CULTIVATING EMPATHY FOR SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN ON BEHALF OF TURKISH CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to design and implement an activity that would cultivate empathy in 20 classroom teachers living in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay and Ankara who are currently teaching refugee students in their classroom. Based on the multicultural education perspective, students from different backgrounds both enrich the learning environment and necessitate teachers to integrate the cultural and subjective experiences of the students into their teaching practices. Recently, refugee population in Turkey has been gradually increasing and more refugee students take part in the Turkish education system. Most of those students had challenging and difficult life experiences, most of which have the potential to have adverse effects on educational outcomes. To arouse empathy for the children students with such experiences, 8 real-life scenarios were presented to the teachers and they were asked to reflect on the psychological world of the students in each scenario. Moreover, the teachers were requested to elaborate on their roles in facilitating the educational environment and development of those children. The evaluations and feedbacks of the teachers indicated that they made a valuable connection with the inner worlds of those children, who are their actual students in real life as well.

Keywords: Refugee students, multicultural education, inclusive education, professional development of teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

The refugee crisis is one of the most crucial global political and social issues of the world. Turkey hosts the highest number of child refugees in the world. [1] Starting from 2011, the number of school-aged Syrian children rapidly increased to around one million, marking a sudden shift in child demographics in the country. [2] This fact brings the necessity and responsibility of creating an appropriate learning environment for all these school-aged refugee children.

When refugee students came to a host country, they face with a variety of challenges including learning a new language, changes in socioeconomic conditions, conflicts in cultural values, and discrimination. While teachers in multicultural classrooms cope with these challenges, they should also provide a learning environment that fosters the academic achievement of all students, particularly the refugee students. Since refugee children have a wide range of life experiences, these may have an effect on their learning process. One enduring challenge is about how teachers handle refugee students with difficult experiences including war, loss, cultural and language barriers in their classrooms. Therefore, understanding the students’ way of thinking and feeling is essential. In order to understand the students’ way of seeing the world, it is crucial that the teachers need to gain awareness about their own worldviews, which in turn, they will be effective teachers with diverse students. [3] According to Sue and Sue [4], understanding beliefs of one’s own culture and understanding the worldview of others are some of the important multicultural competencies. These competencies should be achieved through both learning of theoretical background, exploring one’s himself/herself as well as experiential learning [5]. It is imperative that teachers critically need professional development training about multiculturalism and diversity issues to develop a multicultural climate in the schools.

In this context, we are studying teacher knowledge sharing rounds as a component of a 2-year exploratory project, “Project MIGRA-MATH: Supporting Teachers of Immigrant Students with Respect to Their Mathematics Education Professional Practices” focused on developing a support mechanism for young refugee children, their families, and teachers in four different cities of Turkey. The aim of this study is to arouse empathy on behalf of classroom teachers about traumatic and life challenging experiences of Syrian refugee students. Empathic understanding as a disposition is closely related to increased intercultural sensitivity and can be observed in establishing positive relationships with students [6]. Empathy fosters being open and flexible and these characteristics help teachers to adjust to diverse classrooms [7]. In sum, teachers who have empathic understanding are probably better to
develop curricula according to their students' needs [8]. In a study, it was found that teachers' empathetic disposition led to more positive interactions with their students, supportive classroom climates, and student-centered pedagogy [8].

