

Adolescent refugees and their adaptation in Austrian physical education classes – a call for restructuring existing policy

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Abstract

Within educational systems, discussions have long been held about whether and to what extent refugees and displaced people can be integrated. Due to rare insights this paper discusses in how far physical education can contribute to an integration of juvenile refugees during physical education classes in Austrian schools. Study participants consist of refugees having either fled due to the Syrian war or due to fear of facing Afghan persecution. For this study, three different adolescent refugees – each of them participating in different physical education classes and thus being embedded in varying social settings – have been observed over a period of one semester. Simultaneously, interviews with headmasters, sports teachers, refugees as well as ‘regular’ students and even parents of refugee students have been conducted to ensure a greater variety of data.

The investigation showed that participating refugees vary widely in terms of adaptation at school. While some of them can easily adapt to the new social setting, others face severe impairment due to traumas experienced before, during or after their flight; thus both psychological screening and tight monitoring is highly recommended.

Key words: adolescent refugees; inclusion, inclusive physical education, traumatisation, impairment;

1. Introduction

Andreas, Benjamin and Clara¹ share a common similarity - they are regarded as adolescent refugees within the Austrian school system. While the majority of refugees (some of them might even be regarded as migrants) started their journey from war-torn countries such as Syria and Afghanistan (Statistik Austria, 2021) together with their parents, an increasing number (nine per cent) among refugees arrives in Austria without their parents or any relative at all, thus being referred to as “unaccompanied minor refugees” (Interior Ministry Austria, 2021). Despite differences in terms of origin, flight history, first and second language skills and curricular education, these children and adolescents are regarded as students at a compulsory education age (Blossfeld et al., 2016; Burrman & Mutz, 2016; etc.).

Due to the above mentioned differences among refugees in terms of language skills, experiences with curricular education as well as possibly experienced traumata before or during their flight in combination with the increasing quantity of displaced people arriving in Austria since 2015, many of whom being obliged to attend school (ÖIF, 2017), the Austrian education infrastructure seems to meet this challenge seemingly unprepared.

Within the educational systems, discussions have always been held about whether and to what extent refugees and displaced people can be integrated. Physical education and sports appears to be

¹ For data protection reason the original names have been changed.

on top of the hierarchy among the subjects which have a high potential of integrating potentially vulnerable (i.e. handicapped) groups (Australian Sports Commission, 2006; Tiemann, 2014; Tiemann, 2015). Since the majority of the above mentioned studies focuses merely on “disability sport” (Black & Stevenson, 2012) including almost exclusively handicapped groups of students, the author aims at a broader discussion; hence this paper discusses whether and to what extent physical education can contribute to an integration of juvenile refugees and aims at answering the subsequent research questions:

- 1) (How) Do both juvenile refugees and ‘regular’ students adapt (to each other) during physical education in Austrian sports classes?
- 2) Since three different sports classes of three different schools have been observed over a period of one semester, the question arises whether or not a change of behaviour (i.e. adaptation) among adolescent refugees is observable compared to the beginning of the study.

First, the study design, including participants, analysis tools and background information are presented. Subsequently, the results of the analysis among refugees within the Austrian school system focusing strongly on physical education classes will be presented. After that a critical discussion of current strategies and approaches on how to integrate refugees, migrants or displaced people in Austrian classes is presented. In conclusion, further measurements, goals and possible challenges are discussed.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design

Due to the high vulnerability of the study participants – both students and more specifically adolescent refugees – a detailed description of the study design has been sent to the ethical review commission of the University of Vienna in advance of the study. It was only after the positive feedback of the ethics commission that the study could commence.

In the course of this study the researcher tried to understand the behaviour of participating juvenile refugees in Austrian sports classes from ‘the inside’ which means that already existing patterns facilitating the observation of social groups could not be applied to this study. Therefore, the “principle of a temporary participation in the area of investigation” (Thiele, 2003, p. 14) was chosen. Especially in social settings, study designs highlighting observers as passive participants are commonly chosen (Lamnek, 2005; Thiele, 2003). Over a period of one semester three different adolescent refugees, each of them participating in different physical education classes and thus being embedded in varying social settings, have been observed.

