

War and displacement in the neighbouring country. What does it mean to my work as a teacher? – the Q&A session transcript:

Q1. Sebastian P.: What can you do if neither you nor the migrant children share any language and it is impossible to communicate?

Verena Plutzar: First of all, it is a difficult situation. Since there is no common language, you should think about what you can do. I think you would start to communicate using hands and pictures. When I used to be a German teacher in a refugee shelter, I taught German to people that speak no German at all. We had no common language during our classes. That is why we had to talk in German, even though they could not. It forces you to be a little bit creative. Additionally, you also have to think that you are able to do it because it is possible indeed. You have to see that you want to communicate and that the child wants to communicate. This willingness of both sides is part of any language **learning**. In order to make contact, first of all, you have to show a lot. The other thing is that I would also look for resources around – maybe other children in the class can help out, or the language is spoken by somebody else at school. Moreover, something that I really love about these new times is that a lot of people have a phone where you can find a translator, for instance, Google Translate. Even though it is not perfect, it is better than nothing. Its advantage is that you can speak into it, and it automatically translates. Therefore, you do not even have to know how to write and read. Consequently, try everything possible, there is not anything which is not allowed, in my opinion.

Elisabeth Freithofer: It is crucial to refer to the psychological aspect than solely the concrete learning situation. If you have children in your class or if you are in contact with learners that neither speak your language nor you speak theirs and you want to get to know anything about them, then at some point, it might be really important to find a translator. In this way, you can find out what is going on with the child. Therefore, I would say that without translation, you cannot go on for a long time or rather, you should not. You need to know the learner's situation. For 6 or 7 years I coordinated a project for young asylum seekers in Austria where we offered teaching and education to the young people. We experienced there various situations proving that what Verena is saying is very helpful. At that point, phones have not been so widespread

yet. When those translation programmes appeared, they made a real difference. Young people operate them very well. On the other hand, just like Verena is saying, what you can do in class while teaching a language is to use every possibility – work with pictures, choose common activities in which you do not need the language. Returning to the topic of trauma, these may be repeated movements like breathing together, or rituals to greet each other in the morning where you can integrate. These may involve songs or saying small greeting phrases in the native or familiar language of those children. Thus, incorporate into your teaching situation small, common activities because it creates a better classroom environment. Referring to what Verena said in the presentation, what happens to the brain in trauma is bad and a kind of a healing possibility are those small movement rituals. Activities like clapping hands tell the neural system “you are safe”. It is a very simple thing – we are safe, you are safe here, you can be calm. Consequently, whatever is offered to the children as learning content can be taken in by the learners in a better way.

Anna Szczepaniak-Kozak: I want to add that we need to remember that the conflict has just started. It has been three weeks, so do not expect children to start talking instantly. I think that allowing them the so-called silent period would also be necessary. For example, at my daughter’s school, we have had a Ukrainian girl just for two days now. That is why it cannot be expected from her to participate fully in the classroom activities, she is just getting used to it. Let children have a silent period, absorb the school, and perhaps communication will come later. In the current situation, it should be a bit easier than, for example, with the Bosnian or Syrian children because even though Ukrainian and Polish are not very similar, some mutuality is there.

Verena Plutzar: From the language perspective, there is definitely this silent period, and I think you remember that when you learn a new language, you also have to process a lot before saying something. It is quite a normal way of learning, and I think the challenge is not to think that children are not part of activities when they are silent. Do not think that they do not participate. They are still there, even though they do not say something. Therefore, always treat them, give them something, be there.

Q2. Jolanta G.: What do you think about the function and tasks of the support teacher in the classroom? Is it worth inviting him/her to your language classes?

Elisabeth Freithofer: In my opinion, it is a very good idea. We also used to partly have this system in Austria, especially in Vienna. There is a long term experience showing that it is a very helpful resource that should be used. However, it is essential that the assistant teacher and the main teacher prepare together and work well together. Moreover, they have to have enough space to reflect on the planning, and also on what is going on. I think their relationship needs to be good because if it is not working, the children feel it.

Verena Plutzer: It is necessary to find someone that understands the children's situation. I believe one of the very important things in the case of those teachers who speak the learners' language is that they can find out what the child feels. There are moments, on both sides, when you feel speechless because there is somebody in between who translates, and this translator needs to give some hints and knowledge.

Anna Szczepaniak-Kozak: Ladies and gentlemen, on the basis of the experience we have, especially when it comes to helping Roma children, a support teacher is a teacher who helps organise the learning process, that is, helps organise notes, helps with difficult issues during lessons for a given child. A cultural assistant, if I remember the original Polish name correctly, is a person who takes care of the child's well-being, cooperates with the local community, and helps the child get oriented in school. However, I suspect that in these difficult times, these roles may be mixed, and this person - be it a cultural assistant or a support teacher - is trying to help in these difficult times, and does not separate these tasks, so there may be both typical didactic tasks, assistance in learning, explaining difficult concepts, perhaps creating a glossary of basic terms, as well as care and liaison with the local organisation.

