

Dealing with stress using social theatre techniques with young Syrian students adapting to a new educational system in Turkey: a case study

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Abstract

After a migration process, people begin to yearn for the settledness of their previous lives; this includes those in the education process. After the crisis in Syria, millions of refugees came to Turkey, in that, many of whom were students. The students started to enrol and although the schools' curricula are in Arabic, students of these schools must pass a university entrance exam in the Turkish language to apply. There is also a quota limitation imposed on foreign students in universities. As these obstacles evoke extra-migratory stress among young refugees, the psychosocial support (PSS) needs become even more pronounced. The PSS workshop series outlined in this field report was conducted for Syrian students as they prepare for university admission. The series aimed to support participants to deal with this stressful process through six sessions using art and creativity methods and social theatre tools, including drama therapy games and forum theatre techniques. Through such techniques, the participants were encouraged to express their fears and future anxieties as well as find solutions for self-defined obstacles.

Keywords: Drama therapy, education, forum theatre, future anxiety, migration, social theatre, stress, Syria, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Background

Change is an important process in human life, which may have either positive or negative consequences. While the migration (displacement) process alone is a very stressful one, enrolling in a schooling system, which is completely different from a person's own, adds weight to an already heavy burden of stress.

After the crisis in Syria, millions of people came to Turkey and among these people are students who need to be enrolled in the Turkish educational system. To have their diplomas accredited, Syrian high school students studying at temporary education centres (TECs) register for two distance courses (in Turkish). Then, after completing these two courses, they take an equivalency test in the Provincial Directorate of National Education. If they pass this test, they will obtain the diploma that they need.

In Turkey, there is a national university entrance exam that applies to every high school graduate. For foreigners, this is an exam called the 'Foreigner Students Exam' (YÖS – Yabancı Öğrenci Sınavı). This exam is in Turkish and/or English, and unlike the exam for the Turkish students, each university conducts their own YÖS examination. After the

exam, even if the foreign student passes, her/his enrolment is subjected to a quota limit. Universities cannot receive more than 5% foreign students. This quota is not only for Syrians, but also for all foreign students who all need to apply to a university through the same process. If the students pass this exam, then the TÖMER, the Turkish language proficiency exam, follows. If a foreign student gets less than C1 level (basically fluency), she/he needs to take language course at the university, which is costly.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with children aged between 13–17 and their parents to understand family needs and service provision gaps in 2017 in Hatay, Turkey. In these FGDs there were very important findings, one being that; 'children and parents are concerned about their future. They do not have clear information about potential higher education and job opportunities. In addition to lack of information, constantly changing schooling and

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How to cite this article: Yüsek, C. (2018). Dealing with stress using social theatre techniques with young Syrian students adapting to a new educational system in Turkey: a case study. *Intervention*, 16(2), 175-180.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

www.interventionjournal.org

DOI:

10.4103/INTV.INTV_38_18

examination systems increase parents' and children's concerns and frustration' (IOM, 2017).

As a result, Syrian students face stress and experiencing 'future anxiety'. Future anxiety is defined by Zaleski (1996, p. 165) as 'a state of apprehension, uncertainty, fear, worry and concern of unfavourable changes in a more remote personal future. In an extreme case this would be a threat (panic) that something really catastrophic may happen to a person'.

In the findings of the FGDs, another issue shared by refugees was the timing of school and the lack of school transportation. Students have to wake up extremely early in the morning, while it is still dark, to get to school on time. Besides logistical stress, Syrians (especially girls) felt very insecure during winter time, having to walk long distances in the dark to reach school buses. Regarding school transportation, all adults and students clearly mentioned the inadequate number of buses which are provided (IOM, 2017).

As it can be understood from the FGD findings, there are major challenges in enrolling in new schooling system, and these challenges have negative effects on students' mental health.

Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Forced migration and displacement due to conflict, insecurity, natural disasters and human rights violations are often accompanied by stressors that are not considered 'normal' and can be accompanied by a temporary limitation of the capacity to cope (IOM, 2012, p. 1). This can negatively influence mental health. Mental health is defined by World Health Organization (2018) as 'a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'.

In recognition that playing any games not only can be an important contribution to psychosocial wellbeing, creating a playful place for these students, including team building activities and theatre plays, but also could be important to deal with stress during this temporary situation, where they lack coping capacity. Using drama therapy tools may help the group to express themselves and improve insight, to analyse problems from different points of view, and to enable such migrated students to find solutions for identified problems, thereby helping the students to deal with stress and develop resilience.

This field report describes the psychosocial support (PSS) workshops conducted for Syrian students as they prepare to enter university in Turkey. These workshops aimed to support participants in dealing with this stressful process and gain coping capacity. Six sessions were conducted with the participants using art and creativity methods and drama therapy tools such as forum theatre and social theatre techniques.

