

Living with and learning from refugees

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1. Introduction

Learning how to live together with refugees is one of the crucial challenges in Europe. Research has been done with students in the context of a research-oriented seminar in religious education.

- **Time:** academic year **2016-2017**
- **Research focus:**
 - How do schools organize their life with refugees?
 - What are the challenges and obstacles of the daily routine as well as chances and new perspectives?

2. Methods

- Analysis of students' **subjective theories** regarding refugees.
- **Interviews** with 5 teachers for religious education (3 roman-catholic, 2 islamic) about their experiences with young refugees in school (grammar & vocational schools), following a questionnaire.
- **Group discussion** with 4 teachers conducted by the author and her colleague.

3. Results

3.1. Subjective theories

Students concluded: "To deal with your subjective theories ... makes you **sensitive** against opinions of others."
... gives you more awareness for **institutional and structural aspects**."
... gives you an understanding of the **effects** of your own **words**."
... is necessary for the preparation of **prejudiced themes** in school."

3.2. Language and communication

- All teachers stress the **importance of learning German** for the refugee pupils (parallel to predominantly public discourses).
- **Communication entails more** than understanding language:
 - It decides whether participation, recognition or a sense of belonging may be developed.
 - It does not happen on its own but needs mediation by a teacher especially in case of communication between girls and boys:

"When we said: 'Okay, we will kick a soccer ball back and forth and whoever gets the ball is allowed to ask a question!', then they asked a lot of questions. But without mediation ... so they would enter into contact unprovoked ... it was rather difficult among boys and girls."(GD F.: 741-747)

3.3. Cohabitation and resentments

- **Personal encounter** is important: refugees are no longer figures but concrete human beings.
- An **increased communication** among refugees and the indigenous student population supports the feeling of "welcome".
- The possibility of speaking with Muslim teachers in their **mother tongue is a relieving aspect**.
- **Muslim teachers act as mediators** between parents and teachers: translating letters, invitations & teaching material.
- Teachers with **migratory experiences** get **acknowledged** by their colleagues.

3.4. Religion

- Is perceived as an **ambivalent factor** by refugees: freedom from religion and its oppression & an essential factor of one's identity.
- Islamic teachers stress the importance to discuss terrorism, violence and hatred against Jewish and Christian people as an **inappropriate Islamic behaviour**.
- Christian teachers emphasize religion as a **private matter**.
- **Solidarity** is considered as a shared value between Islam, Christian religion and secular society.

4. Conclusion

- Helping people needs awareness regarding **subjective theories**.
- (Religious) Teachers, who work with young refugees need:
 - support in reflecting the **diverse meaning of religion** in the life of refugees.
 - competence in **interreligious dialogue**.
 - **mental health support** when they act as bridge-builders, especially Islamic teachers – without forcing them being constant translators in a linguistic or cultural sense.
 - to build up knowledge about the dynamic **nature of trauma**.

To engage in inclusive work with young refugees is not an one-way street. It may offer new insights:

"Well, I'd say that refugees have indeed engaged in school development, because we [teachers] got in contact with teachers of other subjects, which we otherwise wouldn't have done, and made new friendship. [...] Insofar it was also a gift." (GD F.: 452-457)

Reference: Lehner-Hartmann, Andrea & Pirker, Viera (2017): "Living with and learning from refugees". Schools in Vienna dealing with global challenges, in: Kury, Helmut & Redo, Slawomir (Eds.): The "Refugee Problem" – an Opportunity for Global Civic Education?, Springer (forthcoming).