

The role of non-formal education in the integration and inclusion of forcibly displaced people in Europe

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Across Europe, national governments are failing to adequately provide for the social and emotional needs of forcibly displaced people. In response, civil society organisations (CSOs) are using non-formal education to address gaps in provision and provide an important source of adult education.

However there remains a need for discourse around how to create and maintain these non-formal educational spaces so as to best support the needs of all involved, as well as overcome the various challenges faced, including a scarcity of resources and the physical and emotional impacts on individuals from local communities.

Based on the Crisis Classroom framework, a methodology developed by Crisis Classroom practitioners and founders Kate McAllister and Darren Abrahams, this article sets out to promote a discourse for creating non-formal educational provisions that facilitates relationship-building, and academic, language and skills-based learning using trauma-informed, experiential-based methods and integrated approaches.

What are the gaps?

In 2015, over one million forcibly displaced people arrived in Europe, and since then hundreds of thousands have continued to arrive.¹ Today, in 2018, there is a significant gap in different states' responses to the humanitarian crisis accompanying these arrivals. Whilst the basic needs of displaced people, such as food and shelter, have often been met, there has been a failure to address their social and emotional needs, and the needs of those working to support them. As established by McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, some common psychological effects of living in chaotic and unhealthy environments are:

- Humiliation and shame
- Fear and distrust
- Instability and insecurity
- Isolation and loneliness
- Being trapped and powerless²

This is reflected in the experience of displaced people in Europe, who commonly find themselves disempowered from key aspects of their lives, caused in part by lack of opportunity, long periods of undirected waiting, trauma and an inability to affect their own futures. As Domenico Lizzi, project manager at Tamat NGO in Italy said, "many have never been told, since they arrived in Europe, that they have a future [here]."

¹ UNHCR (2015) 'A million refugees and migrants flee to Europe in 2015'
<http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2015/12/567918556/million-refugees-migrants-flee-europe-2015.html>

² McGrath, Griffin and Mundy (2016) 'The Psychological Impact of Austerity'
<https://psychagainstausterity.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/paa-briefing-paper.pdf>

With limited access to formal education or employment, adult refugees and asylum seekers across Europe are commonly experiencing a lack of purpose, diminished self-confidence, hopelessness and loneliness; in turn, causing further trauma and making it harder to access and fully engage in opportunities when they may eventually arise.

In addition, it has become clear from the experience of local partners and practitioners from CSOs that there are also significant gaps when it comes to provision for their own social and emotional needs. As well as suffering from many of the above negative effects from working in challenging environments, the proximity to trauma, and a lack of resources and training on supporting the diverse social, cultural and linguistic needs of refugees and asylum seekers can severely affect well-being.³

Without addressing the social and emotional needs of both displaced people and locals, we risk exacerbating an increasingly fragile situation.

Filling the gaps through non-formal education

In January 2018 we undertook a 6-month research project, visiting sites in Northern France, Northern and Central Italy, mainland Greece and the UK. Working alongside displaced people and their local partners, we identified various practices in delivering non-formal education. We conducted formal and informal interviews, participant observations, and facilitated non-formal education activities using the Crisis Classroom framework as our guide.

We found that in response to these long periods of uncertainty, CSOs fill the gaps. This takes the shape of language lessons, 'life skills' training, vocational training, business support and activities, cultural activities and psychosocial support. Importantly, many are simultaneously addressing the following social and emotional needs:

- **Agency:** Having a sense of control, having the power to shape decisions and one's own future
- **Security:** Feeling safe, secure in one's environments and relationships
- **Connection:** Feeling belonging, supported through interpersonal relationships and being part of a community
- **Meaning:** Feeling purposeful through relationships, work and creative pursuits
- **Trust:** The basis for strong and equal relationships, trust is important for developing and sustaining social bonds and networks

McGrath, Griffin and Mundy argue that these are five key markers that underpin a healthy and cohesive society.⁴

³ Doidge and Sandri (2018) "Friends that last a lifetime": the importance of emotions amongst volunteers working with refugees in Calais' *British Journal of Sociology* issue 13

⁴ McGrath, Griffin and Mundy (2016)

We found that by placing them at the centre of practice, these non-formal educational spaces do two important things. Firstly, displaced people were more readily able to access the wealth of benefits and opportunities that the spaces have to offer. Secondly, the needs that are met inside the 'classroom' are carried beyond it and into people's daily lives.

