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How do refugee children experience their new situation in England and Denmark? Implications for educational policy and practice

Abstract

As the number of individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and country of origin has increased rapidly in recent years, the need to understand how best to support such individuals, especially the youngest of them, becomes pressing. This study presents findings from interviews with adults who had arrived as asylum-seekers in one of two countries, Denmark or England, when they were children. Qualitative findings based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses demonstrate the participants' focus on *Language-based challenges that extend to further difficulties, Choosing to succeed, Gaining strength through social support, encouragement and guidance, Integrating two separate worlds into one* and *Seeing, hearing and understanding children's needs*. The participants have had time to reflect on their early experiences of integration, and their voices can inform researchers, educators and other practitioners currently working with refugee children and families.

Highlights

- There is an urgent need to facilitate the integration of refugee children in Western asylum-countries
- Extracts based on qualitative interviews present suggestions for prevention and intervention
- Findings illustrate ways in which schools and communities can support refugee children
- Findings also highlight the importance of providing appropriate training for teachers when dealing with refugee children

Keywords: Refugees, children, education, intervention, policy-making

1. Introduction

Because of the large number of refugee individuals who have sought safety in Western asylum-countries in the past years (UNHCR, 2016, 2017), there is an urgent need to facilitate their integration into asylum-countries and a way to do this is through children's school environment (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Luthar, 2015; Masten & Narayan, 2012). One way in which to examine how professionals can support refugee children's development is to access first-hand experiences. This study presents findings from interviews with refugee adults who have reflected on their recollections of arriving to Denmark or England as a refugee child accompanied by family members.

Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Theory* (1977; 1979) provides a useful framework from which to examine the numerous contexts that influence refugee children's development, well-being and integration, including risk- and protective factors (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Timshel, Montgomery & Dalgaard, 2017). This theory implies a dynamic perspective on the child's interaction with the environment, with children influencing, as well as being influenced by, numerous settings. Likewise, the framework is useful in terms of considering various contexts where prevention and intervention could be initiated (Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

In brief, Bronfenbrenner's perspective (1977; 1979) perceives the environment as nested within layers and structures, similar to a Russian Matryoshka doll (1977; 1979) and each system is included in the next. The developing individual can be seen as at the centre - with individual genetic and personal factors (Boxer et al., 2013). Subsequent systems include *Microsystems*; the child's immediate settings such as the home, playground, or school, *Mesosystems*; relationships and connections between two or more of the child's settings, for instance how a child's home context

influences school and vice versa, *Exosystems*; settings in which the child does not participate, but that affect the child indirectly such as parental employment or unemployment conditions or parent's social network (Boxer et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986), and *Macrosystems*; the organisation and structure of a society; policies, belief systems or financial crises. Finally, *Chronosystems*, such as life transitions or the passage of time affect children – especially refugee children and families. Thus, settings and systems that influence children extend far beyond their direct contact. An important term in the ecological framework is that of *reciprocity* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22), highlighting the mutual interaction between the individual and his or her environment as well as the complexity involved in understanding development. As stated by Bronfenbrenner, “*Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties*” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 9).

Refugees typically face potential risks and adversity pre-migration, during their flight to asylum-countries, as well as after their arrival in the asylum-country. Some risks are related to difficulties and delays with the asylum claim, and prolonged waiting time leading to severe stress, financial difficulties, social isolation, stigmatisation and discrimination (Iversen & Morken, 2004; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Montgomery, 2008; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008; Pitman, 2010). Perceived discrimination and stigmatisation may be intensified by negative depictions and stereotypical discourses in the media and public debates in asylum-countries (Esses & Medianu, 2013; Greenslade, 2005; Shakya et al., 2014). These adverse conditions affect the whole family, including children.

Forced migration, traumatic experiences and loss affect parental responsiveness (De Haene et al., 2007), through macrosystem influences on the microsystem. When refugee parents are under severe stress, their ability to deactivate fear and attachment behaviour in their children may become impaired. Parental attachment representations of their children can be negatively affected (De Haene et al., 2007; Timshel et al. 2017) and some parents may be unable to provide a secure base for their children. In such instances, appropriate support in the asylum-country is vital.

Refugee children may experience increased responsibilities and new roles, and role reversals can develop within the family (Dow, 2011; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Papadopoulos, 1999; Timshel et al., 2017). Refugee children may take care of siblings and family members, and take on instrumental tasks (Shakya et al., 2014). For example, where refugee children

learn the language in the asylum-country faster than their parents, they may also take on the role of interpreting (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Leavey et al., 2004; Khanlou et al., 2014, McKenzie et al., 2014; Shakya et al., 2014) leading to potential shifts in power and roles.

Furthermore, studies have found refugee children to be at higher risk of mental health difficulties compared to native and migrant children (Dalgaard, Todd, Daniel & Montgomery, 2016; Fazel & Stein, 2003; Leth, Niclasen, Ryding, Baroud & Esbjørn, 2014; Thommessen, Laghi, Cerrone, Baiocco and Todd, 2012). In England, Fazel and Stein (2003) found more than a quarter of the assessed refugee children to be at risk of psychological difficulties; a higher percentage than both migrant and native English participants. Refugee children scored significantly higher than migrant children on the *emotional difficulties* and the *total difficulties* score on the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997; SDQ). Compared to native children, refugee children also scored significantly higher on *emotional difficulties*, *hyperactivity* scores, *peer problems* as well as the *total difficulties* score. In Denmark the SDQ has similarly been used to compare the mental health of refugee-, migrant- and native Danish children (Leth et al., 2014), where refugee children were found to score significantly higher than native Danish children on the *conduct disorder* and the *peer problems* scale. These results indicate that refugee children may benefit from support initiatives, based on their specific needs, within schools. Furthermore, these studies also highlight the critical need to intervene appropriately. The present study aims to provide information that could be useful for the development of such initiatives.

Besides the family, school is the setting in which children spend most of their time (Masten, 2014, Rutter, 2012). Schools can provide structure and restore a sense of normality to children's lives, particularly after war and forced migration. The school setting can provide necessary predictability as well as the opportunity to interact with peers and competent adults (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Schools therefore have possibilities for supporting positive integration, and teachers and mentors can facilitate this process (Luthar, 2015). Schools may be particularly important for refugee children and youth, because a sense of belonging in school can affect positive integration and well-being (Kia-Keatings & Ellis, 2007).

