

A peer education program for adolescent girls in refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Coping with transitions

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1 Introduction

This chapter reports educational research undertaken in two refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study focused on adolescent girls whose education has been disrupted through departing Syria and living a new life as refugees. The girls had experienced ruptures to their lives: moving across a border (geographical transition), changing from their ‘home’ lifestyle to life in tents in refugee camps, separation from friends and family (social transition), and changes to the education on offer (educational transition). In addition, they were dealing with numerous other social issues, including abuse, harassment, restrictions on freedom of movement and choices, early marriage and health matters (social transition). They were also growing up—developing into young women (developmental transition), a process that interacts with cultural traditions and expectations, such as marriage.

The adolescent girls had come from Syria. March 2011 saw the beginning of demonstrations against President Bashar Al-Assad, marking the start of civil war (Tyyska et al. 2017). This was inspired by the Arab Spring, and was a reflection of resentment from unemployment, corruption and an absence of political freedom (Wieland 2012). The Syrian government’s attempt to end the protests by force caused further eruptions, including ongoing civil war, the division of ethnic and religious sects, and the involvement of foreign powers (BBC 2018). Indeed, 55% of the Syrian population has been displaced, with 5.7 million refugees, 6.2 million Internally Displaced People, and 13 million people requiring humanitarian assistance (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019), making Syrians the second largest refugee population in the world (Culbertson & Constant 2015). Many who fled Syria as refugees resorted to safer havens in Turkey, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. In 2022, 11 years later, the refugee camps in these regions are still occupied by Syrian refugees.

The duration of such transitions is unknown and can last decades (Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center 2021). In addition, the challenges

encountered along the way, such as trauma, loss of loved ones, poor health, poverty and unemployment, have been found to make life mentally and physically difficult (Adey et al. 2020; Kabranian-Melkonian 2015). Indeed, vast humanitarian implications stem from refugee crises, as refugees are vulnerable and they require shelter, water, medical care, food and other services (Adey et al. 2020; Braithwaite et al. 2019). Dealing with the conditions in refugee camps involves transitions, particularly in terms of geographical dislocation and different social conditions, and these often create further vulnerabilities (Leaning 2001). Child marriage has been identified as a significant issue among Syrian adolescent girls after displacement (Chakraborty 2019; El Arab & Sagbakken 2019; Mourtada et al. 2017). Some families want to preserve their daughters' honour and family reputation; others see marriage as a solution for financial and food stability (Chakraborty 2019) and as a response to extreme life circumstances (Høvring 2019). Girls in young marriages are more prone to face domestic violence (Chakraborty 2019), exploitation, and psychological pain as they feel isolation and distance from family and friends (Karasapan & Shah 2019). These are but some of the social transitions that occur.

Other predicaments relate to legal documents, including school certificates and degrees (Karasapan & Shah 2019), and these are part of the educational transitions of young people. For many refugee youth, continuing their formal education is difficult, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR] 2021) reporting that only 48% of refugee youth attend school. Even though schools are situated within the refugee camps, education for young people is often compromised. Not only do schools have problems, such as poor resourcing in terms of teachers and facilities, but other more urgent factors, including food and shelter, often impact on the take-up of schooling (Ahmed 2021; Celik 2020; Rashid et al. 2019; Zebari et al. 2020). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] (2015, 2019) has reported some of the challenges, emphasising that "quality of learning for children was a pressing concern" (UNICEF 2019, p. 3). Although Celik (2020) pointed out that school can provide a normality for life in the camp, it is often "very difficult to adapt to school, class, teachers and friends" and to have academic expectations (p. 84) when refugee life is full of transition, challenging experiences and trauma.

Indeed, it is recognised that life in refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region is "very hard and the education is not good enough" (Begikhani 2020, p. 292). It is therefore critical that education in refugee contexts ensures that young people build skills to be resilient in the face of the various transitions they encounter, at least as a first step for surviving camp life. Although there is a growing body of research about refugee education, it generally focuses on education in locations where refugees have settled permanently, rather than in refugee camps which are meant to provide temporary accommodation

for those who have fled from their conflicted place of residence (Braithwaite et al. 2019).

