Needs and challenges identified while unfolding the REFUGE-ED dialogic co-creation process: working with and for refugee children and minors.

REFUGE-ED: Effective practices in education, mental health, and psychosocial support for the integration of refugee children (2021-2023)

REFUGE-ED aims to identify, implement, and evaluate evidence-based practices that can be implemented across diverse educational settings **to promote the educational success as well as mental health and psychosocial functioning** (sometimes collectively termed, mental health and psychosocial support or MHPSS) of refugee and migrant youth.

Our reference to educational settings includes formal educational environments (e.g., conventional schools), non-formal educational contexts (e.g., in the case of youth centres or community groups), as well as to learning which occurs informally (I.e., self-directed learning such as independent research of a topic online). REFUGE-ED commenced with a desk review of effective practices and based on a dialogic co-creative process these practices have now been implemented across approximately 46 sites across Europe. To assess these practices in context, we use widely validated tools focused on academic motivation, well-being, sense of social support, and sense of belonging.

Introduction

The REFUGE-ED project is divided into five phases:

1. The mapping and selection of good evidence-based education and MHPSS solutions with proven evidence of social impact.[1]

2. The development of the REFUGE-ED dialogic co-creation process in which Communities of Practices and Learning (CoP&L) consisting of children, families, local service providers, schools, civil society organisations and policy makers discuss the needs analysis conducted and based on that chose and adapt the best solution for their specific context.

3. The implementation through 46 pilots in sites spread over six countries. There are three main types of pilot sites covering formal, non-formal and informal educational settings.

4. The evaluation of (1) any changes of academic motivation (a key correlate of academic success), well-being, sense of social support, and sense of belonging in pilots and (2) learnings from the process of conducting REFUGE-ED.

5. The development of the Brokering Knowledge Platform, which will make effective academic and MHPSS practices for migrant and refugee youth widely available for implementation across educational settings in Europe (e.g., practice guidelines, resources, as well as information on adapting and co-creating fit-to-context interventions).

Pilot actions

Pilot actions were implemented as part of the REFUGE-ED project in six different countries: Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden.
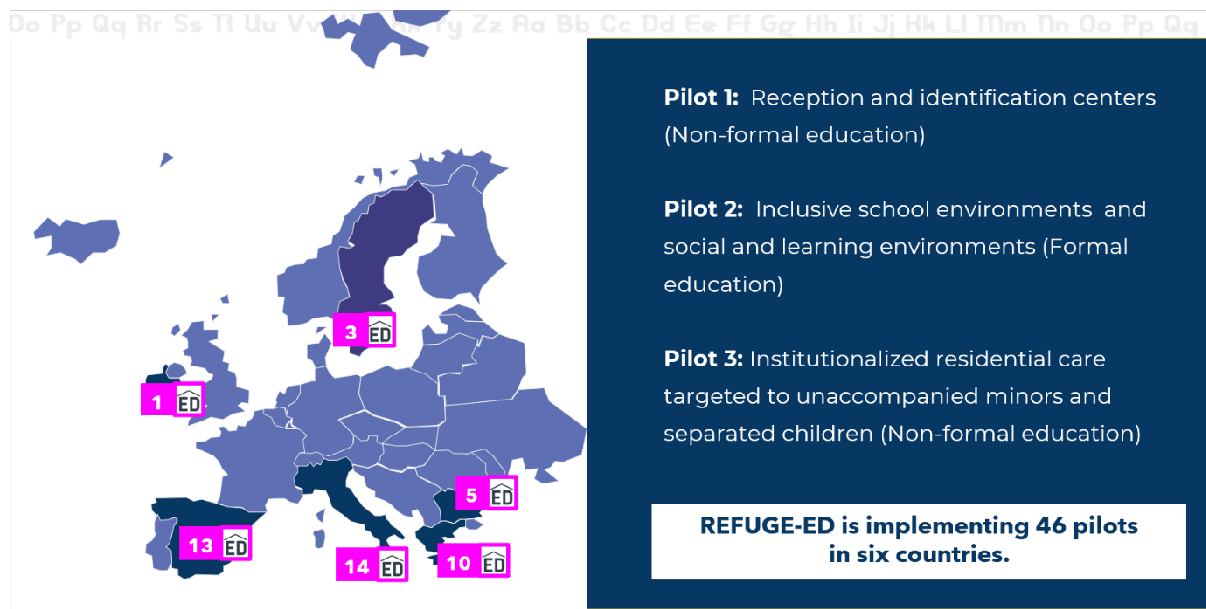

FIGURE 1: REFUGE-ED PILOT SITES AND TYPOLOGY

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[1] Evidence of social impact is the scientifically supported proofs that have been obtained when a given research knowledge has informed policies or actions and these have generated improvements in society in relation to the objectives that enjoy a broad consensus (e.g. SDGs) and/or that have been set by democratically elected people.