Drama therapy

The North American Drama Therapy Association (2018) defines drama therapy as 'the intentional use of drama and/

or theatre processes to achieve therapeutic goals. Drama therapy is active and experiential. This approach can provide the context for participants to tell their stories, set goals, solve problems, express feelings, or achieve catharsis'. By using drama technique, clients can improve their self-knowledge. With the drama therapy activities, people can have the chance to review their relations with other people, create new roles and use these roles in real life.

Drama therapy also helps participants with changing behaviours, building skills, self-development, etc., and all of which can contribute to resilience capacity. Drama therapy can be used in prevention or as an intervention process. Participants can be families, individuals, or groups, including elderly people, prisoners, people with disabilities, drug addicts, abuse survivors, as well as others, and this therapy event welcomes anyone from the public. Drama therapy consists of games, paintings, singing, theatre plays, dialogue, enactment and storytelling. Participants themselves prepare step-by-step to build the confidence to start enacting their problems and issues.

In this application, drama therapy games, social theatre processes and the techniques of the theatre forum were used concentrically, and they could not be separated from each other. All of the drama approaches include arts and creativity methods. For example, in one of the activities, some objects were placed in the middle of the room and the participants were asked to use these objects to represent themselves. In this activity, there were creativity and theatre segments enacted using these objects to demonstrate and make the audiences understand their meaning. The sessions proceeded gradually, step-by-step. First the participants defined the problems by themselves, and then they made some images about these problems. Then, each of the images was described using one word, followed by using a sentence before finally the participant had the chance to move and act to complete the play. Combining mediums in this way should help to make the participant's problems and fears gradually more tangible and accessible.

The whole drama process takes time, because first there is a need to build trust not only between the facilitator and participants, but also among the participants too. Six to eight sessions were considered to be sufficient for enacting change.

The five sequential phases in drama therapy

Renee Emunah (1994, pp. 34–47) defines five phases of drama therapy, which are outlined below:

- (1) The first phase is named *dramatic play* and is about providing a safe space with a playful environment, where participants can get to know each other. This process includes interactive, playful activities and structured theatre plays.
- (2) The second phase is called *scene work*. This phase focuses on sustained dramatic scenes, and in these scenes, the roles and characters are developed.
- (3) The third phase focuses on *role play* and the role of imaginary dramatisation to reflect the clients' actual

state, becoming a dramatic medium to reflect their own lives.

- (4) The fourth phase called *culminating enactment*, and this phase is an examination process. Roles, relationships and conflicts of the client in current life situations start to be examined and lead to a broad level of introspection. Scenes of this phase evolve around experiences that affect and disturb the client's present. This phase sometimes leads to disclosure, and the clients start to talk about issues that were previously hidden from the group, the therapist and even from themselves. Drama therapy is said to be the primary source of this phase.
- (5) The fifth phase is the *dramatic ritual*. The treatment process comes to end and is terminated in this phase. The clients realise the achievements within the group and the changes that have taken place within oneself.

Social theatre

Social theatre is a technique often used in drama therapy. Schininà (1998) defined social theatre as '*a theatre based on the body and personal relationships. This theatre not only has a therapeutic approach and neither does it aim only at aesthetic and artistic concerns. This theatre can be an instrument for social action, for heightening relational and social qualities of the interactions between people through workshops, laboratories and performance*' (Schininà, 2004a; p. 51).

Social theatre is important to express common problems, and the embodiment of these problems will help people to think about possible solutions by enacting and dramatising real situations.

As suggested by Bernardi (2004) and Schininà (2004b); cited in Jennings (Ed.), 2009, p. 37:

Social theatre is a theatre for change. It is a theatre that facilitates individuals, groups and communities in finding their own ways to meet their own needs, improve their own social functioning and eventually overcome unhappy situations. [. . .] Creative tools, communication techniques, and artistic ethics [. . .] used in combination can bring people to express themselves freely, communicate better than before, redefine safely their own roles, discuss peacefully possible changes, and enact socially these personal and collective changes.

Forum theatre

Forum theatre is a technique put forward by Augusto Boal (1992), among the body of the techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO). In this technique, there is a play presenting a situation of oppression. The play is shown twice and in the second repetition, audience members can stop the performance or game by shouting 'stop' and that audience member can replace the oppressed character. These audiences are called '*spect-actors*'. The spectator tries to change the situation and tries to reach different outcomes by using his/her own perspective and problem solving skills for the oppressive situation that is being acted out. Different spectactors explore different alternatives that

can change direction of the play. There can be limitless trials until solution suggestions are exhausted. In these games, there is a need of a 'joker' to facilitate the play.

Forum theatre brings performers and audience together as equals. The performance includes a range of actions and solutions brought by the whole group, providing contextually relevant and highly applicable exploration of oppressive situations. ToO was originally used as a tool for political change, and an adapted version is now being used in educational settings (Farmer, 2014).

