SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN REFUGEE STUDENTS DURING LESSONS: OPTIONS FOR CONCEPT-BASED STRATEGIES

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In the classroom, newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers have to deal with many stressors that challenge mental functioning and educational success. As they have a variety of potential protective factors, educational staff can take these factors into consideration in their everyday work to help foster resilience.

Because systematically transferring resilience research into practice still poses a challenge, the aim is to outline a scientific conceptual basis for resilience building in newly immigrated children, youth, and young adults that is applicable in educational environments. To illustrate the topic, the focus is on the example of Germany, but given insights are just as relevant for other receiving countries (e.g. Canada).

The paper is guided by the conceptual work of Gill Windle and derives resilience strategies for immigrated students, while findings in the context of resilience, education, and immigration are integrated.

Results show that resilience-building strategies for refugee students should focus on both stress reduction and resource enhancement. Language acts as a risk, a protector, and a mediator in the classroom.

En salle de cours, les réfugiés et les demandeurs d'asile nouvellement arrivés doivent faire face à de nombreux facteurs de stress qui mettent à mal leur fonctionnement mental et leur réussite scolaire. Comme ils disposent de divers facteurs de protection potentiels, le personnel éducatif peut prendre ces facteurs en considération dans son travail quotidien pour favoriser la résilience.

Étant donné le défi posé par le déploiement systématique de la recherche sur la résilience dans la pratique, notre objectif est de définir une base conceptuelle scientifique pour le développement de la résilience chez les enfants, les jeunes et les jeunes adultes nouvellement immigrés, qui soit applicable dans les environnements éducatifs. Pour illustrer le thème, l'accent est mis sur l'exemple de l'Allemagne, mais les idées avancées sont tout aussi pertinentes pour d'autres pays d'accueil (par exemple, le Canada).

Le rapport s'appuie sur le travail conceptuel de Gill Windle et propose des stratégies de résilience pour les étudiants immigrés, tout en intégrant les résultats obtenus dans le contexte de la résilience, de l'éducation et de l'immigration. Les résultats montrent que les stratégies de renforcement de la résilience pour les élèves réfugiés devraient se concentrer à la fois sur la réduction du stress et sur l'amélioration des ressources. La langue joue un rôle de risque, de protecteur et de médiateur dans la classe.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR reported a constant increase of migration on a global level in almost all areas and published the following figures: there are currently 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers. Children under the age of 18 constituted about half of the refugee population (UNHCR 2018, 2-3).

In Germany, the refugee population continued to increase, reaching 1,063,800 at the end of the year in 2018. More than half came from Syria (532,100), while other countries of origin included Iraq (136,500) and Afghanistan (126,000) (UNHCR 2018, 18). The immigration occurs not only directly, but also via resettlement. In 2016-17 Germany participated in an EU-wide resettlement program, whereby a total of 1,600 people were accepted by the Federal Republic. For the years 2018-19, the country has announced the admission of a total of 10,200 refugees as part of another EU resettlement program (UNHCR Deutschland 2019).

One of the goals of the German policy is to integrate newly immigrated children, youth, and young adults into the education system. At first, refugees and asylum seekers often attend separate preparatory classes, where they learn the language and content. Following this, they should start, step by step to take part in regular lessons. In some federal states, refugee students attend regular classes from day one and receive additional German lessons, for example in Saarland or Mecklenburg (Massumi et al. 2015, 6-7).

However, refugees and asylum seekers have to deal with many stressors – even within classroom contexts. They depict a high-risk group for mental health impairment, in particular because of prior critical life situations and the current strain caused by the integration processes (Metzner and Mogk 2016). Stress and psychic strain are not just related to mental dysfunction, but also can introduce educational problems. Educational surveys have repeatedly demonstrated that academic performance of immigrant students was lower in almost all participating countries when compared to non-immigrant students (OECD 2007, 2011). Stermac et al. (2010) show there are no differences in the basic learning ability of young people (15 years old) with very stressful and traumatic migratory experiences and others. But in the light of the number of huge challenges they are confronted with, immigrated students are also an at-risk group for educational failings (Beelmann et al. 2018, 208).