Fieldwork conducted in each pilot site

Based on the communicative methodology, the approach to fieldwork was flexible and adaptive across the various pilot sites, depending on each site's individual circumstances. In most centres an informal presentation by members of the REFUGE-ED team to teachers, professionals, and the whole community has also taken place as a starting point. Typically, fieldwork consisted of five communicative life stories with minors and families, five interviews with professionals, minors and families, five interviews with stakeholders such as volunteers, NGOs, public workers, and policymakers, and two focus group discussions with end-users and stakeholders. **The focus of all the data collection and analysis was two-folded: on the one hand to identify main barriers and challenges, and on the other, what where their inputs and views on how to reverse them.**

By May 2022, a total of 818 individuals have participated in the fieldwork across the six implementing countries. Their country of origin included: Italy, Spain. Greece, Bulgaria, Syria Morocco, Afghanistan, Tunisia, Ghana, Bangladesh, Gambia, Iran, Romania, Congo, Albania, Ireland, Guinea, among others.

Evidence and analysis

The data collected have been analysed using a bottom-up approach, meaning that the knowledge has been built looking through the eyes of the interviewed people, summing up their own analysis. In this process, shared mental health and psychosocial support and educational challenges and needs, considering the main guiding thematic issues of the project (academic success, well-being and sense of belonging), have been identified.

Challenges and needs

These challenges and needs have been categorised into three groups: a) the main challenges and needs faced by end-users, b) the main challenges and needs faced at the centre/organization level, and c) the main challenges and needs faced at the stakeholders' level. In what follows we list some of them.

A) STUDENTS, END-USERS, FAMILIES

- Language barrier and language acquisition – There is a need to implement and use a structured approach for improving language capacities and communication.
- Fighting absenteeism and broadening the expectations of students and minors in terms of their aspirations for their own futures.
- Building trust between unaccompanied minors, mainstream society, and public services.
- In the case of refugee children, need to improve communication with their environment, i.e., parents, professionals, educators, teachers, and parental involvement in the school.
- Facilitate training on cultural diversity and incorporating families' cultures into regular school life.
- Promoting social interactions with local communities.
- Providing basic legal information to enhance autonomy.
- It is essential to prevent racism, harassment, bullying and other types of violence and discrimination by promoting safe spaces free of violence.

End-user's narratives in Greece, Ireland and Spain

Ireland: Communications matters

First of all, communication. At the beginning, because that's the hardest process when the children start, and could feel alone. More support and information from the school. For the parents to feel more relaxed about how the process of your son integrating in the school. Communication, meetings.

(Interview, parent).

Greece: Psychological support

Some newly arrived refugee families have shared harsh and traumatic experiences during the daily life stories. Greek schools only have one psychologist and one social worker visiting once a week. Stakeholders clearly stated that one professional does not have enough time on their hands to provide adequate psychological support to refugee students, due to the number of students in each school (both refugee/migrants and locals). This made clearer the fact that extra psychological support needs to be integrated into schools with high refugee numbers. Some of the psychologists that participated in the research also elaborated on their struggles in terms of communicating with migrant/refugee children; the latter's needs are sometimes not covered, due to the absence of an interpreter.

Spain: Promoting social interactions with local communities.

The migration trajectories of the unaccompanied minors who arrive at reception centres are extremely hard. They must travel alone and most of the time without telling anyone in their home country, doing and discovering everything by themselves and dealing with the pressure and pain of all those whom they leave behind. Through the journey and when they finally arrive at the host countries, they find little support for facing cultural and linguistic shock. They develop a tendency to interact according to nationality, often socializing with those who share their nationality based on cultural affinity.

Also, most public and private services where they can attend are specifically addressed to migrant people, so segregated from the rest of the citizens, creating barriers and hierarchies.

As stakeholders from reception centres explain, a key intervention to reverse this could be giving opportunities for them to integrate into the social life of the town and communities. Linkage between the boys in the centre and the life in town, people, associations help to reduce this loneliness and segregation. Educational and ludic spaces should be created, for the exchange and interaction between newly arrived and local communities.

B) CENTRE/ORGANIZATION LEVEL

• There is a high need to enhance communication between all institutions working with target populations and with all stakeholders.

• Introduce the culture of the migrant children to the teachers: there is a lack of cross-cultural educational material; there is a need for training on how to work in multilingual and multicultural classroom, thus, to promote the participation of the community into the centres as volunteers.

• Centres for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and high schools can do much more in terms of education: the training and learning offer (in terms of skills and competences) must be widened and needs to go beyond preparing minors solely to unskilled jobs. This same aspect is related to the expectations of children and minors regarding their future.

• Schools' and centres' leadership matter and is important: there is a need to involve families in the educative community in the whole organization of centres, as well as to promote communal spaces where end-users, professionals, and stakeholders can interact.

• Incorporating professionals of similar cultural and ethnic origin background as part of the centres' staff can be an advantage.

• Promote high expectations among the professionals to guarantee high standards in educational provisions of all children.

The situation in an asylum accommodation camp in Sweden

The main challenge that children face in the centre (asylum accommodation camp) is that the centre is an overcrowded and small living space with bad hygiene conditions particularly during the pandemic of COVID-19.