For individuals from CSOs the toll of this work is often significant, putting strain on emotional and physical wellbeing, personal relationships and finances. When carried out effectively we found that these initiatives have the potential to support and benefit these people, with many practitioners citing personal growth, new supportive relationships, community development and cultural exchange as a result, which we will evidence later in this article.

Using our research and the Crisis Classroom framework, designed to promote psychosocially protective and inclusive practice, we recommend that for these five needs to be effectively addressed in non-formal educational spaces, the following practices must be adopted.

Promoting Security and Connection via Trauma-Informed Learning Environments

One of the biggest challenges to creating and/or maintaining non-formal educational spaces is the trauma related to displacement that many participants have and continue to experience. Consequently, participants often struggle to emotionally regulate themselves and engage in educational environments. For example, in Athens, a volunteer who taught English to children in one of the many squats housing displaced people said, "We spent most of the lesson trying to get them to sit down."

Only when participants feel secure can they effectively emotionally regulate themselves and access the skills, knowledge and social opportunities that these initiatives have to offer. In these disrupted and often chaotic environments, models and practitioners that are flexible to the diverse contexts and experiences of participants are required to accommodate their needs. The Crisis Classroom framework defines the 'invitation' into this space as central to fostering security and trust, which in turn allows connections, relationships and learning to flourish.

At micro-entrepreneur project Loop-La-Loop in Tuscany, Suzie Alexander described how many of the successful outcomes of the project were thanks to a flexible, open and, crucially, honest invitation. Describing the project beginnings, Alexander said, "Loop-La-Loop set out with [the original intention of] spending afternoons together, which then developed into something [more] because, as we went on, it felt like it could." The group of 10 members, made up of 9 asylum seekers from West Africa and Alexander, decided to learn to crochet hats together, initially as a way of improving their English language. As the only non-displaced member of the group, it was important for Alexander to clearly define her personal intentions for participating and to communicate them to the group. Following this, decisions were made as a

group, and actions always followed. As Alexander said, “Seeing an intention, an action and the result made them more participatory.”

A year and a half on, the group now refers to themselves as a family. Members report improved eating and sleeping patterns, as well as a change in their self-worth, noting regained confidence and pride. One member, Elhadji Mbodji, said to us that before joining Loop-La-Loop he was “only eating, sleeping, eating, sleeping. It is not good for your head.” Now, members have partaken in community cultural events, taught crocheting in schools to local children and performed alongside local people in theatre projects. Through the relationships they have built with the local community as a result of their involvement in the project, they have gained employment, taken up other opportunities in sports, music and arts, and, as Alexander notes, their Italian has improved significantly. She said, “The number one priority was learning Italian. The group has successfully contributed to that happening for everyone.” Abega Koneh, another member, said that what Loop-La-Loop gives him is “Solidarity... Loop-La-Loop [provides me with] collaboration with the country.”

Developing Agency through Shared Experiences:

Social engagement can often be difficult for participants affected by past and present traumas, and made harder by cultural and language barriers. However, in focussing on a shared task and a common goal, participants can build connection and actively work towards their future. In making these experiences flexible, participants are given agency in pursuing their own learning outcomes, rather than outcomes that have been pre-ascribed to them.

An example of using a flexible, shared experience to promote agency can be found in the Italian branch of the European-wide project Urbagri4women run by Tamat NGO. The shared experience is urban agriculture and similarly to Loop-La-Loop, project organisers Tamat NGO identify honesty as a key factor for meeting the participants’ needs. Project manager Domenico Lizzi and teacher Andrea Ciribuco told us, “They were never promised anything. We always told them, ‘This is what we are doing... It’s something that we can do together.’”