School contexts can provide relationships outside the family context, which can be particularly important for vulnerable children. Although early attachment relationships shape the lens through which children view later relationships (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1977; Bretherton, 1992; Fonagy, 2001) peer groups, friendships, teachers and mentors can ameliorate negative effects

of early experiences (Luthar, 2015). School based peer support and friendships may be particularly important in situations where refugee children's families are unable to provide sufficient emotional support and effective parenting (Luthar, 2015).

Adapting to the school context in the asylum-country may pose difficulties for refugee children due to language challenges, social barriers, and challenges arising from gaps in education (Kia-Keatings & Ellis, 2007). Berthold (2000) has argued that schools contexts are of importance for both prevention and intervention for refugee children, and draws attention to refugee children and youth who may be suffering in silence, as silence is typically valued and rewarded by teachers, thereby leaving potential distress unnoticed. Whilst schools can provide a context where friendships can develop, schools can also be a place of discrimination, victimisation or bullying. As such, schools can either alleviate or intensify risk factors for refugee children (Masten, 2014).

In addition to the psychological risks and social stressors that refugees face, they may also be negatively affected by the way in which they are portrayed in policy and public discourses in asylum-countries (Esses & Medianu, 2013; Greenslade, 2005; Shakya et al., 2014). For instance, when being described as helpless victims, passive burdens, unable to contribute to society, or draining the asylum-country financially (Shakya et al., 2014), these perspectives are likely to influence integration and well-being.

As the sections above highlight, refugee children are vulnerable because they may be affected by their own adverse experiences as well as those of their parents (Dalgaard et al., 2016). Refugee children are affected by conditions in all of the systems outlined by Bronfenbrenner, from their core environment and interactions with parents (*Microsystems*), roles and responsibilities related to bridging the home and school context, such as interpreting for parents and teachers (*Mesosystem*), the effect of parental trauma (*Exosystem*), political decisions (*Macrosystems*), and last but by no means least, external factors such as war and political conflicts, leading to the major life transition of having to flee their of origin (*Chronosystem*), (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986).

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the needs and experiences of refugee children as they adjust and integrate into the asylum-country. Such an examination is vital, in order to facilitate their positive development and to increase their chances of well-being and future

opportunities. Bronfenbrenner's framework provides a theoretical perspective that acknowledges the various different contexts that affect development – as well as an understanding of the different levels at which prevention and intervention can take place.

It is hoped that findings from the present study can inspire further research in this area and thereby inform intervention strategies for refugee children, and that educators and practitioners, who work with these children, can benefit from them.

1.3 Ethical considerations

Researchers, educators and policy makers in Western and European societies are likely to have very different backgrounds compared to refugees, which may affect the way in which views are expressed, explained, perceived and understood (Pain, Kanagaratnam & Payne, 2014). Through the qualitative method and open-ended questions in the present study, we aimed to avoid preconceptions. As individuals with a refugee history may have experienced events and situations where their voices and opinions were not respected or valued, making an effort to avoid imposing further harm (Masten & Narayan, 2012) was deemed to be critical. De Haene and colleagues (2010) have argued that research participation may in some cases reactivate feeling of distress or disempowerment in refugee individuals. The present study did not examine trauma or symptoms, but instead, aimed to 'give voice' to the individuals. We hoped to facilitate empowerment by encouraging participants use their knowledge and experiences to help refugee children. We chose to include young adult participants, so that the experiences discussed were reflected on from an adult perspective but were relatively recent. It is hoped that the knowledge gained from the participants in this study will lead to further investigation, through qualitative, quantitative, longitudinal and mixed-methods research, and thereby provide benefits for refugee groups, through improved prevention and intervention, for instance in educational settings, and policy decisions.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Seven refugee adults participated; they had all arrived in Denmark or England as children accompanied by family members and were therefore born outside of the asylum-country (please see table 1 below for details). Our inclusion criteria were: refugee background, having arrived to the asylum-country accompanied, currently an adult in their early twenties, having a desire to share personal experience with a researcher. Participants were recruited purposively through two non-clinical refugee language and community centres that did not provide therapeutic care. All of the participants were working or studying at university. Two of the female participants in Denmark had arrived there as part of planned UN resettlement programmes, whereas the remaining participants had arrived to the asylum-country as spontaneous refugees.

Table 1: Description of participants

| Participant | Gender | Age at arrival | Age at interview | Country of origin | Asylum in |
|-------------|--------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Female | 8 years | 22 years | Bosnia | Denmark |
| 2 | Female | 12 years | 21 years | Iraq | Denmark |
| 3 | Female | 10 years | 21 years | Iraq | Denmark |
| 4 | Female | 9 years | 20 years | Iraq | Denmark |
| | | | | | |
| 1 | Female | 13 years | 23 years | Somalia | England |
| 2* | Male | 8 years | 22 years | Somalia* | England |
| 3 | Male | 4 years | 22 years | Somalia | England |

*Participant 2 was originally from Somalia but had lived in Kenya for some time before seeking asylum with his family in England.

2.2 Data collection

Ethical approval to undertake this research was granted from the university where the researchers were employed and permission was also obtained from the two community organisations where participants were recruited. Participants were asked to give informed, written consent after having heard and read about the aims of the research, and after being provided with the chance to ask questions. Most participating individuals were interviewed at the refugee community organisation, apart from two participants who preferred to be interviewed at the university in the researcher's

office. Prior to each interview, participants were reminded that they could choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences, and that anything they might choose to talk about would be treated as confidential. The participants in England spoke fluent English, and the participants in Denmark spoke fluent Danish. The researcher who conducted the interviews spoke both languages fluently. Interpretation was therefore not necessary.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were asked open-ended questions about their recollections of the adjustment process and their experiences, perceived needs and challenges in the new country. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually and consisted of questions relating to the participants' first memories in the asylum-country, initial challenges faced, what was found to be helpful and what was perceived as most important for the successful integration of refugee children. The interview questions did not seek to explore conditions in the pre-flight environment, but remained focused on experiences in the asylum-country and on integration. The interviews were audio-recorded for the purpose of analysis and lasted between 40-90 minutes.