Simultaneously, interviews with headmasters, sports teachers, refugees as well as ‘regular’ students and even parents of refugee students have been conducted to ensure a greater variety of data. In total, 15 interviews have been conducted which were analysed together with the observation reports (cf. chapter 2.4).

2.2 Participants

In each of the three schools and their corresponding physical education classes so called ‘focus students’ have been selected, all of whom being adolescent refugees having arrived in Austria only recently (i.e. from 2017-2019). The procedure of selecting focus students has also been successfully carried out in other educational studies (Breidenstein, 2006, 2008; Huf, 2006; Kamper, 2015) since the continuous observation of individual students over a longer period of time allows researchers a

profound description and, most importantly, an in-depth analysis of the specific student and the corresponding social interactions (with classmates as well as teachers).

While table 1 shows that two male students and one female student from different age groups attending different Austrian school forms have been observed, table 2 highlights the differences between the juvenile refugees in terms of nationality, the period of residence in Austria and the participation in the specific sports group, respectively.

Table 1: Sampling of participants

Focus student	School type	Academic year
Andreas (male)	Grammar school	11
Benjamin (male)	Secondary school	8
Clara (female)	Secondary school	8

Table 2: Contextual information of the focus students

Focus student (sex)	Country of origin	Duration of residence in Austria/student as part of sport class
Andreas (male)	Syria	Since 2018/ since the school term 2018/19
Benjamin (male)	Afghanistan	unknown/ since the school term 2018/19
Clara (female)	Afghanistan	unknown/ since the school term 2017/18

2.3 Measurements

In order to analyse sports classes as social settings including “hierarchical aspects or inequalities” (Lofland et al. 2006) a two-dimensional approach for gathering data has been chosen. For the analysis of the focus students each of them being, as already mentioned above, an adolescent refugee (one of them being even unaccompanied and thus referred to as ‘UMF’²) each sports class has been observed once a week over a period of one semester starting from September 2018, which led to a total of 49 observation reports in the course of that semester. Before the actual start of the observation each class has been instructed to ensure that the students understand the purpose of the regular presence of a stranger in their physical education lessons so that they are not too distracted at the actual start of the observations (besides, open questions of the students could be sorted out although their parents had already been informed both at the end of the previous school and the beginning of the new school term).

The individual sports groups (including ‘regular’ students, focus students and their PE teachers) and the specific lessons have been video-recorded by both a fixed camera and a mobile camera ensuring that a) all corners and b) possibly scientifically relevant situations could be filmed from different perspectives and angles; in addition to that, observation reports (Lamnek 2005) have been conducted during the observations which immediately after the specific lesson have been merged according to Bodgan and Tylor’s (1975, p. 62f.), seemingly archaic but still useful, recommendation: “[R]ecord your notes as soon after the observation session as possible[...].”

² This abbreviation stands for “Unbegleiteter Minderjähriger Flüchtling” and means unaccompanied minor refugee.

Along with the ethnographic observations, interviews with headmasters, sports teachers, focus students as well as 'regular' students from the observed sports classes have been conducted to gather a greater variety of data.

2.4 Data Analysis

Both the observation reports as well as the conducted interview files had to be further processed after the data collecting process. While the interview files were transcribed onto a word file, the observation reports were analysed together with the corresponding film material from both the mobile and the fixed camera (whenever this was possible). By viewing and reviewing the film material, remarks and comments to earlier conducted observation reports could be added, since video documents are suitable to conserve both visible and audible incidences ensuring that profound insights into interactions can be undertaken (Dinkelaker & Herrle, 2009, p. 15).

In order to ensure highest possible data validation as well as replicability (Flick 2007; Lüders 2005; Thiele, 2003) another scientific researcher, had a look at the video sequences and added his remarks to the existing field reports. Comprehensible and overlapping remarks for each of the lessons have then also been transferred into a word file. The data processing from the interview files as well as the observation reports have been conducted using MAXQDA 2018.