Based on these findings, implementing approaches to help refugee students realize mental resilience despite stress and integrating such approaches into educational contexts where academic performance is being promoted can be considered highly relevant. Systematically transferring resilience research into practice is still lacking (Höfler 2018), and as of now, there has been no focus on research-based resilience promoting strategies for the classroom, particularly in regard to refugees and asylum seekers. This paper suggests a scientific conceptual basis for resilience approaches in newly arrived immigrants, which is applicable in educational environments. The concept of resilience is first outlined in the work of Windle (2011) from which strategies of resilience promotion are derived. Following that, options of classroom-based resilience approaches are illustrated.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATION OF RESILIENCE AND RESILIENCE PROMOTION

In resilience research, resilience is defined as the individual's ability to cope even with massive risks and stressors so that the mental functioning and life success is not negatively affected, at least not in the long term (Fingerle 2009, 204). The field of study regarding resilience is extremely heterogeneous. If resilience is to be positioned as a concept, it requires a theoretical foundation containing basic conceptual features that are common to the various forms of operationalization. Based on 271 resilience studies, the analysis of Windle (2011) found three defining characteristics of resilience:

1. An encounter with risk (i.e. significant stressor);
2. The process of functional adaptive responses to risk, enabled by protective factors; and
3. A positive outcome.

The outcome can thus refer to both health and competence (such as school performance), depending on the specific definition of resilience (Höfler, 2016a, p. 46). However, as addressed above, these outcomes are related to each other.

The core focus of the concept of resilience is the individual's capacity to adapt. – This is on the one hand threatened by risk constellations, but on the other hand, these threats can be prevented, mitigated or offset by protective factors. As such, two key approaches exist for resilience promotion:

- Risk-centered approaches which work to prevent or to reduce threats;
- Resource-centered approaches which strengthen protective factors.

The previous comparative research on preventive pathogenic and protective salutogenic principles of action suggests that these do not typically follow the same inherent logic. Thus, in resilience research, there is a consensus that protective factors are not the opposite of risk factors per se (see discussion in Höfler 2014, 4). If, for instance, an individual avoids the risks caused by experiencing political violence, this does

not necessarily imply a protective effect on psychological processes that can mitigate existing or future risk effects. However, despite the conceptual ideal-typical distinction, both courses of action can, of course, interact, react with one another, and merge. In practice they cannot be regarded as entirely separate from each other (Altgeld and Kolip 2009, 42).

RESILIENCE PROMOTION IN REFUGEE STUDENTS DURING LESSONS

RISK-CENTERED STRATEGIES: STRESS REDUCTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Because of their history, most refugees and asylum seekers attend classes with an increased level of stress. In the past, they often experienced life-threatening circumstances before and during escape and migration which may carry long-lasting effects. Experiences can include war, torture, loss of or separation from parents, life-threatening escape routes, physical or mental abuse by human-traffickers, and imprisonment. Postmigration stressors may include, for example, difficult housing situations, unresolved asylum status, financial problems, and discrimination (Metzner and Mogk 2016). Because resilience is more likely at a lower risk level (Höfler 2016b, 115), approaches that reduce emotional stress in the classroom are highly relevant. Educational staff are able to create lessons that provide a degree of emotional security, controllability and stabilization, which result from constant external conditions and continuously recurring processes that are based on solid structures, well-regulated procedures, routines, and rituals. Classroom seating arrangements, welcome rituals, rhythmic clocking of the school day with concentrated lesson phases and relaxing breaks, as well as clear responsibilities and roles, for example, can reduce emotional stress and support feelings of security (MBK Saarland 2017, 8).

Along with the desire to avoid social exclusion, discrimination, and educational failure, refugee students are also under pressure to quickly learn a new language. As a lack of language competencies is interpreted as a significant acculturation stressor (Beelmann et al. 2018, 207), strategies that counteract this may depict a risk-centered resilience approach. In order to prevent language barriers in the classroom, creative techniques could be helpful. Creative performance and artistic activities, for instance in the fine arts, reveal non-linguistic possibilities of expression (MBK Saarland 2017, 9). Furthermore, when aiming at language development, a content and language integrated didactic (e.g. Leisen 2017) could reduce stress by developing language skills parenthetically and combined with content learning rather than as separate additional task, which could be overtaxing.

Basically, no matter what kind of actions are implemented, a culturally sensitive teaching practice is important (Gogolin et al. 2018) since it reduces prejudices and fears and builds up familiarity. However, as teachers are not free from prejudices, emotional stressors and risks for educational success can also be introduced by teachers themselves. Schofield (2006) identifies the influence of negative stereotypes and expectation effects of teachers on the school performance of migrants (Beelmann et al. 2018, 208). To reduce such threats to students' resilience, the provision of adequate teacher education in addition to the implementation of school structures that provide possibilities for information exchange among colleagues and student supervision are important.