2.4 Data analysis

The study was designed based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), which is considered to be especially suitable for research questions concerned with the exploration of lived human experiences (Smith et al., 2009) and research that aims to give voice to individuals who are rarely heard. Within the IPA approach, researchers intend to examine individual experiences and seek to understand the world through the eyes of the respondents (Willig, 2012). The English audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and likewise, the interviews in Danish were transcribed verbatim before being translated into English by one of the researchers. The two authors of this paper both contributed to the analysis, as an investigator triangulation process in order to increase the trustworthiness of findings. Having completed the analysis for the data collected in Denmark and in England separately, some similarities and differences between these two contexts became clear. In the following, findings from the two different contexts will be presented separately, before discussing common themes.

3. Findings from participants in England

Overall, the refugee individuals who had resettled in England focused on supportive networks such as the immediate family, extended family and teachers as well as culture and religion. The three

main themes that were developed were: *Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties*, *Choosing to succeed*, and *Gaining strength through social support and encouragement*.

Table 2: Themes developed from interviews in England

| Themes based on findings from participants in England | |
|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties</i> |
| 2 | <i>Choosing to succeed</i> |
| 3 | <i>Gaining strength through social support and encouragement</i> |

3.2 *Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties*

The three participants mentioned that initial challenges were related to the English language, however, their focus on why language was a challenge, varied.

P1 (female): *I came when I was thirteen, and you know, I had to speak English and you know, I had to live with my auntie and I found it hard to communicate with people, I remember. Yeah...*

Another participant also mentioned the initial language difficulties, but then went on to focus on how language and culture, including how educational expectations, differed from what he had been used to.

P2 (male): *English was the problem, I remember (...) but it passed on quickly, because Kenyan education was similar to the British because it was a former British colony so education-wise, we were taught in English. Speaking in English became second nature after a while, but in the beginning it was quite difficult because we spoke Swahili and Somali – and now we had to learn English, so it was... (...) within 5-6 months we were speaking English, but writing English – the structure of it, grammar...it was a bit difficult for us, because we had learnt in one way, which was more structured, like you knew what the rules were, and then in this school they were like ‘use your imagination, think of something’ so we went from a place where everything was closed, you literally learnt the books word for word, and you were expected to regurgitate that - spit it out.*

This participant seems to illustrate how language and culture to him are very closely connected.

A third participant emphasised how parental lack of English language abilities led to a challenge for him, as he was expected to translate for the family and to take on new responsibilities.

P3 (male): *So I think the biggest barrier was the English – parents not being able to speak – that was the most difficult thing, as a child I remember.*

And later he added,

Probably because mothers, my mum didn't speak the language it was difficult to communicate between the school and my mum, or for parents, I think. Because obviously, if you don't speak the language, then how as a parent can you communicate with the school, to see the progress of your child. So that was, I think, the biggest barrier at the time. I think the language barrier first of all, but she learnt English after a few years, but that was the major thing which was difficult, because you had to act as a translator which made you more mature, because obviously, you're translating everything, reading letters – all letters that come in the house – whether it's bills, whatever – you'll read them. Because obviously that's what you'll read. So you had that responsibility from a young age.

Related to the Micro- and Mesosystems discussed by Bronfenbrenner, the extracts illustrate the close connection between language, culture and family relationships, such as role-reversals. Language is more than mere communication and affects processes and relationships within the family, for instance when children learn the new language quicker than their parents. When children are expected to translate for their parents, it brings responsibilities, as the participant expressed. Children translating for their parents can also mean that children are exposed to information that may cause distress, anxiety and worry in the child, and teachers and psychologists should therefore be very aware of the challenges that can arise for children who are asked to interpret meetings or information.

3.3 Choosing to succeed

The participants gave examples of the challenges faced related to their background or ethnic group – such as racist comments or stereotypes – and they expressed how they chose to use these remarks as motivators, even expressing that negative comments had led them to aim higher and to work harder to achieve their goals.

One of the participants recalled how a teacher had doubted that he could have received such a high grade, and therefore went to check the result.

P2 (male): *Again, you're fighting against the system - everyone automatically assumes you are Somali - illiterate, uneducated - probably you're going to flop.*

Similarly, he described a situation from a work context as follows,

(...) after university I was the first black person to work in that team, I was the first black person to be a supervisor in that team, I was the first black person to be a manager of that team (...) I've had people say to me, 'oh, you're here to make up the numbers' – someone told me that. I was like, this is not America, this is not South Africa, and this is not a numbers game. If I did not deserve to be here, I would not be here! So yeah... you take it on the chin.

In these extracts, the participant demonstrates a perception of how his identity and background are related to existing stereotypes in England – Macrosystem influences. However, he also acknowledges that he has the power and opportunity to challenge those stereotypes, and the strength to voice his opinion. Later in the interview, when speaking about his family background and culture, he said,

P2 (male): *There is a high case of mental issues within Somali parents, but that's not to say that should have an impact on what you're capable of. Your mum needs you more than the next guy's mum does, because your mum has a problem and the only way that you can help her is to help yourself and get better, do something with your life. If you fall a victim you will be in the same position as your mum and then your child will fall into that cycle (...).*

This extract can be interpreted as the participants' perception that parental challenges can be passed down to their children, an Exosystem influence. He also expresses a desire to break that cycle without forgetting about his past in that process as well as a degree of responsibility.

Similarly, another participant said,

I'm a fighter; I don't give up - even if I get a bad result - that will motivate me rather than de-motivate me. So I'll be like 'I did this, I did this, what can I do? Where can I improve? What can I add?' Rather than saying, 'Oh, I did bad, I don't want to do this again'...

Later this participant referred back to the challenges she initially faced and summarised,

P1 (female): *I think about life, you get something that you don't want but you have to adapt to it. See it, don't take it as a negative, but deal with it as it is.*

Another participant expressed how the advice he had received from a teacher had been helpful,

P3 (male): *'You're African, you have to work twice as hard as everyone else, so put your head down'. (...) if you're prepared to work hard, when you're from a certain background and you realise you're here for opportunities, so if you do get opportunities, take it! But then those words I remember, to this day, and I think it did help me a lot in the sense of actually seeing things and probably getting into different places as well, so not wasting time, doing certain things. So yeah, I'm grateful for that teacher's word.*

In these extracts participants exemplify how they experienced stereotypes, prejudice and racism because of their background, however, they similarly express a conscious choice to face those challenges with a positive attitude. The last extract illustrates how a teacher was able to provide advice that was valued by the participant, which leads on to the next theme – *Gaining strength through social support and encouragement*.