For an analysis of the data the researcher applied the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) (Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Glaser & Strauss 1998), in which a code is being applied to almost all of the relevant text passages. In order to differentiate between seemingly unimportant and highly important text passages (a code was applied usually to the latter one), Saldana's (2016, p. 7f.) statement was obeyed: "Coding requires that you wear your researchers' analytic lens. But how you perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens and from which angle you view that phenomenon". Sipe and Ghiso (2004, p. 482f.) argue likewise by saying that: "All coding is a judgemental call [as we apply] our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, [as well as] our quirks [to the process]".

Nevertheless, the highest goal was (as it is in all scientific researches using GTM) to establish fitting categories to the corresponding data which then convey interesting insights into the research field. To avoid simplifications at that stage of analysis the data has undergone several cycles of coding to generate themes, concepts or even a theory. Saldana (2016, p. 9) highlights the importance of coding by saying that: "Coding is cyclical act. Rarely is the first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted."

The coding process as such has undergone three different stages: The first stage of coding is usually referred to as 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin 1996), in which phenomena are categorized which follow a pattern like "rhythm as well as changing and repetitive forms of action-interaction plus the pauses and interruptions that occur when persons act or interact" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 173). At this stage of coding names and concepts some of which being even abstract for important phenomena are applied. This can be done through either using terms from already existing literature on the field of study or through so called in-vivo-coding by using terms for concepts showing up in the data itself which is especially applied "in educational ethnographies with youth" (Saldana 2016, p. 106).

After terms and notions had been applied to the text passages, comparisons between passages with similar peculiarities were undertaken aiming at applying the same notion to similar manifestations. In other words "major units of social organisation" (Lofland et al. 2006, p. 121) are spotted – a process called categorisation.

The next step of coding is then called 'focused coding' (Strauss and Corbin 1996) in which the codes and categories from the open coding process were grouped, renamed and sometimes even

reassembled “to determine which [codes] in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones [... and to] reorganize the data set“ (Boeije 2010, p. 109). The highest goal of focused coding is the establishment of a major (abstract) category, a so called core category which embraces all the other (sub) categories.