Tamat NGO provide practical workshops, language and business lessons for displaced people, with the aim of empowering them to grow and sell their own produce, build a business together and ultimately take full ownership of the project. Participants were partners in the planning phase of the project, making key decisions such as what plants to cultivate, the objective of the business and how they would organise. Alongside Tamat NGO staff, the group have successfully experimented with growing, marketing and selling okra, and have formed their own collective, collaborating with local businesses under the name Lambé (meaning ‘dignity’ in Mandinka). Responsibility over the crops, communications and other aspects of the business have been assumed by participants, providing equal responsibility and even leadership roles over Tamat staff. Ciribuco said, “The choice to grow an African plant was good because it [allowed us] to give them responsibility and to give them the role of people that have something to share and something to teach to the

others.” This is significant because, as Lizzi continued, “It’s not the message that they have got from Italy so far, that they can be responsible for something here.”

Directed by the learners, language lessons became focussed on the theory and business of agriculture. The group learns and makes decisions together and the project aims are not only flexible to their needs but actively shaped by their contribution. The organisers explained, “The connection starts when you have a common goal that you decide together. Because if not you are always following different goals... and you are not planning together.”

Building Trust through Integrated Approaches:

As Eleni Perraki, Social Services Unit Coordinator at the Greek Council for Refugees, said, “The next step will be how to engage the local community to embrace difference [and] to have more discussions about welcoming [displaced people].” By extending the invitation to individuals from CSOs and local Europeans to learn *alongside* and *from* displaced people and by emphasising learning exchange, trust is built with the local community and displaced people are given the opportunity to actively contribute towards their new societies.

London-based project Our Second Home (OSH), which aims to build a youth movement run by the displaced people it serves, offers an example of this approach. In August 2018 the project ran its first 5-day residential camp for 25 unaccompanied minors living in London. Programme Director Amos Schonfield said that one of the most unexpected and beneficial elements of the project identified by the organisers came from the connection and learning exchange between displaced people and local volunteers. He said, “We wanted OSH to be a participant-led project and for the British element of the programme to disappear.” However, having almost 1:1 ratio of volunteers to young people ultimately facilitated the most important outcomes. Project Manager Ellen O’Neill said, “It’s fairly rare for [the participants] to interact with British people who aren’t trying to get something from them, who aren’t their social workers or doctors, asking them the same questions over and over again.” She went on to explain the value of enabling the young people to spend time with British people who did not expect anything from them, people with whom they could form meaningful relationships.

Finding Meaning Together

By creating learning environments where local people can be learners and displaced people the active participants, teachers and leaders, locals themselves can also gain security, trust, meaning, agency and connection from these spaces. Important for Perraki too is the solidarity fostered by these spaces for individuals from CSOs, and how this counteracts the strain on the individual. She said, “We need to support ourselves, our colleagues and our volunteers. We need to feel that we are not alone as individuals and organisations So the more we stand together the better it is.”

One Tamat NGO project manager said, “It [felt like] there was an exchange, [we were] learning from them... as they learn from us. That was something that was very important and should always be a goal.”

Alexander identifies some of the benefits that her local community has gained from Loop-La-Loop. “The most lasting impact has been working with the children. At the moment they get a lot of exposure to racist commentary. To come into contact with [the members of Loop-La-Loop] on a regular basis, teach language, say hello on the street, and make friends with them helps them see the world differently.” Laura Fatini, who has also been working with Loop-La-Loop as part of The Giufà Project, which brings together asylum seekers and local young people to write plays and perform together, also said, “This project is not about making [the children] great artists. It’s about making them better citizens.”

Conclusion

We have found that when the above practices are adopted, non-formal educational spaces can effectively address the social and emotional needs of everyone involved and can be mutually beneficial to both locals and newcomers. If we don’t consider security, agency, meaning, connection and trust as basic human needs we risk marginalising newly arrived displaced people, alienating locals and fracturing our societies. Loop-La-Loop in Tuscany, Our Second Home in London and Urbagri4women in Perugia show us that when these five needs are made central to educational practice, the wealth of learning and opportunities within these thriving and connected communities is made accessible. These spaces can then serve as a starting point for further integration and inclusion opportunities for and between displaced people and local welcoming communities.

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