RESOURCE-CENTERED STRATEGIES: FOSTERING PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN STUDENTS

Approaches for increasing resources of refugees and asylum seekers in the context of school (e.g. Bistritzky 2013, Siebert and Pollheimer-Pühringer 2016) such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, problem-solving skills or social support already exist. These resources can cover factors or substructures of factors that have been confirmed as resilience-enhancing in resilience research. Self-efficacy, for instance, which refers to the expectation of a person to be able to successfully perform desired actions based on their own skills, has been often validated as resilience factor in different age groups and settings (Cassidy 2015, Werner and Smith 1992, 2001). Because it can be fostered through successfully fulfilling requirements and duties, educational staff can encourage self-efficacy in students by purposefully transferring responsibility to them. Teachers may incorporate students into small tasks and services such as maintaining the attendance list, taking food orders or the floral service in the classroom, to promote the development of a healthy self-image (MBK Saarland 2017, 9). Dealing with challenging but, in principle, manageable learning tasks is also conducive. The growth of self-efficacy can cause other protective resources, for instance, increased self-esteem. In addition, resilience studies found self-efficacy may contribute to increased social support (Werner and Smith 1992, 245).

Social support is also a prominent factor in resilience research and shows resilience promoting effects in a wide range of target groups (Horton and Wallander 2001, Werner and Smith 1992, 2001). A survey of 214 adolescents (16-21 years old) in 34 welcome classes at vocational schools in Hamburg shows that nearly half of the students do not feel they have adequate social support, in particular emotional support (Metzner et al. 2018). As the feeling of belonging to a peer group is important, in school contexts social support can be directly promoted through a frequent and repeated involvement in group activities such as working groups, guided leisure activities, or school trips. Additionally, the creation of strong relationships with educational staff is necessary. Next to class teachers, trust teachers or school godparents can play a decisive role (MBK Saarland 2017, 9) because they are able to seek specific individual contact and, in this way, act as personal contact persons who provide emotional support and practical help.

Language barriers are a risk for healthy adaptation and educational success. Conversely, language skills are also a potential protective factor for resilience. Numerous studies have found a clear connection between the linguistic competences in the language of the host society and the psychological and socio-cultural acculturation quality (see discussion in Beelmann et al. 2018, 208). Besides the fact that language is a decisive tool for social participation and integration, language skills activate additional resources, – access to knowledge, for instance. Furthermore, language serves as a symbol system to express thoughts and feelings (Beelmann et al. 2018, 207), which is central in coping with stress. Long-term studies are needed to answer the question of to what extent language proficiency restricts other acculturation stressors (next to language barriers) in the sense of protective processes, allowing for normal development (Beelmann et al. 2018, 217). Even though in current practice newly immigrated students often receive language support, it is important to see this approach as a possible method to enhance resilience. That also means that access to language learning is important for mental health. The way teachers communicate in the classroom thereby acts as a mediator in students' resilience. Using a language style that is more resource-intensive rather than stress-inducing and deficit-oriented promotes positive outcomes in students.

CONCLUSION

Participating in education has enormous importance for refugee and asylum-seeking students. School could be seen as a first link to German society that helps to restore stability and normality (Bistritzky 2013). Educational staff is able to reduce stress within the lessons, foster language competence, as well as provide psychological resources and social support. Thereby, staff can contribute to students' educational success and resilience, which is not only relevant in Germany, but in receiving countries such as Canada and many others.

Taking into account the different individual needs of students, sufficient knowledge and competence are required on the teachers' side. However, teachers often have a lack of information regarding students' residence status, countries of origin, family situation, health problems, and special educational needs. Furthermore, research shows that they often feel they are not adequately prepared to cope with the emotional stress they experience in educating refugee students (Bistritzky 2013, 50). Hence, teacher support, for example through school psychologists or school medical services, and suitable teacher training is indispensable, as are adequate structural conditions such as sufficient teacher jobs and timely information transfer. However, as school cannot replace psychotherapy, one has to pay attention to the professional limits of the educational staff (MBK Saarland 2017, 11).

Finally, there are a wide range of risks and resources that could influence the resilience of newly immigrated students and reveal starting points for risk-centered and resource-centered strategies. Such approaches also can be health-promoting for the regular student population. The challenge for resilience research is the systematic and differentiated determination of when resilience is actually promoted and when it is not. Although primary studies often confirm protective factors for peoples' resilience, protective effects may depend on age, gender, cultural background, risk situation, risk level, and resilience outcomes such as specific health or competence indicators (Höfler 2016a, 54-59). Because of this, aside from primary research studies that focus on the theme of this paper, there is an urgent need for systematic reviews that evaluate and summarize research results in reference to subgroups of newly immigrated students in various educational contexts, in preparatory courses and regular classes, for example.

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