A 17-year-old child separated from his mother, her being an undocumented refugee in Sweden. The migration agency provided accommodation only for the child not for his mother. The child lives with an adult man in a room in the asylum accommodation camp 'Restad Gård' (name of the camp). He does not feel safe with the adult man and wants to be with his mother, but according to him, the Migration Agency does not listen to him. The child is from Afghanistan and living in Sweden for 5 years but does not have a residence permit. His asylum application has been rejected, but due to recent changes in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over the country, the Migration Agency has stopped deportation and has provided accommodation. Therefore, he has got a place in Restad Gård to live, however his mother did not. The youngster does not have the motivation needed to continue school since he does not know if he has the chance to stay in Sweden or not. In the beginning he says that he had the ambition to learn the language and study economy and business and become a professional in the future but now after years of uncertainty he lost his ambition and feel like he does not have a better future in this country. Due to not having a residence permit, things are very hard going, even at school. In the school system, there are some apps that share about the weekly schedule, free time activities and other documents that keep parents updated. However, to use the app, one needs a social security number (Swedish personnummer) that asylum seekers do not have and therefore, they cannot use those apps and other schools' material. Children also experienced isolation upon arrival to Sweden in an accommodation camp a few kilometres away from the city.

c) Stakeholders/surrounding community/policy makers' level

- Tailored capacity-building for teachers to be able to work in multilingual and multicultural classrooms
- Encourage families and communities' participation in key decision-making processes as a crucial element to develop policies and actions which are relevant for the constituencies.
- Promote actions that have already showed to be effective in promoting academic success,
- Lack of gender perspective in the design and implementation of services
- Addressing language barriers in access to administrative services
- Facilitating legal employment
- Strengthen public support units by incorporating more psychologists and professionals, who can accompany educators in the centres, but also children and minors in relation to MHPSS and include families, when possible.
- Municipality/politicians: understanding that integration and inclusiveness requires mutuality and reciprocity. Creating spaces for migrants and refugees to fully participate in decision making to embrace a more inclusive and mutual notion of integration.

What stakeholders interviewed in Palermo (Italy) explain about the needs at the community/policy-makers level?

The high rate of school drop-out and educational poverty affects children with foreign backgrounds, and locals too. Some students move outside Palermo and disappear. The only work of the school is not enough, there must be a broader support that can follow children from the primary school until the end of the high school, but also their families, to make them understand the importance of school.

There are no spaces where migrants can meet and share their lives together with locals, for this reason network and cooperation among sport and culture associations are essential. "We should think to the well-being of the person from a horizontal point of view and not from a vertical/institutionalized level as it happens now" [IT12_INT6] These spaces can also be an opportunity to develop a proximity relationship with locals, and to avoid of thinking about migrants as people in need of only food and house, but as people in need of everything, especially for children and their growth.

Children born in Italy from families of other origins are without Italian documents, and they cannot attend specific school activities, such as school trips abroad. There is the need to follow up with families about bureaucracy, as often minors do not have a GP (doctor). Moreover, simplified procedures would be needed, as well as having (institutional and school) documents translated in the most spoken languages in the city and explained through multi-languages tutorial. Another relevant aspect observed is the importance of non-formal education programs offered by NGOs and collaborator organizations.

Key learnings and take-aways

Data collected points to (or 'highlights') six underlying aspects of key relevance across all the pilots' sites, and which need to be urgently addressed:

1. High educational expectations for all children, youth and their families.

Since children and minors face difficult transitions between their home and educational settings in foreign countries, language acquisition of the host country is key without being a trade-off of educational opportunities. In this sense, inclusive and rich interactive learning environments are the ones which have showed to be most efficient in equipping children with both, effective language acquisition as well as educational opportunities.

2. Protection against racism, discrimination, and race-related/Islamophobic bullying.

This implies establishing effective practices based in evidences of social impact in centres and schools that reverse situations of inequality and inclusion through the participation of the educational community and the creation of violence-free spaces.

3. Need to include a comprehensive approach to MHPSS and prevention practices.

Include a comprehensive approach to MHPSS in all educational policies. The educational context is the most important setting outside the family for the development of mental health in children and minors. Therefore, the inclusion of the mental health perspective in educational policies will

conduct significant impact on the well-being and development of socioemotional skills that in turn translate into improved educational outcomes.

4. "In transit is our normal reality".

Challenges posed by high temporality and high rotation of both users and of staff poses barriers in terms of planning, implementing, and assessing measured aid at supporting UMA social inclusion. But this must not prevent professionals and aid structures to do their work. Much more can be done if a tailored capacity building for teacher and professionals is ensured. Leadership at the centres' level, matter.

5. Inclusion of the gender perspective in the design and implementation of services.

To this end, it is essential, on the one hand, to understand that gender is related to a sociocultural process regarding the roles expected of each person and, on the other hand, to understand the causes and consequences of gender inequality to overcome it. Including the gender perspective in the design and implementation of services and policies in the educational and mental health fields must be aligned with theories and practices that have been scientifically proven to contribute to overcoming this problem.

6. Promoting dialogic participation of the communities and professionals.

Public sector agencies (especially those with which end-users often come into contact) must ensure that they create safe spaces in which they spend time with children and families to get to know them and their needs as well as to fully recognize their agency involving them in key decision making processes.

About REFUGE-ED

www.refuge-ed.eu

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