3. Results

3.1 Adaptation in PE classes

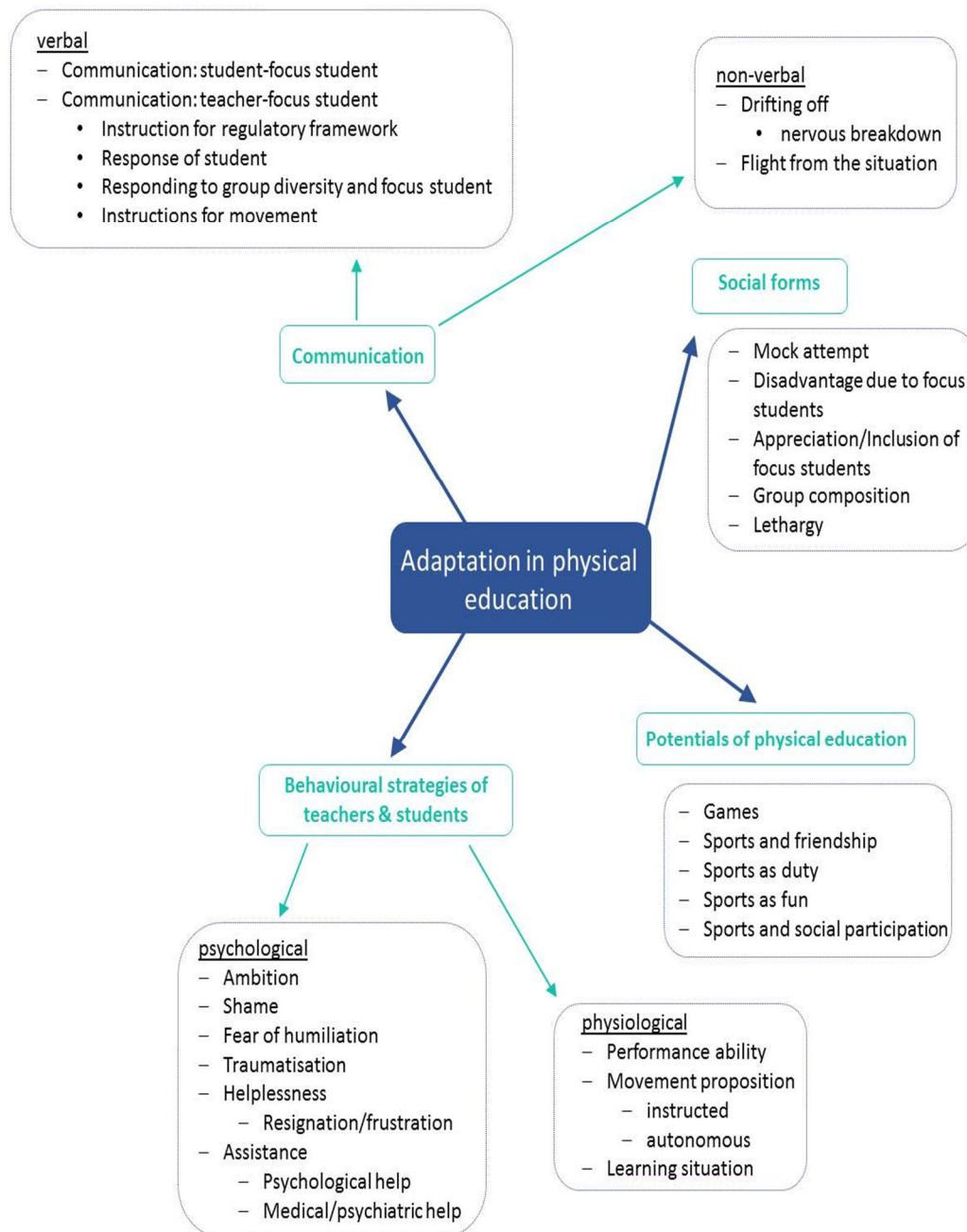
The primary aim of this study was to analyse whether (or not) adolescent refugees as well as ‘regular’ students adapt in the course of physical education classes and whether or not behavioural (i.e. social) differences can be spotted in a period of one semester. Empirical evidence on juvenile refugees in (Austrian) sports classes has been insufficiently covered hitherto which caused insecurity and confusion among both teachers as well as participants in sports classes (Burrmann & Mutz, 2016). On the basis of the aforementioned observation reports (N = 49) and interviews (N = 15) the coding procedure of GTM (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) has been applied.

After the first cycle break up of data the core category ‘adaptation’ has been established, which can be defined as a multi-layered, temporarily constant and not always consciously chosen adaptation process of human beings on the surrounding social conditions. Due to the participation of children and adolescent refugees all native participants (i.e. regular students and their PE teachers) as well as newly arrived people (i.e. refugees) adapt in the course of physical education at school.

This adaptation affects *verbal communication* (“What have you been doing at the weekend, Andreas?” Andreas: I have been cycling and studying German. My father says that German is important. Consequently, a class mate said to Andreas: “That’s true. But you speak German already quite well.” 1-1;14)³ and *non-verbal communication* (Mr. K, as well as some of his classmates seem to have understood that Benjamin has not realised the rule of the game. For that reason he prompted the students to take up a special position in the gym demonstrate Benjamin the aim and the procedure of the game.” 2-12; 19). Likewise, the *social forms* are affected (“When Michael finally attempted to demonstrate the upward circle forward [in gymnastics], he was supported by Andreas. Sadly, Michael failed at his first attempt so that Andreas supported him again by making him aware of the core elements of the performance [...]“; 1-12; 32) and especially also the *physical behaviour strategies* (Andreas showed the other students during the push-up coaching a special kind of push-ups which, according to him, “are much more intense than the normal ones” 1-3; 13) and *psychological behaviour strategies* (“It seemed as if she disregarded or at least recognized her surroundings only marginally.” 3-15; 25); the teacher (Mr. K. [noticed] that the focus student was solely left over. However, Mr. K. prohibited that immediately by stating: “Josef and Julian [...] both of you go together with Benjamin to form a team!” (2-1; 18). On top of that, also the *potentials or possibilities of physical education* (“We could need somebody with your skills in our sports club. Don’t you want to join us?” 1-1; 22) are exhausted through the participation of children and adolescent refugees.

