are characterised by psychological and developmental processes that take time:

A change occurs when something in the external environment is altered. These changes trigger an internal psychological reorientation process in those who are expected to carry out or respond to the change. Transition is this internal process that people must go through in order to come to terms with a new situation. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. (Bridges, 2009, p. 3)

² Adult education, i.e., education and training organised especially for adults, is regulated by § 4A of the *Education Act (1998)*.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6841276>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6841276>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)