Q3. Anna B.: Should we talk about the current situation in the child's country? Or perhaps should we avoid it?

Elisabeth Freithofer: It is both a very needed and a difficult question. It reminded me of my recent teaching experience with German teachers who are also working with children in trauma

situations. Likewise, it was also one of their crucial questions, and they connected it to the order they got from the authorities. You cannot go into your classes and talk about the war. It is impossible, and you cannot do it like that. However, of course, the issue is in there, and the children either know something about it or not. Sometimes, at least now in your situation, such conversation might not even be possible because some parents try to shield their children from the issue of war. Of course, children can feel that something is going on because the parents' behaviour has changed. Should we talk about the current situation in the child's country? Yes, if the question comes from the learners or the children in this case. Take what comes from them. What do they know? What do they want to know? What is bothering them? How do they feel about it? It is crucial to know it, and that includes also how will the parents react to it? Because it may worsen the situation if we give completely different signals than those coming from the parents. It is a very complex question, but I think it is essential to find out if they even want to raise the subject. If they want to, we should not give them a political speech. Furthermore, they should know what I think about it. There are many things I do not know, that make me insecure. It is not about passing on our unfiltered insecurities to children. Instead, let's give a signal that it is something that I am thinking about, too. Additionally, there is very often a follow-up question concerning the children who do not want to talk about it. In such a situation, it is important to divide the class. Give those who do not want to be involved something to do. They can still be in the class while you have the conversation with the others. The question is, however, what do they know? What is in their mind, and how can we maybe calm them? Should we do an exercise, like a breathing exercise, together? To sum up, it is a significant and complex question that requires a lot of sensing of the atmosphere, but you know your children or your learners. Therefore, you can do it individually and find out what is needed at the moment.

Verena Plutzer: I would like to recommend a German webpage called "Servicestelle Kinder- und Jugendschutz" because it is also available in Polish. I think the content presented there could be helpful, especially for older children. When it comes to whether we should talk about the war or not also depends on age, in my opinion. And if there are older children, over 12 years of age, I think it is also necessary to talk about what they hear and see in the media. It is a big challenge. Talking with children about war is hard, and I believe this webpage is something that could be useful.

Q4. Intercultural school in Ioannina in Greece: Usually, migrant children are closed to themselves. How can we help them to express their feelings?

Elisabeth Freithofer: I have put a document to the chat with three ideas for different situations. Number 2 is referring exactly to that question. In this example, we can find, for example, pictures of figures with various expressions. In addition, there are signs with words that describe feelings. What is described in this little document is that while sitting with the children we may show them the faces or the figures. They are, of course, either in their familiar language or in the new language, or both languages. In this way, they connect words to the expressions visible on these figures. That is a very important exercise for grown-ups with migration experience, too. Numerous studies have shown that the more vocabulary such people have to express their feelings and their state of mind, the fewer psychosomatic symptoms they develop over time. It means that they are able to express more also in their language. Many of us, many children and also grown-ups, do not have enough words to describe our state of mind. Thus, the more we broaden our ability to express our emotions, the better for everyone. It is not something that we have to perform only with migrants or children with refugee experience. It should be present in every class, for all learners and grown-ups. It is the reason why I have sent this document. If you open it, there is just one link, so if you want to find more, go to the Internet. For example, there is a thing called “circle of emotions” by Sandra Velazquez. It describes different degrees of emotions, so go to the Internet, find something they are giving, express emotions, metaphors, pictures and use this.

Verena Plutzar: I thought about the kindergarten teacher in the refugee shelter where we lived. What she did a lot with small children were painting drawings. There are many other ways to express our feelings than just words – drawing, painting, music or anything else. Consequently, children can process their emotions and feelings, even though they are not expressed by words. However, I want to say that speechlessness is very important to overcome in this way. I am going to share with you a very nice logbook, even though it is in German. It is called “Logbuch Neuland”. It is made in a very beautiful way for newcomers, refugees or migrants. The idea behind it is to have a book for children and youngsters in which they are asked about their feelings, ideas, dreams and many other things young people are involved in. They can draw

there, it is very much pictures, it is not about words, and they can do it on their own. Moreover, they can, but do not have to share it with someone. Thus, it is a very private thing. When I express my feelings, in my opinion, it is essential to have certainty, that this is OK, that I do not show too much of myself, which will be used perhaps against me. One thing in this book is also that they can express their feelings in any language they want. To sum up, I think it is crucial to give them opportunities to express themselves in their languages and learn.