As far as the first research question is concerned, adaptation of both refugee students and ‘regular’ students (and even teachers) proceeds among a scale of four different manifestations; these manifestations (shown in turquoise) can be seen in picture 1 including sub-categories for each main category.

³ In order to ensure anonymity among the participants as well as transparency a three-tier system has been applied; while the first number indicates the specific focus student (i.e. 1, 2 or 3), the second number indicates the number of the observed lesson of this specific focus student, the third number indicates the line number of the transcript, this quote can be encountered.



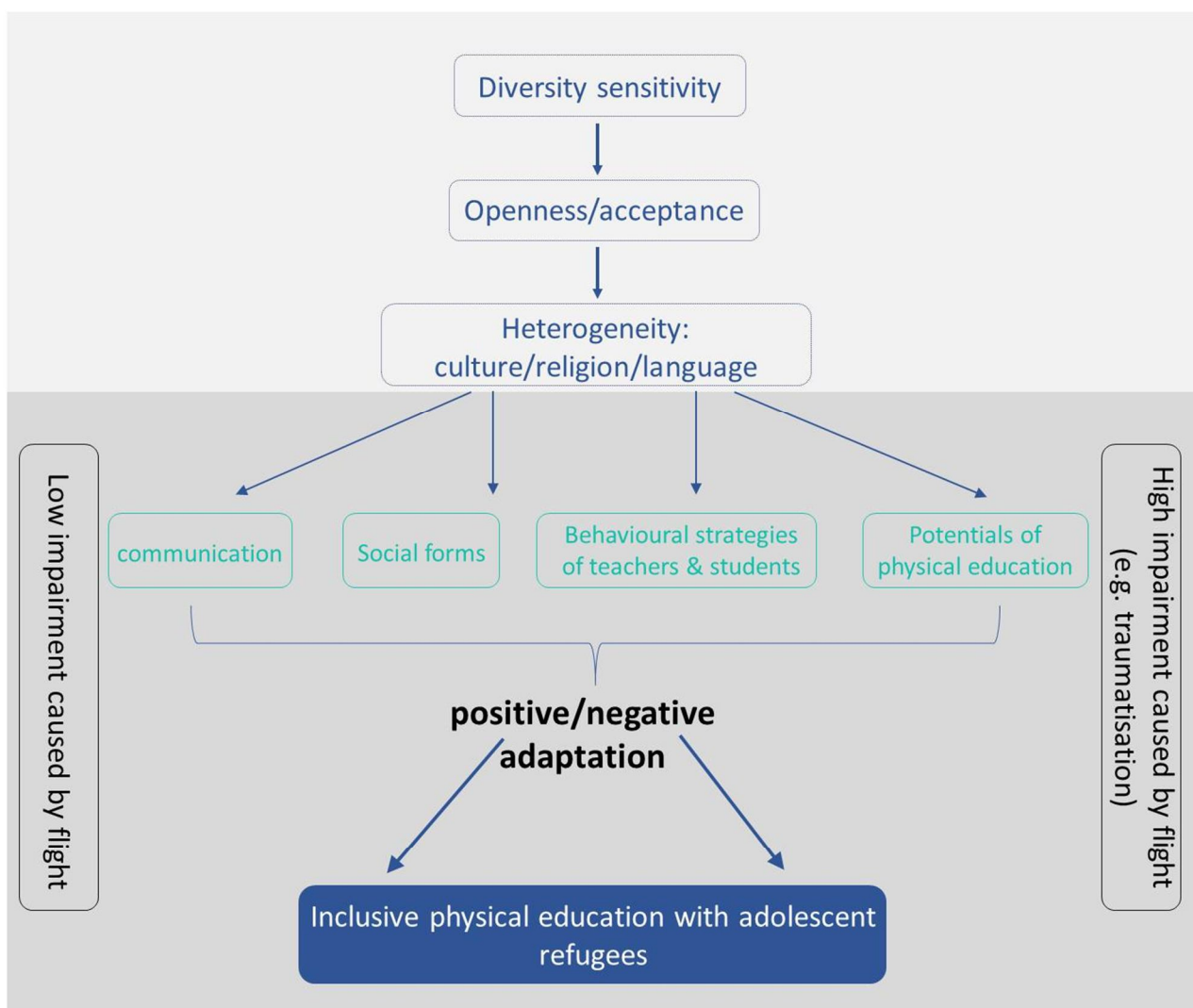
Picture 1: Adaptation in physical education classes among different manifestations

