

BAR ILAN UNIVERSITY

*On Being a Refugee in an Elementary
School in Israel: An Ethnographic Study*

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Abstract:

The Purpose of the Study:

The purpose behind this study is to draw attention to the difficulties that refugee and non-Jewish minority cultures face when moving to the State of Israel, and the effects that this has on identity, development, and the integration process. There are no previous studies that have observed and researched this population, and I feel that more information is needed about one of Israel's sub-cultures in order to gain insight into integration within Israeli society. Israel's perspective is somewhat different than other Western countries that also help refugees as Israel's society and education system are underpinned by religion, and Jewish values. While it is to Israel's credit that it provides schooling for this population there are challenges within the approach to the curriculum and education as Israeli schools follow a 'Jewish' curriculum, and these refugee students are not Jewish. The aim of the research is to shed light on some of the challenges that both the school and the students face within themselves, in school, and in a larger context. In addition, within Israeli society refugees face a lot of criticism and unrest and it is important to understand the ordeals of this arguably traumatised population as their views, feelings, and experiences are seldom represented within the media. It is crucial to understand a culture rather than just penalise them for coming, and with this shed light on the consequences a society's actions can have on an individual. This research is by no means aimed at criticising the State of Israel but rather recognising what exists, its strengths and weaknesses, and whether any changes could be recommended or conclusions drawn on the basis of the research.

Methodology:

The research was conducted over twenty-two full school days in an elementary school in Israel whose school population consists of refugees, children of refugees, asylum seekers, and foreign workers. There are no Jewish Israeli students in the school. The objective of this research is not to address who is and is not Israeli; many of the school's students were born in Israel, are the children of refugees, are not Jewish, and therefore face numerous challenges within their school experience i.e.

they bear the weight of the parents' decisions to seek refuge. The school is in the centre of the country and has students from many places in the world from age four up to twelve years old. There is only one class per year group in every year except sixth grade where there are two classes. (The norm in Israel is multiple classes within a year group.) The class size varies between fifteen to twenty-five children yet there are often absentees. The home environment is difficult for parents and students alike with parents working long and intense hours thus leaving their young children to care for themselves. Students as young as six years old can be seen walking a distance and across main road in their journeys to and from school each day.

Throughout the study every effort was taken to preserve student and school confidentiality. All names and identifying details were removed for child protection. After completing the data collection it was evident that the material fell into four categories, and within that there were sub-categories. The observations were placed in the fitting place, and that then become the structure for this paper.

Results:

The research has demonstrated some of the difficulties that this population faces. The complexities begin at a very early age with language development as students often lack a mother tongue. Students at times become more frustrated and violent as a result of an inability to express themselves through language as they lack a concrete base on which to develop. As described in the paper a person who does not have a mother tongue language finds it harder to develop a second or third language. Language confusion often occurs as a result of speaking Hebrew, English, and the language of their home origin but not speaking it to the standard that is expected of a native. Additionally, many children in the school speak Hebrew as their language of preference but are normally unable to speak Hebrew at home, and furthermore, parents are not able to help with school related issues such as homework as a result of the language.

The student becomes further challenged during the pull between nature and nurture as s/he receives a different set of rules at home compared to that within the school. An individual needs to attempt a level of understanding of where they come from, who they are, who they want to be, and learn about the society they live in as their parents are often not aware or do not know enough to educate their child about Israel, the culture, the society or the language. This confusion is often projected through the

students' behaviour as they are often aggressive and violent in school despite constant reinforcement that violence will not be tolerated. In many cases the confusion lies in violence at home and learning from peers.

Despite the struggles students face, the school and the teachers play a vital role in the students' experience, integration, and development. The institution provides an environment for students to explore behaviours, develop social skills, learn about boundaries, rules and expectations, and to gain the necessary knowledge and tools for the future. The future of this population is unknown and the school and the teachers provide a valuable opportunity to teach the students lessons and knowledge for life in order to cope with the unexpected and their often unpredictable future.

Implications:

The society as a whole is a large category in its entirety but the research demonstrated that students do not feel included or integrated within society but they do within the school community. The research identified some of the prejudices that students face, and perhaps how they too have come to view themselves as second class citizens as a result of some of their more negative experiences.