3.4 Gaining strength through social support and encouragement

The individuals interviewed in England stressed the importance of academic support and personal encouragement from teachers and mentors outside the school context. This support proved to be influential throughout participants' lives in the goals they set for themselves, their willingness to work hard and to believe in themselves. The participants spoke warmly of teachers who had made a difference during their time at school, and who, in various ways had shown that they were willing to go beyond and above their basic duties in order to help the children and youth.

One of the participants spoke of his early memories of coming to England, and how a teacher had been especially important during the initial months,

P2 (male): *(...) the first month, because we came around June, we stayed in the primary school, because summer time was coming up, so the school was going to be closed anyway. And what happened was that in that school, there was one good teacher, Miss F, I still remember her. She looked after us. She was black as well. Everyone else was white or Asian. So we sort of looked at her like mum number two – she would help us out... yeah...*

Another participant described how a teacher had offered her extra help after realising her difficulties in that subject.

P1 (female): *'Come, come to me every day after lunch' – she said: 'Spend your lunch – like 20-25 minutes and then come to me', and she was like 'I'll give you one-to-one support' (...)*

So that showed me, I was like, don't give up: If you want something, work hard, then one day you will achieve something.

Similarly, the support provided by a formal mentoring scheme in the community was stressed as particularly meaningful and helpful to this participant,

P1 (female): *And I remember I used to have a mentor, and she used to tell me: 'Don't give up - if you give up, then you're not strong enough'. I used to be like, even if I got bad results, I used to be like 'how can I improve this?' Rather than giving up. I used to hate the words 'give up' back in the day, like yeah, it helped a lot.*

Another participant also explained how a teacher had provided support and encouragement,

P2 (male): *So what he used to do was at lunchtimes take me aside to do presentations for him so that my English improved, my pronunciation improved. And he used to give me a reading list to do; he was a nice guy, (...)*

He didn't like us being stagnant or ordinary, he said 'No, you don't have time for that, you guys came from a hard place, to get through life you need to do double what other people are doing' (...). So with that it focuses you again into knowing what you want to do and makes it easier for you to say 'Okay well the whole world is not that bad because there's people like him who are there'.

These extracts illustrate the importance of teachers' roles and how one teacher can influence and inspire young people to achieve to the best of their abilities. The participants, who were now in their twenties, spoke warmly of these teachers, who seemed to have made a deep impression on them.

4. Discussion of themes from participants in England

4.2 Language-related challenges extending to further difficulties

Language-related challenges extending to further difficulties was a common theme across the interviews, although the focus on the type of challenges varied from basic language barriers to the connection between language and culture, as well as on how different English language abilities within the family led to a shift in roles and responsibilities. This was exemplified through the participant who expressed how he perceived having increased responsibilities because of having to translate for his mother. Children in refugee families may learn the language of the asylum-country quicker than their parents, because of the children's contact with native peers in school settings and

their exposure to the asylum-country's norms and traditions through school. This may therefore lead to *role changes* within the family (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Khanlou et al., 2014, McKenzie et al., 2014; Leavey et al., 2004; Shakya et al., 2014). Refugee children may function as the link between the two cultures, and may be given new responsibilities, such as interpreting meetings or translating letters for their parents, which can lead to added pressure in the family and on the child (Shakya et al., 2014). Children's younger age may lead to an advantage in terms of learning the new language, compared to their parents, particularly if parents are adversely affected by previous traumatic experiences.

4.3 Choosing to succeed

Despite the challenges faced by the participants who were interviewed, which included perceived prejudice and stereotypes, the participating individuals expressed a conscious choice to face such challenges by not falling into those stereotypes, and by succeeding in their educational choices. Participants felt that it was possible to reach their goals if they worked hard. This confidence may have been influenced by the teachers and mentors providing extra support and encouragement, and showing professional and personal interest in helping them. A stated goal was to enable themselves and their families to move beyond the difficulties that had led them to leave their home country. Previous research has illustrated how education is seen as essential for improving one's chances in the asylum-country by both children and adults who have experienced forced migration, loss and up-rootedness (Goodman, 2004; Hopkins & Hill, 2010; O'Shea et al., 2000).

4.4 Gaining strength through social support and encouragement

The importance of social support is an area that has been well-documented within refugee research (e.g. Berthold, 2000; Carswell et al., 2011; Hodes et al., 2008; Kovacev & Shute, 2004; Lie, 2002). Several years after having left school, participants recalled that some teachers had made an impact on their educational choices and had instilled a strong sense of self-belief in them, as well as a desire to aim high and achieve their goals. These participants had completed university or college, and the support and encouragement provided by teachers at an early stage of their education may have influenced their further choices. The findings, therefore, stress the crucial roles of teachers, who meet refugee children at early stages after their arrival in the asylum-country, and who also spend many hours a day with the children. Finally, the support provided by specific teachers and mentors seemed to offer a contrast to the stereotypical encounters that participants also experienced, thereby giving participants strength and hope, as expressed by one of the participants (P2) who said,

Okay well the whole world is not that bad because there's people like him who are there.

5. Findings from participants in Denmark

Based on the transcripts from participants who were interviewed in Denmark, the following themes were developed: *Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties; Integrating two separate worlds into one; Gaining strength through social support and guidance*, and finally, *Seeing, hearing and understanding children's needs*.

Table 3: Themes developed from interviews in Denmark

| Themes based on findings from participants in England | |
|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties</i> |
| 2 | <i>Integrating two separate worlds into one</i> |
| 3 | <i>Gaining strength through social support and guidance</i> |
| 4 | <i>Seeing, hearing and understanding children's needs</i> |

5.2 *Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties*

Challenges related to language, and associated feelings of insecurity, were common. Whereas the participants interviewed in England expressed that they had been exposed to the English language prior to their arrival, this was not the case for participants interviewed in Denmark, which may have increased the language-related challenges they perceived.