3.2 Inclusive physical education model

In summary, it can be seen, that the theoretical frame supports the results gathered through empirical research. The combination of empirical research with theory illustrates that sensitivity towards diverse educational (sports) groups proves to be a prerequisite for social intercourse with adolescent refugees and, therefore, “has to be taken into consideration in all didactic decisions” (Tiemann, 2015, p. 55). In addition, an open-mindedness towards heterogeneous cultures, religious beliefs as well as foreign languages (ultimately) leads to an adaptation in subsequent areas: (verbal

and non-verbal) communication, social skills, potentials and possibilities of PE and behavioural strategies (of students and teachers).

Most importantly, adaptation among adolescent refugees depends tremendously on potentially experienced negative impacts. Depending on whether refugees have experienced a low or have suffered from a highly negative impact during their flight to the target country, adaptation proceeds faster or more slowly in the course of physical education or even resembles a boycott of education (cf. picture 2). The latter has been observed among one of the target students who, while fleeing from Afghanistan to Austria, has witnessed both her parents being killed. Adolescent refugees cannot overcome experienced traumata like the aforementioned; unsurprisingly, a mental breakdown of the target students could be observed (“Clara left the gym without saying a word [...] In the locker room, Clara was lying on the floor, screaming and shouting the names of her obviously dead parents” (3-15; 26)).



Picture 2: Inclusive physical education with adolescent refugees

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate whether and to what extent participants (i.e. students as well as teachers) adapt in the subject physical education in a period of one semester (September until January). Since prevalent research focusing on refugee students exercising at curricular sports education is still at the beginning, the study aims at a contribution to a more comprehensive notion of adolescent refugees on both a national and an international level.

As far as the first research question is related, adaptation as the core category has been established. Adaptation in this context can be characterized as a multi-layered, temporarily constant and not always consciously chosen process of human beings to the surrounding social conditions. Due to the presence and participation of juvenile refugees all native participants (i.e. local students and teachers) as well as refugee newcomers adapt to each other in physical education classes. Adaptation occurs among a scale of manifestations ranging from verbal and non-verbal communication, social forms and especially physical and psychological behaviour strategies of both teachers and students. What is more, the potentials and possibilities of physical education are being altered through the participation of adolescent refugees.

The coding paradigm of Strauss (2015) connects the core category with all other main- and sub-categories which in return causes the aforementioned categories and their manifestations to affect the core category (i.e. adaptation); thus the category communication (both verbal and non-verbal), the category of behaviour strategies (of both students and teachers), social forms as well as the category potentials/possibilities of physical education compose the core of the introduced coding paradigm.

As the study has been conducted over the period of one semester (September 2018 until January 2019) a resemblance to longitudinal studies can be noticed; therefore analysis and comparisons regarding possible changes of behaviour among adolescent refugees can be realized.

Similarly to the core category adaptation, another important characteristic has been established through the analysis at different moments of time – the impairment of juvenile refugees. Especially a closer look at the category social forms (i.e. active participation in class, social interaction) has revealed clear differences among individual focus students between the start and the end of the observation. Differences depend tremendously on the individual flight background of the refugees including positive as well as negative experiences (or even traumas) during their flight to Austria. Varying experiences are closely affecting behaviour strategies, communication patterns, social forms as well as potentials of physical education.