The adolescent girls in this study could attend school in the refugee camps, although their experiences there were not always happy or productive. However, a youth space in each camp offered a peer education program, which was generally one week of activities focused on developing personal and life skills. The program was conducted by peer educators, who had also been refugees and still lived in the camp. We were unable to find any previous research that investigated this program or programs like it in similar contexts. This chapter, therefore, intends to address the research gap at the intersection of refugee girls in camp settings and peer education.

In the literature, peer education is usually associated with formal educational institutions such as schools and colleges (Topping 1996), whereas the current study is different, because it examines peer education outside of formal schooling and in a humanitarian context. As explained by Topping (2005), peer education involves “people from similar social groups who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by doing so” (p. 631). Dryden-Peterson (2017) explained that refugee education is “for an unknowable future” (p. 14). She argued that education has an important role in “creating certainty and mending the disjunctures of ... trajectories as refugees” (p. 16). These are important issues to consider in relation to the peer education program and its influence on the transitions in adolescents’ lives.

The research we are reporting examined a peer education program funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and working with youth affected by the Syrian crisis in Iraq. The program targets adolescent youth to remain at school, have access to hygiene kits, empower them within their community, and protect their health and safety (UNFPA 2015). UNFPA aims to assist youth to make appropriate decisions related to sexual and reproductive health, while having the right awareness, with a particular emphasis on marginalised adolescent girls (UNFPA 2019). The ultimate aim is for youth to be able to ensure their own well-being and to rebuild their societies when crises abate. For working with adolescents in humanitarian and crisis situations, UNFPA (2005) has developed numerous training toolkits for those organising programs such as its peer education program. The UNFPA Iraq office has provided intensive peer education training and training of trainers to youth in Iraq since 2008, as well as manuals to guide the peer educators and the program (UNFPA 2005). The peer education program was, at the time this research was conducted (and still is), a major component of its activities for youth development, particularly with vulnerable populations such as refugees.

The research described in this chapter was conducted in two refugee camps located in two governorates of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: the

Kawrgosk refugee camp in Erbil and the Domiz refugee camp in Duhok. Erbil received refugees from Syria in what is known as the first wave in 2010, and a second wave arrived in 2013. The Kawrgosk refugee camp is approximately 30 km from the centre of the city of Erbil. The Duhok governorate is 155 km from Erbil, and is situated in the west, near Turkey and Syria. The Domiz refugee camp is 18 km outside the Duhok city centre.

The study focused on two iterations of the peer education program, one in each camp, during 2018 and 2019. The program aimed to develop young people's life and survival skills. It was generally conducted as a five-day program, but the participants could attend as many times as they liked. The research deliberately investigated programs for adolescent girls, even though the program was also conducted for adolescent boys. The research questions were: What type of education did the peer education program offer the refugee adolescent girls? How did the program operate, especially in relation to the range of transitions that the girls were experiencing?

2 This study

The study set out to examine the peer education program that was available for adolescent girls living in two refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and what types of knowledges and skills were being addressed. The program operated at the youth space in the camps, a space where ongoing activities and workshops for youth were held, including art classes, music, sports, zumba, and theatre.

Conceptually, we draw on Paul and Quiggin's (2020) discussion of transformative education. They argued that education involves epistemic change—"providing ... new ways of looking at the world and teaching [students] to consider and criticize assumptions they had previously taken for granted" (p. 579)—along with personal change. Although Paul and Quiggin's work was focused on a different context from this study, they acknowledged that change can be "short-lived and intense" or longer and more sustained (p. 561), which seemed relevant to the way the peer education program operated, especially since it was offered as a short, one-week intervention. However, as already explained, the adolescent girls could attend the program as often as they liked.