2 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method was used as the main research strategy of the current study. In specific, content analysis was chosen to analyze the views and expressions of the participants by using therapeutic picture cards as a projective technique to generate feelings and thoughts. The sample of the study consisted of 20 classroom teachers living in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay, and Ankara being among the cities of Turkey hosting the highest refugee population, especially from Syria and Iraq. Those teachers were purposefully selected because of the fact that they had several refugee students in their classes for years. As the aim of this study was to arouse empathy on behalf of classroom teachers about traumatic and life challenging experiences of Syrian refugee students, eight real-life scenarios were presented to participants along with this purpose. All of the scenarios were obtained in person from the parents and family members of refugee children during the fieldworks. The participant teachers of this study have been teaching those children in the scenarios. But, the names of the children were hidden due to the ethical responsibilities like confidentiality. Some of the scenarios were as follows: (1) Think of a six-year-old boy escaping from the war in Syria with his family. It took 40 days to arrive Turkey from Syria. Along the escape, he had to stay with his 20 family members and relatives in 20 to 30 square rooms for most of the days, (2) think of an 8-year-old boy who had been physically abused and had witnessed the physical abuse of his school friends by teachers at Syria several times. Both the parents and students normalized physical abuse as a natural way of relating and as a part of school culture. This year in Turkey was his first school year and he had not experienced any kind of physical abuse neither to him nor to his friends, (3) Think of a family trying to hide while moving from Syria to Turkey illegally. They dug trenches in different locations to spend the nights. In one of the digging times, a 6-year-old girl of the family disappeared all of a sudden and for 6 hours. The military forces found the girl and brought her back to the family. Five more and similar scenarios were included as well. The participants were required to think of those scenarios by focusing only the feelings, thoughts, behaviors of the children in the scenarios and the possible current and future emotional, social, and psychological transferences and impacts in classroom settings of those experiences. They were also asked to elaborate on solutions and actions that they might practice as the teacher of those children. Therapeutic picture cards as a projective method were used as a tool to stimulate and evoke more association regarding the parts that the researchers requested from participants to focus. In those metaphoric cards (see https://oh-cards.com/ and http://oh-cards-institute.org/) cards, there were several images and symbols that induce creativity and communication among group members.

To begin with the procedure, firstly, the instruction of the activity was explained to the participants. They were divided into groups and 2 scenarios were assigned to each group. Four to five members were randomly delivered to each group but gender equality could not be guaranteed in terms of number because of the inadequacy of female participants in the study. However, in each group, at least one woman took part. Then, paperboards and pencils were given to each groups. For 15 to 20 minutes, group members were told to discuss with each other the scenarios assigned to them in the context of the themes mentioned above. And then, they as groups one by one were invited to look at and choose relevant therapeutic picture cards which mirror the unique experiences of the student in the relevant scenario and from the perspective of the teacher. This part roughly took 20 to 25 minutes in total. Later on, they worked as a group and formed a collage on a large piece of paper by using therapeutic cards. They discussed why they chose those specific cards and what feelings and thoughts they refer to. Lastly, the teachers were expected to reflect on how they can contribute to these students' psychological wellbeing and make a difference in his/her educational setting. In the last part, one of the group members from each group presented their collage to the whole group and shared their opinions regarding the welfare of the students in educational setting. A collage sample of one of the groups can be seen below. Under the picture cards, group members jointly commented on the associations of the images with the subjective experiences of the students in the scenarios.
3 RESULTS

Our content analysis revealed that each teacher was impressed by the experiences of the students and reflected on the contribution of the activity in terms of understanding the inner worlds of them. They reported that they could not have imagined the stories in the scenarios, all of which had actually happened to their students. The researchers also observed the effect of the activity on facilitating empathy in teachers towards refugee students. The therapeutic picture cards drew very much attention of the teachers in the sense that they were found very colorful and enjoyable. Moreover, the participants said that the use of cards in such an activity stimulated the interaction among group members and provoked many associations regarding the subjective experiences of the children in the scenarios.

Several themes emerged both from the collages and discourses of the teachers. Mainly, the teachers focused on the feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, despair, hopelessness and loneliness that the children in the scenarios might have experienced as a result of the challenging life situations. Moreover, they acknowledged the possible adverse consequences of those life experiences on the social, emotional, psychological and academic development of their students. The projections of the experiences on the classroom setting including academic self-efficacy, friendship relationships, adaptation to school culture, parent-teacher relationships, teacher-student connection were clearly and meticulously depicted by the teacher participants. Along with those depictions, the teachers came up with several creative and inclusive solutions to minimize the effect of challenging life experiences of refugee children in their classrooms.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The dramatic increase in the refugee student population urgently necessitates original practices and implementations to ameliorate the educational environment of the refugee students in Turkey. Empowering teachers in terms of inclusive education, this study can be evaluated as a good practice to cultivate empathy on behalf of Turkish classroom teachers towards refugee children who had various
challenging and difficult life experiences. School counselors may utilize this activity to raise awareness in classroom teachers who are teaching refugee students.

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