The first focus student shows little to no impairment and a high adaptation despite his flight from Syria, which he successfully managed together with his whole family. Especially his physical strength enables him to raise interest not only among his classmates but also among his teacher. Likewise, focus student two (male, fleeing from Afghanistan) suffers from language and communicative problems (highly impaired), especially at the beginning of the research which, in the period of the semester improved significantly. Due to the classmates and the teacher aiming at actively involving the focus student in the physical education lessons, he became an active member of the sports class which could, for example, be observed during games or whenever teams were assembled. In contrast to that, focus student three (female, fleeing from Afghanistan) is highly impaired from the beginning to the end of the observation. Although the classmates as well as the teacher were ambitious in terms of actively involving her in the sports group, the focus student suffered from severe psychological problems (i.e. the death of her parents experienced during her flight to Austria) which prevented her from participating in class and even led to a nervous breakdown in one of the physical education classes.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to analyse whether or not adolescent student refugees as well as local students adapt to each other in the course of curricular physical education. As can be seen, the results provide evidence that either group of students (refugees as well as locals) and in addition, also physical education teachers adapt; however, it is crucial to consider the individual flight background of adolescent refugees as this might cause impairment on a psychological level which then also affects physiological participation in sports classes.

Despite the transformation of a segregation-based towards an inclusive educational Austrian school system, numerous (Austrian) educational institutions as well as teachers long for “concepts, models and strategies which are applicable especially for inclusive education settings and which support acting in those settings” (Tiemann 2016, p. 1). The demand for concepts focusing on inclusive education which facilitate teaching and, furthermore, provide a guideline for teachers, headmasters or educators in general seems to have risen in recent years. Interestingly enough, existing concepts in physical education aim exclusively at a ‘narrow’ understanding of inclusive education, as they almost only focus on handicapped or disabled people (Black & Stevenson, 2012; Tiemann, 2013; Scheid & Friedrich, 2015; Tiemann, 2015c; Tiemann, 2016). Nevertheless, some authors emphasize the importance of a broader understanding of the term inclusion by highlighting that:

It is important to address the challenges of inclusion in the context of addressing all forms of discrimination. This means that discrimination and exclusion relating to social class, race, gender and disability and other less obvious areas (such as different learning styles and paces) should be addressed in a holistic and comprehensive manner. (Lazarus, Daniels & Engelbrecht, 1999, p. 47f.)

With regard to the work of adolescent refugees in the Austrian school system, some of the above mentioned concepts concerning inclusive education have (consciously or unconsciously) been applied; however, inclusion efforts in sports pedagogy or didactics focusing on juvenile refugees – a majority of whom having experienced traumatic experiences either in their (war-torn) home countries or during their flight thus being possibly affected by post-migratory stress (Metzner & Mogk, 2016) has hitherto neither been evaluated in general nor in relation to physical education – despite its significantly soaring relevance.

In order to facilitate the integration of adolescent refugees in Austrian (physical education) classes, the author recommends to adhere to basic guidelines. Firstly, as already mentioned before, a broader understanding of inclusion or inclusive concepts in the context of didactics and pedagogy without being restricted to disability sports has to be aimed at. Secondly, a (psychological) screening of newly arriving adolescent refugees has to be established, enabling authorities to differentiate between (highly) impaired and non-impaired refugees due to their flight experiences which, in return, would guarantee a faster help for those refugees who are in need of professional assistance; in addition, also teachers and headmasters would be relieved as potentially traumatised refugees obtain professional help and assistance. This consequently should lead to the third step – a monitoring for those refugees who, according to the screening at the entrance of the Austrian educational system, have been diagnosed as (highly) impaired due to their experiences before, during or after their flight.

Observing all three steps might, according to the opinion of the author, foster and promote integration of adolescent refugees and enable them to actively participate in Austrian institutions, (sports) clubs or society in general.

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