In this small study, the participants are students. They face problems mostly related to universities, and many of them feel stuck and see these problems as unsolvable. By using forum theatre techniques, participants are able to enact their problematic situation for the audiences to understand.

METHODS

Background

The author is an IOM field worker with a social work diploma and a graduate student who works with a Mobile Outreach Team in rural areas that have no other organisations at work. They conduct PSS activities in this field. The team focus is on information dissemination, awareness raising sessions, social cohesion activities and mental health and PSS related services such as group, family and individual counselling.

The author attended the *Executive Certificate Program on Psychosocial Support and Conflict Transformation* training provided by IOM in Turkey in 2017. This field report describes the workshop conducted by the author as an output for this training in June 2017. The information from the FGDs, as described earlier, helped the author to define the target group and design the programme. The participants recruited were studying at 12th grade and preparing for university entrance exams. Because there was a group of 25 students preparing for university, in that all of them were sent by the school officials to the first session of the PSS programme.

Psychosocial programme sessions

Six sessions were conducted using forum theatre and social theatre techniques. Each of the sessions consisted of the following: check in (asking the participants how they feel), warm up (an activity to prepare the participants for the main theme), main activity, cool down (to gently bring the participants out of the session atmosphere) and closure (discussing and feedback about the session). Each session took two hours. The sessions were held in one of the TECs in Belen, in a classroom.

The topics worked on were defined by the participants. In the first session, the group was split up into sub-groups (groups of four), and they were asked to write down the three most common problems they faced. In the plenary, they then chose the most common three problems, which were having less quota for foreigners in the university; if they get into a university in another city they will be separated from their families and the language barrier.

Twenty-four participants attended the first session, but because the group was mixed gender and the male students often had to work after school to support their families, only seven participants regularly attended the following sessions (six females and one male).

The students who participated in the workshop were between 17 and 20 years old. These students were travelling together to take the exams that were held in different locations and universities, so they knew each other, but not well.

Eight sessions, twice a week for four weeks were planned, however, because the participants were in the process of university registration and travelling to take exams, two sessions had to be cancelled. Therefore, only six sessions were conducted.

Measurement

To have an idea of change in stress levels due to completing the sessions, we used a Stress Level Questionnaire, which is used by the Ministry of National Education (n.d) in Turkey. There are two different types of this questionnaire for two age groups, so for this work we used the questionnaire for 6th to 12th grades. There are 28 questions in the test and the answers were 'often', 'sometimes' and 'never' scored as 1, 2, or 3 points. If the score of a person was 20–29, the stress level is normal, 30–35 is medium and 36 and more was high level.

Findings

Pre-test and post-test questionnaire results below are for the seven regularly attending participants:

As seen in Table 1, there is a decrease in the number of high level stress participants after the drama therapy programme.

The following is an example of one of the group exercises. In one of the sessions, the participants were asked to make images of their fears about the future. One of the participants made an image of a person holding a diploma, and in the second image the diploma was in a cup full of water referring to a Syrian expression of 'dreams to fall in water', pertaining to disappointment. The participant was fearful of the future. Some of the ideas expressed were, what if having struggled to get a diploma, they cannot work with their diplomas in either Turkey or Syria? Yet, there was no legislation for this issue in Turkey. After the participant demonstrated the fear, it was observed that the other participants were relieved. It seemed that this technique helped participants to transfer intangible thoughts and feelings into more concrete expressions, by using metaphors. The participants tried to recreate the stressful environment. When they faced the situation, they started to

think again and realise that the problems were not as big as they expected. Although there might be some hardships, they began to think that they could overcome their problems.

In another example, participants learned to think more flexibly about their fears. They were asked to take an object and imagine that it has a different function to that which we expect. For instance, participants pretended that a tape was worn like a watch, or a tire was used like a ball, and a sticker used as a telescope, as well as a whole host of other objects. This activity demonstrated that, there is always another way to do or interpret things. This was related to their problems, in that sometimes it can be restricting to just see one side of a problem and stick to that side. If they can look from different viewpoints and be flexible, they will have a better chance to overcome it.

Having asked the participants how they found the groups, one of the participants said; *'in the first session we did not expect to achieve that much. We had a lot of fun, we were stressed too much because of exam anxiety, now we are relaxed'*.

Another said; *'we have learned to see the problems from different points of view, a person should use his/her brain, and shouldn't be focused to one side of a problem. There were participants that stopped coming, we are sorry for them'*.

One participant expressed that; *'when I had attended to the first session, I had thought playing is for children, then in the second session I learned that it was not only playing games. I am a person that speaks too much, but I have learned that sometimes there is no need to speak. I have made these things (enactment) for the first time'*.