One of the participants expressed this in the following way,

P3 (female): *It was the language; of course I didn't speak Danish at the time. We lived in a small village then, and I was in an integration class, it was not easy to learn this language, suddenly we had to say 'I, you, door, chair' - all these strange little words, but slowly we learned. There were lots of people who helped us, so actually that was fine. The language was the most difficult thing, and the fact that we didn't know this society. I'm from a completely different world. People don't know who I am and I don't know who they are either. We didn't quite understand what was going on in society, it is very different.*

Another participant had a similar experience,

P2 (female): *In the very beginning it was really difficult for me, the language was so different. I didn't have problems with the English language, because I'd learnt that in*

school in Iraq, but the Danish language and school and just the environment, everything was completely different. And it was quite hard to integrate or to get – how can I express this – I went through a very difficult time in the beginning. (...) I was always really scared of saying something in class, I didn't want to say something wrong and I didn't want the others to laugh at me. Even if I knew the answer to the questions asked, I was always shy. I thought I was the only one who felt that way, but most refugees felt like that.

And similarly,

P4 (female): In the beginning, I mean this was from the perspective of a ten-year old, I felt I couldn't learn anything at all. I felt like everything went so slowly, and they were never going to understand me and I was never going to learn this language. So that was frustrating to me, because I couldn't really explain to them who I was, or why I looked like this, or where we came from.

Another participant expressed how she disagreed with the dominant focus on teaching children the Danish language, whilst neglecting other areas which, in her view, would have been more important initially.

P1 (female): And in school, it was the teachers' job to teach us Danish, but how could they think we were ready to learn Danish? We would have been much faster learners if the other things had been dealt with like psychological support or counselling. To them, all that was important was, teach them Danish and get them into mainstream schools, teach them Danish and get them into mainstream schools – they need an education. But we were far from ready for that.

5.3 Integrating two separate worlds into one

The participants spoke of conflicts and challenges they faced because of the differences between their families' cultural background and the general expectations from the asylum-country, and how that influenced their sense of identity, which can also be seen in relation to bridging different systems – according to the Ecological systems theory.

P1 (female): Somehow, society expects you to, I mean back then we thought we were all going back home again, but after it became clear that we were going to stay, it was as if they expected us to be just like them. We had to acculturate and integrate into society – but no one tells you how you do that. How do you do that? What is it they do differently from us?

Another participant, who had been able to travel back to her country of origin, described how she felt as if she was standing in between the two cultures, without really belonging in either.

P2 (female): (...) *now when I go back to Iraq, I'm not like them, I feel like a foreigner, probably because I didn't grow up there. But then when I get back to Denmark, I feel like a foreigner here as well, so I feel foreign in both places. Sometimes I don't know where I belong. Sometimes I feel like I'm just standing in the middle of the two. You don't know whether you belong in Iraq or whether you belong in Denmark.*

P3 (female): (...) *I am the person I am. You come from the place you come from, that's what I think. Inside, I feel I am from Iraq. There is nothing I can do to change that. And I am really happy that I am Iraqi. But as for the Danish society, this is where I live, this is where I study, and where I'll work, so I keep up to date with society here, and I am very happy about everything here. So in a way I am a little bit Danish as well, but inside, I am an Iraqi person.*

P1 (female): *It is a sense of confusion in your mind – no-man's-lands. That's what I usually say, that's where I belong. And what I am? I don't know. I am Bosnian but I live in Denmark, am I Danish or Bosnian? I'm neither of the two. I see myself most like a Dane, but in lots of contexts I don't feel accepted in the same way as others.*

Another participant described a strategy that had helped her,

P4 (female): *You can't live two separate lives, you can't do that. And you shouldn't try to do that either. Some people do that. They are themselves at home, but outside the home they may wear different clothes and talk to different friends, I think they are torn, in the end they won't know where they belong. For me it's worked really well to mix the two cultures, but then I've invited friends home to my house and they really liked to taste our food and meet my family (...)*

One of the participants, who now worked with children herself, described one of her suggestions for how to help refugee children develop and integrate the two different cultures in a positive way.

P1 (female): *And something else I do, which maybe the rest of our staff don't do, is that I ask the kids about their background. How do you say hi and goodbye? Ask them about their food or anything. And then I can work so much better with those kids than my colleagues, it just makes such a difference.*

5.4 Gaining strength through social support and encouragement

When asked if there was anything that had been particularly helpful during the initial time in Denmark, a common theme amongst the participants was the positive effect of having support in their immediate environment.

P2 (female): *Yes, my teacher in the integration / reception class. She helped me a lot, not just with school but with everything; even things that had nothing to do with school. I would speak with her all the time. She was really helpful to me. Even now I still talk to her sometimes, we are still in touch. (...) she really made a big difference. She is the kind of person who helps people from other countries, or foreign children.*

And similarly, another participant said,

P1 (female): *(...) I really think social workers, teachers and psychologists, psychologists especially, are really, really important for these kids – not only are these kids completely confused about what's going on, they don't know the language, they feel they have lost everything, they miss their friends, miss their families, aunties, uncles, grandparents – everyone – that's the way we are as refugees, we're really tight with our family, not everyone here (in Denmark) is like that, but we are all like that. And there is such a longing for all the people you know and at the same time having seen and experienced things you don't understand as a child.*

P1 (above) therefore expresses how professionals can take on supportive roles in the asylum country – roles that would typically have been filled by a tight-knit extended family, which is now dispersed. In addition to the support provided by teachers, one of the participants expressed the important role a voluntary mentor had played,

P4 (female): *I had been a volunteer in one of these organisations previously, but then I got an adult friend too and we went to cafés and talked, and I met her daughter and her son, and they told me the paths they had chosen and how they had changed degrees at university without problems, so I found out it was okay to experiment a little bit, you won't lose anything. Even though I feel very well-integrated into society, but even I needed other people to help me with my choices. My parents just said I should choose something I like, because they know I like to read, and in a way it was nice that they didn't force me to do anything, but on the other hand, sometimes you need directions.*

A participant expressed how the support she had gained from friends and her peer group, as well as her parents' openness to the Danish society, was helpful in terms of integrating and adjusting to the new country;