The participants of this research were two distinct groups: the adolescent refugee girls, who attended the youth space and took part in peer education sessions, and peer educators, young women who worked directly with the adolescent girls. In total, there were 45 adolescent girls between 13 and 19 years old and five peer educators. All had fled Syria with their families and resided inside the refugee camps, thus holding refugee status. The adolescent

girls were of school age and were also attending the school located in the camp where they were residing. Participation in the peer education program and in the research project was voluntary.

The peer educators had similar backgrounds, having also arrived as adolescent refugees. They were still living within the refugee camp and had experienced the same transitions as the adolescent girls. The peer educators had previously participated in the program, and they had later been invited to join as peer educators. This meant that they were about three years older than the adolescent girls, but with very similar life experiences. Peer educators had received training and they were all provided with a copy of the UNFPA (2005) manual.

The data collection took place within the youth space inside the refugee camps. Data were collected through ethnographic techniques: semi-structured interviews (Barbour & Schostak 2005) with all of the research participants, observations of the peer education program they were either attending or conducting, informal conversations before, after and during the daily activities, and a field notes reflective journal (Creswell 2003). The interviews, which were conducted in Arabic and Kurdish, were conducted pre- and post-program and transcribed in English. As part of the data collection process, the first author spent time building trust with those attending or working in the youth spaces in the refugee camps to ensure research trustworthiness. This included participating in some of the activities and contributing snacks. Ethical clearance was obtained for the research (University of Southern Queensland, H18REA097).

Data analysis involved an inductive approach following the eight steps put forward by Creswell (2003): organising and preparing the data; reading through the data for general ideas, a coding process, notetaking, and then organising the data into sections before proceeding to interpret and bring meaning to the data at hand. In particular, we were interested in the characteristics of the program and how it worked transformatively (Freire 1993) to enable and empower the adolescent girls as they negotiated the challenges of life and transitions in the refugee camps. For this chapter, we draw on examples of transitions and how the program attempted to address them.

3 Findings

Although we did not deliberately set out to collect data about the schooling on offer in the two refugee camps, many of the adolescent girls talked about their dislike of school and drew comparisons with peer education. The peer educators said that schools did not cater for the adolescents and were disconnected from their everyday lives. In other words, the contextual factors that

impacted on the girls on a daily basis were not taken into consideration in the teaching at school. For example, the traumatic experiences of the adolescent girls and their backgrounds, stories and challenges seemed to be kept separate from their learning. The geographical, social and developmental transitions that the girls were experiencing were not the focus of the school education on offer.

3.1 Peer education in two refugee camps

In contrast, the peer education program was different from the more traditional and formal schooling that was available and, based on the program participants' interview responses, it was well received. Freire (1993) argued that most educational interventions fail because they are designed by outsiders based on their personal views of what reality is, rather than considering the views and experiences of those being targeted by the program. This was not the case for the peer education program conducted in the refugee camps. The program worked in flexible and responsive ways, where the overall focus was designed to address the transitions that took place in the lives of the adolescent girls, and their input during the program was taken into account. This meant that the program operated at the intersection of education and the transitions experienced by the adolescent girls. The peer educators demonstrated flexibility and sensitivity about program content, saying "We ... adjust to what is relevant in the camp," and "I don't stick to the manual anymore." They used topics from the manual (e.g., addiction, puberty, early marriage), but they also included camp-specific issues (e.g., unsafe locations) and issues that had arisen in previous sessions (e.g., disagreements, anger, misunderstandings, media information). This showed they were sensitive to the girls' feelings, and they did not single out particular girls.

In an interview, one of the peer educators (PE) reflected on an issue that arose from the social transition in the adolescent girls' lives: early marriage, one of the matters that the program attempted to address.

PE: You know most of the girls, they think about marriage. I don't know what it is about about marriage that is so ...

SM: So they like to get married?

PE: Yes, they're year eight and they are getting married. And if you ask the family they say it is her wish. Okay I don't get what, why straight away marriage. You know girls, they are year nine, they came to me. They had failed maths and English. I tutored them. One of them said if I fail this time I won't go back to school. Okay, why won't you go back to school? Because I want to get married.