DISCUSSION

As was defined above, the participants were experiencing future anxiety due to uncertainties related to their education. This was firstly because the educational system was new to them and they were trying to adapt. Secondly, they had fears of being in another city for the university and having to leave their families. Lastly, after graduation there was no clear legislation about equal opportunities or information about job or work opportunities that may be available.

By using social theatre in the sessions, participants were able to work on and explore thoughts and feelings around what may happen in the future. The participants created the stage for plays, and enacted every event that could happen (including their fears). Then the participants tried to bring (using forum theatre) solutions and suggestions to overcome hard times. Using this approach seemed to have a positive impact on the participants stress levels (using a stress level questionnaire), therefore, this small project achieved its aim to support participants in dealing with this stressful process and gain coping capacity.

Though not measured using an assessment tool, it seemed that the participants became more confident. Compared to the first session, by the end of the programme, the

Table 1: Stress levels before group work and after

Stress level	Normal	Medium level	High level
Pre-test	2	2	3
Post-test	3	4	0

participants started to volunteer for the plays and became more enthusiastic about solutions. Using theatre to embody fears made the fears more tangible. When the participants realised their fears, they also realised that they can be overcome.

Being in a group supported this process, because if someone felt she/he could not overcome a fear, others with the same fear could support this person and help them problem solve. When group members overcome the hardship, others will be encouraged by the success of their friends. Forum theatre sessions were creative and their group format made them collaborative. The participants were able to find more than three solutions for each problem. The ideal number of participants of a group for forum theatre is 15–25 persons. In our group, although there were less number of participants, the suggested solutions were appropriate and convenient. For example, for those having anxiety about not waking up in the right time, when they go another city to study at university, the students suggested setting an alarm to wake up in the morning. This may sound very simple, but some of the participants are woken by their parents and they do not know how to deal with this otherwise. Or, some participants were worrying about their families not being able to support them and not having time to work while studying at the university. Some group members suggested working during the summer to save money for university. Another one suggested taking lectures three days a week and to work the other days. These solutions were both reasonable and applicable.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Firstly, this was a very small case study, so results cannot be generalised. However, important feasibility considerations can be made as a result of this study.

Also, there was a time limitation as part of the IOM *Certificate Program* that the author had attended, so sessions had to be completed in four weeks. As mentioned earlier, the group work was planned to be completed over eight sessions, but the university application process was still going on during these sessions, meaning that due to the whole group's travel to another city for the exams, two sessions were cancelled. Of the original 25 participants invited to attend, only seven participants took part. The male participants were working after school to support their families. For this reason, most of them could not attend the sessions. Also, because it was Ramadan month, most of the participants were fasting, so they were less willing to move during the warm up activities. The students were in the process of being accepted or refused by universities and still attending exams for different universities. This may have also skewed results because of exam stress affecting their stress levels. The timing of the sessions should be carefully considered when running a programme like this one. This PSS group activity should be performed during school time, before the application process starts, so that the students can have time to attend these sessions.

Before working with a group, there is also a need to do some research or at least have some information about the cultural background of the group. There were a number of

gender issues that required consideration in running this programme for Syrian refugees. Also, having a mixed gender group may have affected the initial attendance and interest in the programme. In the very beginning of the sessions, the girls and boys were standing far apart from each other and the effort to leave distance between each other was very apparent, with the groups not interacting.

Despite there only being one male in the group, we observed that during the plays, if a manager role needed to be played, the group chose a male. The facilitator realised this (and afterwards the rest of the group also reflected) and encouraged females to take these roles. The cultural gender roles made it difficult for participants to fully participate in the sessions. One of the IOM colleagues, a Consultant for Accountability to Affected Populations talked to the girls after the last session to gather their opinions. According to the consultant, the girls were very happy to be part of the group work. Their only concern was to be in mixed groups. One girl reflected that normally she cannot laugh in front of males, but here, even though there was a male in the group she could laugh freely. The girls said they would prefer groups to be female only, so that they could share deeper issues about themselves. If the programme consisted of same gender groups, the participants may feel more at ease with each other sooner and results may be better.

Lastly, the sessions held in a classroom of a TEC. Sometimes the sessions were interrupted by other students. The noises from outside were distracting. If there would be a different place, outside of school, it might have been better.

Despite the small group and not being able to generalise the findings, this case study suggests that social theatre processes and techniques might be a feasible and potentially effective and acceptable way for reducing stress for student refugees. However, further research is needed with an adequate sample size and during a time when more students can attend sessions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ekin Ekici, my supervisor, for her usual great support in the writing process and for her great feedback after the sessions, Derya Ferhat for always being supportive and encouraging me to complete the article, and my supervisor for the field report, Guglielmo Schininà, who guided me in the writing process and whose suggestions shaped the programme planning.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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