P4 (female): *I think it was mainly friends, and the fact that my parents allowed me to go on school trips and to visit strangers, I mean friends from school, my parents didn't know them and they didn't know their parents, but they let me. Some kids - even today - are not allowed to do those things. There are even lots of girls my age in their twenties, who are not allowed to visit Danish friends, but I was allowed to do all those things. If there was a birthday party or a movie night, I could always participate. I actually think I've been really lucky, both in terms of my environment and my family. That was their goal from the very beginning. My parents had an open mind, they wanted to get out of Iraq and to experience the world - whether they were forced or not, it was still a choice to leave.*

One of the other participants explained how she felt that Danes were unable to understand her background, and she described how she found security in friends from her native background;

P1 (female): *I've been here for at long time, and I love being here, but most of my friends are from Bosnia. That's where I feel safe. They are my safety base, because we're all in the same boat. They have experienced the things I've been through as well. And I have this feeling inside that others will never be able to understand, and they wouldn't. Lots of people are really interested and want to hear about it, but I've come to a place where I don't even want to talk about it, because they don't understand anyway.*

And later she added,

You can try day and night, you'll never understand it - and it cannot be explained with words - never. Not even in pictures... it's.... it just cannot be explained. That feeling...

These extracts illustrate the importance of social support from the immediate environment, such as peers, teachers and mentors outside the school context. Teachers, psychologists or mentors may have particularly important roles to play in helping refugee children and youth to navigate in the new country and culture, not only in terms of education but also through general support and encouragement, and to help children feel accepted in the new society. Some of the participants expressed how they felt unable to discuss concerns and worries with their parents, and they encourage professionals working with refugee children to really listen to the children's own perspectives and needs.

5.5 Seeing, hearing and understanding children's needs

The theme *Seeing and hearing children's needs* is closely related to the earlier theme *Gaining strength through social support and guidance*. Participants expressed how they would have benefitted from being asked questions about their past, and from truly being seen and heard by professionals, especially during times when they were not able to discuss their worries and concerns with their parents.

P1 (female): *You don't talk to your parents about it, not because you are afraid to or because you don't want to – but somehow you feel they don't know what's going on either, because you see your parents stressed and frustrated and not knowing what's going on. They are worried too, it's not because they are bad parents – we've all had the best parents in the world, parents who wanted only the best for us, but they just didn't have the capacity to help us or to talk with us. They were just so busy with all kinds of other things. Our parents lost their families back home, lost their homes, and then had to live in a tiny room and had to share a toilet and kitchen with other families, and couldn't afford the things they usually would have and were used to – it was a lot of changes to deal with for them. And they just didn't have the capacity to also speak to us and explain to us what was happening.*

P1 (female): *And even if you try to speak to your parents, what I remember is that they would always say: 'That was just a bad dream you had, that didn't happen, you haven't seen dead people, you haven't seen bombs, you have been dreaming.' And actually that worked for me, I believed them. I had just had a bad dream. It worked for me, I wasn't afraid of it. It was just a dream. Up until the point when we went back to Bosnia, then I realised, 'it wasn't just a dream, mum - I've been here before'. 'Oh, well, you're right'.... And then I was older so we could have the conversation then. And after I got older, they've told me everything they went through and what they experienced.*

In the extract above, the participant expressed how she sought to protect her parents from further distress by not asking questions or reminding them of the war or what they had experienced. At the same time, the extracts shed light on the coping mechanism parents in this family used to deal with their grief, by denying what had happened, through avoidance and by actively encouraging children to push the memories away. Similarly, this participant expressed how she had experienced that professionals lacked an understanding of her past, background and troubling experiences:

P1 (female): *Or another example which is just small, but the professionals never thought about that then, but they should have, is when they test the sirens each year in May. Anyway, we were in school this day and we are what eight or nine Bosnian kids in the classroom – refugees – in one classroom. We've all seen war. The sirens go, no one told us in advance. What do you think happened? We were under the tables and inside the closet within no time and the teachers were like: 'what are you doing, come out of there'. We remembered from back then, if you hear a siren, it's down, hide as quick as you can – you know? It's a little thing, just a ridiculous everyday thing – if they had just warned us and said it was not dangerous... How easy it would have been for them. (...) Little things like that; there were loads of things like that. Like toys, there was plastic guns and bombs and things – damn it – what were they thinking? Right?*

Another participant spoke about a related issue,

P3 (female): *(...) I think that it would be a massive help for these children, if the adults and professionals know about their background and their situation that they're in, that they realise these are not just typical kindergarten or preschool children, but that they have actually experienced things like war and that these children are used to a completely different society. I think that is the most important thing. It could be a huge help for these children.*

The extracts above illustrate how participants felt they could have benefited if professionals had shown a better understanding of the context and culture from which they had come. Several of the participants gave their view on how refugee children could be supported in such situations, with a focus on really listening to the children and acknowledging and valuing their opinions.

P3 (female): *Listen to the children. Listen to what they have to say. Children are able to express themselves and tell their stories if they feel comfortable and if they really want to speak to the person sitting across from them. These children may have good stories or good plans for the future and what they want to achieve in life, and if you know them, then you can help them achieve those goals. If you know about their dreams for the future, you are better able to guide and support them down that path and help them make the right decisions.*

Finally, a participant spoke of the need to be patient with refugee children, by listening to their needs and by following the pace of the individual child. In accordance to what other participants expressed, she emphasized the importance of *understanding* and *patience* from professionals;

P3 (female): *But if they understand each other, it will help the children understand the new society as well. So that children themselves decide when they are ready to speak Danish and make friends with people from other cultures, rather than being forced to speak the language, being forced to go to a Danish school - the whole process should be calm and relaxed, because this is the child's future that is at stake. It is not a machine that can be programmed; things have to develop slowly step by step.*

6. Discussion of themes from participants in Denmark

Although participants were not asked specifically about their educational experience, this came up as a dominant topic in their responses to the open-ended questions, highlighting the importance of the school environment and the role of teachers.