The peer educators explained that they aimed to allow the adolescent girls to think critically regarding certain decisions in their lives, without being told directly what to do or what not to do. One of the peer educators stated: “We help them make the healthier decision for themselves by showing them the consequences that could happen.”

Part of the reason that the peer education program was able to do that was because it was conducted by young women who had been refugees themselves and still resided in the refugee camps. These peer educators had personal experience of the types of experiences that may have been problematic to the adolescent girls, and they were trained to provide relevant and appropriate learning for the girls. In particular, the program addressed a range of transitions: social transition that included early marriage, social injustice, social stigma, addiction, violence, and sexual harassment; geographical transition, such as safety and security while commuting to different locations in the camp; developmental transition, including focusing on puberty, sexual and reproductive health, and mental well-being, such as anger management and coping with emotions; and educational transition, such as the importance of remaining at school. It was clear that the program was providing targeted education to assist the adolescent girls to live and survive in the camps and to cope with the transitions that were occurring.

Personal safety within the refugee camps, for example, was one of the focus topics, and it addressed the girls’ social transition into a new living environment. In one of the peer education sessions, one of the adolescent girls spoke about a family friend’s daughter who was lost in the camp. She explained that a man took the girl by the hand in the wrong direction, and “she knew he was not taking her the right way so she screamed, let go of his hand and ran away.” It was not surprising for safety to be a focus of the peer education program, because Syrian girl refugees elsewhere in the Middle East have been identified as targets of harassment, even within host communities (Bartels et al. 2020), as a result of their geographical transition to new countries and communities. As Bartels et al. explained, they were seen as vulnerable and without protection in places where “the security risks are perceived to be high” (p. 8).

In addition, among Syrian refugee women, considerable gender-based violence, including rape, has been reported (Çöl et al. 2020). The peer education program addressed topics such as communication, dealing with emotions, social problems and addiction. These were just a few of the issues that demonstrated the need for life skills and decision-making skills to help the adolescent girls cope with the transitions that were taking place in their lives after leaving their home countries.

In their interviews after the program, the adolescent girls were questioned about the influence of the program on their thinking. The following

excerpt from an interview with Lara (pseudonym) is fairly typical of the girls' responses.

Lara: I changed my thoughts, and I learned about puberty, and ... and I learned about early marriage.

SM: What did you learn about early marriage?

Lara: Early marriage is not good. ...

SM: So you don't think you will marry early?

Lara: No, not until I become 20 years, 20 years and above. I don't want to get married. I don't like.

Lara's responses indicated that the program had encouraged discussion and thinking about social issues and developmental transitions. Some of the other girls reported that they felt more relaxed and comfortable in their surroundings, thus learning to cope with transitions. Dirin (pseudonym), for example, said: "To be honest, I was always angry, crying, and my mental well-being was zero, to be honest, just from stress, and I had missed Syria a lot, but I am more relaxed now. I am happier." According to one of the peer educators: "I felt that they [the adolescent girls] began to have a bit of hope."

3.2 How the program operated

The peer education sessions conducted in the refugee camps were participatory in nature. Even though the program did not talk about pedagogical approaches, it was evident that the activities and the strategies that were used were intended to be transformative: to equip the adolescent girls with skills and knowledges to survive the challenging environments of the refugee camps and numerous transitions. The program used a range of learning strategies: simulation activities, scenarios, dialogues, case study stories and role plays. These fit with Freire's (1993) problem-posing approach to education.

Simulation learning activities allowed the adolescents to imagine a hypothetical situation, and then to reflect on it and discuss it with their peers, thus listening to different opinions. Through being involved in these activities in ways that were relevant to them, the adolescent girls were able to bring their experiences and present their reflections in the discussions that followed. The participatory learning in this instance created what Shen et al. (2004) referred to when they talked about evaluation as "a valuable, lifelong, everyday skill that incorporates critical thinking and analysis" (p. 11). In shaping learning in this way, the peer education sessions enabled "deeper learning" and "increased awareness, and interest in, the issues surrounding topics covered in class" (Shen et al. 2004, p. 11). In terms of Paul and Quiggin's (2020) transformative education, the girls were able to see "new ways of looking at the

world” (p. 579) and to consider how they might act in particular circumstances.