Q5. Izabela Czerniejewska: What if Polish kids initiate the discussion about war?

Elisabeth Freithofer: That depends. What really should be avoided, in my opinion, is getting into a kind of political discussion, one against the other. I would say that this is a war and the war also causes people not to communicate properly with each other, and they also fight each other. However, we do not decide what is right and what is wrong. What happens to the victims of the aggression is wrong, but who is right? They embody how our modern history or politics work. Otherwise, you create a kind of conflict that is not desirable in such a situation. Nevertheless, just like Verena said, it also depends very much on the age of the children. Giving a background and what do they know relies very much on what they already know and what they hear. Whether Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian kids, whoever initiates the discussion does not matter. I would repeat what we have already said and ask who wants to talk and what about? What are my feelings, what do I know and would I like to share? Another significant thing is to identify who wants to be involved in the conversation in the group and the others who do not. If I create a circle where we talk about it, there needs to be a beginning and an end. The end has to be defined and obeyed as well. One hour may be too much, let's say 40 minutes might be better. It depends, however, on the age of the learners. With older ones, we may talk longer and then come back to our learning schedule. If anything else needs to be discussed, then we can get back to it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. It has to do with what Verena referred to – what is so important is the space. Rules have to be introduced to the safe space, it is not the issue of war itself or that the future chief cannot come into the classroom with no limits and borders. It has to be regulated, there has to be a beginning and an end.

Q6. Izabela Czerniejewska: You talked about teaching trauma in psychoeducation. Should we also teach Polish kids about trauma? Or rather not?

Elisabeth Freithofer: I think it depends on the situation, and I would not go in and say “Today we are talking about trauma and what it does”. I would rather explain if the issue comes up. For example, in the classical situation, if the learner says “Ah, I cannot concentrate. I cannot remember anything, and I am confused very often”. This is coming from somebody in the class who has a traumatic experience and the others find out about it too. Maybe some kids say, “Samia can never remember at the end of the day what happened in the beginning”. Thus, I would really only do that when the issue is kind of there already, I would choose the right moment. I would not incorporate it into the curriculum and then do it for everybody. Because then we could say “Listen Samia said himself he has trouble remembering something, or it's difficult for him to remember at the end of the day what we did in the morning”. It is very difficult if everybody knows in the class that he has had a traumatic experience. Then we would say if something very bad happens to us, then it can happen that for some time being we may have trouble remembering things. Consequently, I would use the tree or the apartment or the brain as some kind of metaphor, so that could be then interesting for everybody.

Verena Plutzar: And I want to add that it could be quite difficult for the very little children to address it. That is why it could be beneficial to work with “persona dolls” in the kindergartens or also in the very first levels of primary school. There is a doll that the teacher takes into the class and introduces. He or she gives the doll a name and then starts to talk with the doll. The doll has some of these pains or problems and then together you can explore what happens, and the teacher explains it to the doll. The doll can answer and then the children. You will see that the children will listen to it. And it is not themselves, I am not the one whom we are talking about. We are talking about this doll. Therefore, this could be a little trick for the little children to have a conversation about this in such a situation.

Anna Szczepaniak-Kozak: I just want to say because I have already mentioned that we have this project, and we have been working on some outputs... What message I would like to deliver to all of you, to teachers at Polish schools, is that other countries in Europe, for example, Austria and Germany or any other, have been facing similar problems for decades. The experience and

message are that they have got by and children easily adapt. They want to be at school, and obviously, these three weeks were particularly difficult in Poland. However, I think that allowing children some safe space and then just being a bit patient with them will lead us to great results. Migrant children in Germany have actually achieved wonderful results at school. Achievements will come with time. To sum up, schools around Europe have coped with similar problems. Additionally, multilingualism, and contact with children of other backgrounds, are generally doing wonders for children. It influences their interculturality and sensitivity to different cultures. The reason why these children are at Polish schools is horrible because horrible things are taking place. Nonetheless, from a positive side, it could also be considered a chance for Poland to become a bit more tolerant, open and intercultural.

Emilia Wąsikiewicz-Firlej: I would actually like to drop a comment because last week, together with Izabella, we interviewed some migrant children. They were of Ukrainian and Belarusian origin, and Anna, this is exactly what they said. The first weeks were really traumatic for children. Even for children without war experience, only with migrant experience. The message from the parents to teachers was “do not be too demanding, just give them some time, be patient”. They asked not to be too demanding in terms of the language and the curriculum because they need some time to integrate. Thus, as we have said here, there is some silent period. They need some time to adapt. That was actually the message from the mothers because they remember how difficult the first weeks were for their kids. And the children used to cry several times a day, did not want to go to school because they did not really feel safe there, so that was really the message. Be patient. Do not be too demanding. Because they will integrate, they will learn the language as well.