6.2 Language-based challenges extending to further difficulties

Initially, participants living in Denmark faced challenges associated with a lack of Danish language abilities which led to feeling insecure, being unable to explain why they had arrived in Denmark and what they had experienced, as well as difficulties understanding the culture and social norms. They said that they felt there had been too much emphasis on learning Danish, and on pressuring children to learn before they had found stability in the asylum-country. Intuitively, it seems important to prioritise teaching refugee children the language spoken in the asylum-country so that they can attend school. As emphasized by the participants, however, it is equally important to try to understand the context and conflicts the children have just come from, and to enable children to talk about their home country, or express these in non-verbal ways, and to listen to their worries and concerns.

From the findings presented here, it seems clear that there is a tension between what children, teachers, and mental health professionals such as psychologists, focus on. Teachers are likely to focus on academic aspects and the language, and to seek to avoid distressing the child by asking questions which could potentially lead to upsetting the child. Psychologists, on the other hand, are more likely to focus on social and emotional aspects. One of the participants suggested that an initial therapeutic focus would have aided later language learning. Schools may therefore be able to provide both therapeutic support as well as education – and it seems imperative that teachers in

classrooms with refugee children are provided with appropriate training to be able to detect when there is a need for intervention, and to have necessary referral schemes in place within schools.

Parents may discourage their children from talking about the past directly or indirectly (Almqvist & Hwang, 1999; Dyregrov et al., 2002) and it is therefore important that children are provided with opportunities to talk to caring and professional adults, when and if they need this. At the same time, however, the pace for each individual child will differ and it seems vital to advocate for a less hurried approach, one that takes the individual child into consideration, rather than a more rushed and general approach as described by participants in the present context. Schools, therapeutic and clinical professions could therefore develop stronger collaboration strategies in order to provide necessary support for refugee children.

6.3 Integrating two separate worlds into one

In addition to language difficulties and the barriers created by not feeling understood and not understanding, participants spoke of conflicts and challenges faced because of the differences between their families' background and the expectations from the asylum-country. Participants spoke of their difficulties in integrating two cultural identities, and the resulting problems that can develop in families. They also spoke about the need for openness, for instance, the positive effect of inviting native peers into the refugee families' homes, as well the importance of people from the asylum-country showing an interest in the refugee children's culture and background.

Again, professionals working with refugee children can have profound influences in regards to facilitating a deeper understanding of cultural variations by enabling refugee children to speak about the culture, traditions and positive aspects of their native country. This might help refugee children to keep a positive connection to their cultural heritage, and may also teach the native children in the asylum-countries about these cultures, as well as facilitating integration of the two cultures, and thereby contributing to positive development. This connection has been highlighted through clinical work with refugees (Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009), however, also seems important to consider from a more general, social and developmental perspective when working with refugee children and youth.

6.4 Gaining strength through social support and encouragement

Participants stressed the importance of social support and guidance, both in the form of educational advice from teachers, mentors outside the school context, as well as broader support from peer

groups. They valued the advice, time and guidance provided by teachers and mentors, especially as their own parents were not in a position to guide them in this way, as they could not navigate in the new society's educational system. However, they also spoke about their reliance on family and community support, and the security this provided. Friends and peer groups were highlighted as an important means of social support. In summary, it was positive to find that a range of people within the children's social worlds had provided guidance, encouragement and support, although the participants also had suggestions for areas that were in need of improvement.

As illustrated by the extracts above, refugee children may seek to protect their parents from further distress, by not asking questions about the difficulties they are experiencing, the conflict in their native country, or the reasons that led the family to flee. This finding has previously been reported in refugee children in Sweden (e.g. Almqvist & Hwang, 1999) and Syrian adolescents (Hassan et al., 2015). Professionals in the child's immediate environment, such as teachers, psychologists or mentors from outside the family or community, may in some cases be able to take over the important role of listening to children when their parents are unable to face such conversations. In addition to guidance and advice, professionals may also be able to provide a supportive role in enabling children to speak freely about their thoughts, concerns or anxieties. The participants in the present study encouraged professionals working with refugee children to really listen to the children's voices and to make an effort to understand, see and hear their needs. In line with an Ecological approach, and the interplay of effect between the school setting and the family, one way forward might be to work with families, rather than the child individually, and to thereby avoid causing potential conflict or confusion, if messages regarding speaking openly and freely differ in two of the child's environments.

Although it is important that professionals do not force refugee children to speak about their own or their family's past experiences, it is essential to note that children may not readily or spontaneously voice their anxieties or concerns unless they are provided with an explicit opportunity to do so in a safe environment. Children may experience shame, worry about stigmatisation, choose not to disclose information because of cultural expectations or norms, or because they do not think that adults will listen to, or believe, their words. It is therefore vital that professionals are sensitive to the children's individual stages of development and integration into the new society, and that a supportive environment is facilitated where children feel secure enough to discuss sensitive issues if they wish to.

In a review of the literature on patterns of communication styles in refugee families, Dalgaard and Montgomery (2015) concluded that a *modulated approach* to the disclosure of refugee parents' traumatising experiences from the past was most likely to be associated with positive development in their children. A modulated approach was described as being sensitive to the timing and manner in which the parents' traumatising experiences were disclosed to their children, rather than focusing on disclosure or silencing as such (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015). It is possible that a modulated approach, which takes the child's development and level of integration into account, is also the best way forward when teachers or other professionals seek to support refugee children. School settings may have unique possibilities for providing a context for such interactions to occur. This does, of course, require time for trusting relationships to develop in a safe environment, as well as understanding from policy-makers, in terms of investing the necessary resources in order to enable long term relationships and interventions. As highlighted in the Introduction, apart from the family context, school is the setting in which children spend most of their time (Masten, 2014, Rutter, 2012), schools can provide predictability and competent adults (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Schools therefore have critical possibilities for supporting positive integration and well-being, (Kia-Keatings & Ellis, 2007; Luthar, 2015) as well as intervention strategies.

6.5 Understanding, seeing and hearing children's needs

Participants expressed the value of being asked questions about their past, and from truly being seen and heard by professionals, especially during times when they were not able to discuss their worries and concerns with their parents. Establishing a positive connection between the roots from participants' native culture to the asylum-country's culture may be particularly important in order for refugee children to create meaning in the situation they find themselves in, as well as for their identity formation. Coping and meaning-making seem to be affected by the individuals' ability to integrate the various parts of his or her background into one whole. Positive integration and development may also rely on bridging experiences within the different social contexts that children find themselves in, such as the family and the school, corresponding to Bronfenbrenner's theory.