This all occurred in the informal environment of the youth space. The activities were not part of a formal educational institution or a traditional classroom. Scenarios put the adolescent girls into an imaginary social environment where they were given the opportunity to see what it would be like to be in another’s shoes and to feel their feelings, and then to reflect on those vicarious experiences. In Mezirow’s (2000) terms, creating these experiences is a form of transformative learning that assists the conceptual understandings of the learners (Ukpokodu 2007). Fernando and Marikar (2017) argued that “learning is an active experience” (p. 110), and each of the strategies used by the peer educators helped to create active experiences.

Case study story, as a participatory learning method, was also used in the peer education program. In this strategy, the adolescent girls formed groups and each group was assigned a hypothetical story, usually no longer than one or two paragraphs, to analyse and reflect on. In one activity, the case studies centred on puberty. For example, one of the groups had to study a case about a 13-year-old girl who saw blood in her underwear. This activity aimed to raise awareness of menstruation. After a discussion amongst themselves, the group members presented a list of possible actions the girl in their story could take, including telling her mother or elder sister, asking for a sanitary pad, keeping herself warm, and so on. After the group presented their solutions to the full group of participants, the peer educator asked additional questions relating to the focus topic of menstruation (e.g., What is the first reaction when we menstruate? How do we feel? What do we do? How can we look after ourselves and keep hygienic?). This was to consolidate their learning. In the interviews after the program, a number of the adolescent girls reflected on this session in particular, stating that “I learned a lot” and “it was informative,” while another participant mentioned: “I was not shy when we spoke about it.”

Role plays were also used as a learning strategy. One activity saw the adolescent girls in assigned groups, with each group having a story to depict in a role play. The stories were provided on a piece of paper and included: an abusive father at home, bullying among peers at school, arguments among siblings at home, and parent-daughter relationships. The groups had time to plan their role plays and assign roles to each member of the group, before presenting to the whole group. The peer educator then posed questions, such as what a certain character could have done or said differently to achieve a more positive outcome. These questions invited input from the adolescent girls and provoked them to think further about the situations being considered. The adolescents were expressive and outspoken when explaining what each character could have done differently. They also criticised behaviours they saw within the role play. In other words, they were dealing with alterna-

tive ways of understanding events that were relevant to their lives (Paul & Quiggin 2020).

The overall purpose was that their learning could be transferred into their real lives, in terms of being aware of the issues that might affect them. Having previous knowledge, having thought about an issue before its occurrence, or knowing some of the options that might be possible, could allow for healthier decisions or better developed coping mechanisms. Role play also meant that the adolescent girls had rehearsed some possible ways of acting in particular situations or transitions in their lives.

One example was where a group depicted a scenario of early marriage. In the role play, the father of the bride-to-be and the father of the groom-to-be were negotiating the marriage. The bride-to-be was called in and told that tomorrow a Sheikh [religious man] would come and wed the two. The bride-to-be cried and remained silent. The scenario was well-played by the adolescent girls and immersed their peers in emotions. In the discussion, the peer educator asked the girls why the young girl in the role play did not speak up, and one of the girls held her hand up, replying: "If she speaks, she will be hit." Other girls gave various different opinions of the story they saw, and reflected on examples from the real lives of people they knew who were married early, either by choice or by force.

These activities had clear purposes. They drew on real life examples, but they also made the program participants aware of the prevalence of issues that could affect them at that time, or in the future. In addition, the process, particularly the dialogue that was part of the discussion after each activity, provided options—others way of seeing their world (Paul & Quiggin 2020)—for dealing with such issues. In both camps, the adolescent girls reflected on the activities positively, describing the experience as "fun ... informative ... enjoyable ... interesting and a change of scenery and atmosphere." After the sessions were finished, one of the girls said, "I didn't have nice friends at school. I didn't like school. Here [the peer education program] was nice, good friends and fun ... I benefitted a lot here. I learned."

