

Seize opportunities, take children seriously

PEACE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM

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This article describes 10 aspects of potential opportunities in learning processes when dealing with the topics of refugees and asylum and offers ideas from the perspective of peace education.

In Germany, the topics of refugees' flight and asylum are increasingly characterised by fears of security threats. Despite a generally positive attitude toward refugees, children do not remain untouched by this development. "My parents are against refugees. I'm for them. How can I convince my parents to be for asylum

too?" In August 2016, Stefanie sent this question to the editors of the internet portal *www.frieden-fragen.de*.¹ Other questions in the portal make it clear that children have an enormous desire for information: Why do people flee from their countries? How do they come to Germany? Why are refugees from Iran in Germany? What can I do to help the people in/from Syria? The children's openness and curiosity offer an opportunity for talking about this topic in a way that is oriented on peace and therefore constructive. In light of the current threat-focussed discussion, awareness of positive approaches is an

important prerequisite for initiating the necessary social learning processes and being able to support these processes with peace education. The following 10 aspects of these potential opportunities are meant to provide a basis for discussions.

1. **Personality development and self-efficacy with refugee work:** When employed or working voluntarily with refugees, many people get to know new aspects of living together and find this experience to be enriching for their own personality development and lifestyle. The examination of basic attitudes and perceptions takes place on multiple levels: In direct encounters with refugees and in co-operation with people who are dedicated to helping refugees, but also when confronted with people in their neighbourhood, friends, or family members who do not share their views. With adults as their role models, children experience a conflict culture. The 3rd International Summer School for Young Peacebuilders, organised by the Berghof Foundation in Germany, July 2016, underlined the relevance of this observation. A main focus of the summer school was to provide inspiration for a conflict-sensitive approach to refugee work, which the participants could implement within the context of their countries of origin or residence (Rwanda, Uganda, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan,

RESEARCH

Iran, Turkey, Greece, Ukraine, Montenegro, Sweden, France, Germany). The aspect of self-efficacy played an important role in the participants' discussions.

2. **Learning to better understand the world:** People from conflict and war zones are becoming a part of everyday life in many world regions. Living together promotes curiosity and the thirst for knowledge about life in other countries and the reasons people flee their homes. Connections between lifestyles, domestic and foreign policy decisions, or economic priorities in host countries on the one hand and the (im)possibilities of self-determined ways of living on the other are revealed through personal stories and open up a new view of the world. Learning processes take place not only by getting to know how other people live but also through the people themselves. Global thinking, that means an awareness of the interconnectedness of the world, thereby increases. The children's curiosity about the unknown receives essential support in a protected environment.
3. **Re-evaluating your own past:** In Germany's history – like in many other countries – there have been many experiences with flight. People who fled to Germany during and after the Second World War have made significant contributions to the development of the Federal Republic. Refugees from Germany were taken in worldwide. Without migrants or refugees in the post-war years, Germany would not be the country it is today – highly respected for its openness. Against this background, the so

called “refugee crisis” is perceived as a new stage in the development process of a contemporary civil society. Children and adolescents get to know new aspects of their families.

4. **Recognising people in need as partners:** The willingness of many people worldwide to support usually does not end with just “helping” but then develops into a partnership through a (sometimes very painful) learning process. The danger of being locked into a perspective of superiority and inferiority is recognised and actively addressed, creating the possibility for true empathy to arise. Direct encounters offer opportunities: Children and adolescents who had had direct encounters with refugees expressed fears only in exceptional cases (see also Götz & Holler in this issue).
5. **Revealing exclusion mechanisms:** Every person has had painful experiences with exclusion and wants to avoid it for themselves: in their family, at school, or at work. When consciously confronting the actual or attempted exclusion of “foreigners” or “others”, the sensitivity to mechanisms of systematic exclusion, racism, and racially motivated violence increases. Equality and liv-

ing together peacefully are seen as a win-win situation. The atmosphere of accepting differences can also be seen in schools and makes it easier to handle exclusion mechanisms like bullying.

6. **Strengthening and redefining the public good and (democratic) achievements:** Some achievements that were fought for in long social and political confrontations are now taken as a matter of course; they have lost their creative energy and stagnated. When confronted with the refugees' attitudes, positions, and experiences, these achievements and their fragility seem to become more relevant and new life is breathed into them. One example from the perspective of peace education is children's right to be raised without violence. At the same time, openness increases towards other cultures' experiences in regard to organising communities focussed on the public good.
7. **Viewing human rights and dignity from a compassionate perspective:** The necessity of continually upholding human rights and human dignity for ourselves, our society, and our nation is undisputed as is the imperative for demanding these principles in other countries and regions. It becomes visible and tangible that limiting the right to asylum violates international law and seriously violates the human dignity of people who have fled to Germany. Not only the large number of unaccompanied minor refugees makes the topic of children's rights important.
8. **Recognising options for action and participation:** Studies on

the German context have shown that many people who work with refugees would also like to make a contribution to social change toward a (global) society with more solidarity. In a politicisation process, new approaches for political participation are jointly tested out with the people who arrived in the host countries. Discussions about participatory elements for children and adolescents in and outside of school (children's councils, children's parliaments, youth councils) are renewed and new spaces are discovered. These might also apply for other countries and regions where large parts of civil society have stepped up in accompanying and supporting refugees.

9. **Counteracting radicalisation:** Refugees who have good experiences in host countries are less receptive to arguments of radicals who, for example, use discrimination against Muslims as a justification for violence against non-Muslims. People who are treated respectfully upon their arrival in the host country can be strengthened by these experi-

ences, develop ideas for a way of life that respects human dignity in their home countries, and stand up for these ideas. New inspirations can thereby arise for changes in their countries of origin. Finally, the aim is for children and adolescents to grow up together in an environment of safety, security, acceptance, and good prospects for their lives so that the breeding ground for radicalisation is removed. Violence becomes less attractive.

10. **Work with refugees as peace work:** When peace educators accompany, encourage, and qualify people working with refugees, this promotes the ability to realise the opportunities described above. New possibilities for reaching a common understanding that leads to a peaceful community are opened up. Work with refugees is understood as peace work.

Media reporting can support the learning processes described above together with the potential opportunities these processes present. In this context, children and adolescents must be taken seriously with their questions and

needs. Young people have the right to age-appropriate and understandable information in which not only the violent but also the peaceful aspects of reality are made visible (adults, too, by the way!). Descriptions of the causes and background of violence, war, and flight must then be oriented on the current status of (peace) scientific findings. At the same time, the ubiquitous examples of successfully living together cannot be neglected without glossing over the connected conflicts. This calls for constructive and solution-oriented reports that encourage people because they not only show feasible ways out of violence and conflicts but also inspire people to become active themselves. Finally, the objective is to create protected media spaces in which children and adolescents can mutually inform each other and talk. ■

NOTE

¹ frieden-fragen.de [peace questions] is an internet site for children, parents, and educators that informs about questions related to war and peace, fights, and violence and enables an exchange on these topics.

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