As expressed by one of the participants in this study,

P4 (female): *"You can't live two separate lives, you can't do that. And you shouldn't try to do that either"*.

7. Summary of findings from England and Denmark

The participants interviewed for this study all mentioned initial language barriers or problems relating to language, communication difficulties or language relating to culture, when asked about the first months and years in England or Denmark. Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted the potentially unfavourable direct and indirect influences on children's development when families move physically, due to changes and disruptions in children's relationships such as friendships, peer-groups in school or links to their community. He particularly stressed the disrupting consequences of moves leading to completely new traditions, norms, customs, and values - as is the case for these refugee families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition to developmental tasks involved in maturation and identity formation, refugee children and youth must suddenly navigate completely new norms and traditions at various levels (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). The Ecological theory provides a helpful framework for understanding the multiple stressors that refugee children and families face (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Timshel et al., 2017).

One of the challenges that differed for the two groups was that participants in England felt stigmatised by stereotypical and racist comments, which may also have led to this groups' strong focus on succeeding academically. Perceived discrimination has been found to be related to feelings of distress, anxiety, low self-esteem, frustration and depression (Luthar, 2015), highlighting the need to minimise, or preferably eliminate, interpersonal discrimination in schools. Likewise, institutional and societal discrimination and racism is harmful, illustrating negative effects of Macrosystem influences on Microsystems; perceived discrimination has been found to predict internalising, though not externalising, behaviour in refugee youth – which may be linked to refugee youth's reluctance to show externalising behaviour, in order avoid confirming already existing negative stereotypes in the asylum-country (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008). Strict policies, stigmatising political agendas and negative discourses can influence Microsystems, if these are internalised by refugee children.

Challenges in regards to integrating two different cultures into a whole were only found in the extracts from participants in Denmark. Participants in Denmark spoke about issues relating to their identity, and expressed that they felt part foreign (from their parents' country of origin) and part Danish. Refugee children may benefit from opportunities to integrate traditions and norms from their country of origin with those of the asylum-country, as suggested by one of the female

participants in Denmark. Restoring stability and meaning, by facilitating ethnic pride, might be one way in which to support refugee children in educational contexts.

A common theme that was found across the two contexts was the emphasis on social and educational support, encouragement and guidance from teachers and mentors, as well as more general support provided by friends, peers and family members. Offering refugee children, youth and adults the opportunity to create meaningful and close social relationships seems to be of central importance for positive integration and well-being (e.g Berthold, 2000; Goodman, 2004; Hodes et al., 2008; Thommessen, Corcoran & Todd, 2015; Thommessen, Corcoran & Todd, 2017). Previous research suggests that peer groups and social support provided by friends may be a protective factor (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Enabling opportunities for social relationships to develop should be encouraged when working to improve the well-being of asylum-seeking and refugee individuals, and may therefore be an aspect that is particularly important to consider when planning intervention and support initiatives for such groups.

When looking at the findings through an *Ecological* lens, it seems that prevention and intervention strategies could be tailored to various different levels. Interventions within *Microsystems* might include working with families or within schools, or by strengthening connections between children, families and staff in schools (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Working therapeutically with parents or teacher training could influence children indirectly – at an *Exosystem level*. Likewise, the need for changes at the *Macrosystem* level was highlighted by participants' perceived experiences of racism and discrimination, stressing the disadvantageous effect of negative discourses about refugees and the adverse consequences of increasingly harsh political tendencies. Interventions seeking to encourage refugee youths' positive involvement in the asylum-country, and providing them with an opportunity to challenge harmful and harsh political ideologies (Betancourt & Khan, 2008) seem important. In summary, the extracts in this study stress the importance of considering prevention and intervention strategies in broad and inclusive terms, by moving beyond a narrow perspective on the individual child's difficulties, or challenges with the family. Instead, it seems important to consider connections between the child, family, school and wider community, including *Macrosystem* political decisions that automatically affect all the preceding systems.

8. Limitations

Due to the relatively small number of participants in this study and their individual differences, the findings cannot be generalised to broader asylum-seeking and refugee groups. Nevertheless, the fact that similarities were found across contexts, and with participants from different cultures and contexts, as well as the fact that findings align with previous research, indicates that these findings are of general importance – and may therefore also be seen as a strength of the study.

Without doubt, interviews may have differed if another researcher had conducted them and if the context had been different. It is inevitable that the participants in this study chose to reveal some experiences, needs and opinions whilst withholding other information. Similarly, the analyses included the themes that were judged by the two authors to be most prominent in the data, meaning that the full data set could not be presented. It is possible that individuals who are motivated to take part in research are more likely to be high achievers who have the personal resources necessary to discuss personal needs and experiences with a researcher. Asylum-seeking and refugee individuals with fewer personal resources, or individuals with past experiences that hinder participation, such as language barriers or suspicion of authority figures due to earlier negative or distrustful experiences, may be less motivated to take part in research. Consequently, individuals who suffer the most may be less inclined to participate in research, and researchers may therefore be more likely to make contact with individuals who are more resourceful (Carswell et al., 2011), thereby leaving more vulnerable voices unheard.

9. Concluding remarks and reflections

Based on the findings from this study, school environments seem an optimal setting for prevention and intervention strategies seeking to facilitate integration, positive adjustment and development in refugee children in asylum-countries, not restricted to European countries. Likewise, school settings provide a critical setting where refugee children can develop meaningful and constructive connections to peers, teachers and other professionals. The findings also highlight the importance of providing appropriate training for teachers when dealing with refugee children. This includes supporting children in the educational setting, as well as having sufficient collaboration strategies and referral systems in place when clinical or therapeutic interventions are needed. Likewise, schools can provide safe and stable environments for refugee children, whose parents may be affected by mental health issues and social challenges, as well as being a place in which discrimination, racism and stigmatization can be actively countered. The Ecological theory provides

a useful framework when developing and planning prevention and intervention strategies for children affected by war and conflict.

We conclude with a quote from a female participant, who was interviewed in Denmark.

P1(female): If you just listen to the child, and listen to what they have to say, just ask them – and you could have saved a lot of time and even money in the long term. If they had only asked the kids what they were thinking about and worrying about.

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