4 Implications

The peer education program demonstrated an educational response to the specific challenges that Adey et al. (2020) and Kabranian-Melkonian (2015) described as characteristic of displacement. It offered education in a safe space and, unlike most peer education programs, it did not sit within a formal educational institution. Instead, it was an educational intervention offered in an informal learning environment in a humanitarian context.

Education is a tool for transformation (Freire 1993), and the manual (UNFPA 2005) and the peer educators identified this as an aim of the program. Using what Ukpokodu (2007) called an “activist pedagogy” (p. 315), the program provided opportunities for the adolescent girls to engage with and reflect on their lived challenges, and to take control of their own lives. By using active (Fernando & Marikar 2017; Ukpokodu 2007) and dialogic (Freire 1993) strategies to build problem-solving capacities, the program addressed social issues, such as child marriage, identified by Chakraborty (2019), El Arab and Sagbakken (2019) and Mourtada et al. (2017) as high risk.

Through educating the adolescent girls about issues relevant to their daily lives, the program aimed to empower them (Ukpokodu 2007) and develop strategies for coping with major life transitions. These coping strategies included learning how to deal with the challenges of the living conditions in the camp, how to make decisions that would ensure their health and safety, and how to manage emotions and relationships. Although the program explored issues similar to peer education programs in other locations (Southgate & Aggleton 2017), it was context-specific, focused on displacement (Adey et al. 2020; Kabranian-Melkonian 2015), and operated at the intersection of transitions experienced by the adolescent girls. Their learning meant that they were more likely to become agentic and be able to respond in a more informed way when transitions affected their lives.

As the discussion of data showed, the peer education program attempted to be responsive to the transitional needs of the adolescent girls and made their learning relevant to their lives in the refugee camp. However, the program went further than that, by considering issues and challenges that the girls might face in the future. In other words, the program aimed to facilitate survival in the here and now—the short-lived transformation that Paul and Quiggin (2020) talked about—as well as providing longer-term transformation that would equip them for future challenges. Thus the program was aimed at upskilling the adolescent girls for their “unknowable future[s]” (Dryden-Peterson 2017, p. 14).

The peer education program was an opportunity for real or potential problems to be considered, as a way of assisting the adolescent girls to gain awareness and skills to cope with life changing matters and to be able to make healthy decisions about circumstances that might be life threatening. Awareness-raising, decision-making and coping skills were all incorporated into the program. These reflected the lives the adolescents lived on a day-to-day basis, including the transitional challenges they faced. The topics of puberty and addiction, for example, were deliberately a focus of the program and this meant that the girls developed awareness about the issues and considered how they might respond.

In the research interviews and observations, there was a clear indication of the necessity of the peer education program to be responsive to the needs of the adolescent girls and for their learning to be relevant to their lives in refugee camps. As a result, the program and those conducting the program also needed to be flexible, both with the content and the management of timing and how the program functioned. Although the girls themselves were generally not aware of the issues and challenges they could face in the future, the program was building skills and understandings that should enable them to cope in new situations and contexts.

5 Conclusion

The peer education program was purpose-designed for adolescent girls in refugee camp contexts. This form of education was deliberately planned to have transformative effects. These were seen to emerge through opportunities for the adolescent girls to develop their communication abilities, to learn how to cope emotionally, and to be confident in thinking about decisions they might need to make as they live through future transitions.

Although life in refugee camps is uncertain and sometimes refugees live in camps for years, if not decades, the intent of the peer education program was to prepare them for whatever their lives might hold. Some refugees hope to move to developed countries for a new beginning. If that became a possibility, the girls would probably not bring a strong formal school education with them. However, educators in locations that receive refugees would benefit from understanding the type and intent of the informal educational opportunities that young people have experienced. Although our study did not collect data about the longer term effects of the program, it did show that it offered the adolescent girls the opportunity to be agentic, by developing skills and understandings that would enable them to cope with change in and to other contexts. In other words, the program focused on life and survival skills for the girls' current lives in the refugee camps, but it also had a futures orientation.

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