

The Impact of the War Conflicts on Residential Childcare: A Survey into Czech Children's Homes

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Abstract

The paper's main aim will be to present the research results that mapped the reflection of current war conflicts on the situation in Czech children's homes. We investigated whether ongoing war conflicts are changing the population of children in these institutions and to what extent children's homes are prepared to meet the needs of children from war zones. We worked with a qualitative research design based on close contact with the research setting. We have identified several areas that require attention. In particular, these are issues of religion and socio-cultural norms. We have also identified the need to significantly strengthen the training of teaching staff in the area of skills for working with children traumatized by war and refugee experiences.

KEY WORDS: *children's home; social-legal protection; trauma; special educational needs.*

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1. Introduction

The explosions of war do not only tear up battlefields; they also tear up families. The most vulnerable members of our societies, children, suffer from war [1;2]. Although children should be guaranteed the protection guaranteed by international conventions [3], many families prefer to send their children to the relative safety of a foreign country. It has been demonstrated that separation from parents profoundly impacts a child's psyche [4;5]. Studies have repeatedly confirmed that the experience of war-induced separation has a massive effect on children's psychology and development [6;7]. The issue of children displaced abroad by war in their homeland is extremely relevant in today's geopolitical situation. In our globalized society, the changes caused by armed conflicts affect us all [8]. As soon as a child enters the territory of the country of destination, he or she is subject to that country's socio-legal protection legislation [9]. In many cases, the child is placed in an institutional setting.

The paper's main aim will be to present the results of a unique research that mapped the reflection of current war conflicts on the situation in Czech children's homes. We investigated whether ongoing war conflicts have an impact on the composition of children in these institutions and to what extent children's homes are transported to meet the needs of children from areas of war conflict. This issue is minimally elaborated in the Czech space; the responsible ministries need in-depth analyses. We focused our research on the area of special educational needs, the area of socialization of newly arrived children in the Czech school environment, and the area of social interaction of children with experience of war conflicts with children from the intact population.

We divide the paper into two main sections. First, a brief introduction to the social and legal protection of children in the Czech Republic will be necessary, as this is a crucial sector for children coming from war zones. We will then present the research design of our qualitative research. In the second part of the paper, we describe the research setting and present a unique case study. We then describe the research findings. In the discussion, we outline recommendations for practice and finish the paper with a conclusion in which we appeal to experts to pay more attention to the issue of children coming from war zones and their stay in residential childcare settings.

2. Child Protection

The fundamental child protection legislation in Czech Republic is Act No. 359/1999 Coll. on Social and Legal Protection of Children, which introduced new perspectives and new services to help vulnerable children. Socio-legal protection of the child means ensuring the child's right to life, to his or her favorable development, to parental care and family life, to the child's identity, to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, to education, and employment. Also, it includes the protection of the child from any physical or mental violence, neglect, abuse, or exploitation [9]. Child protection, which is a broader concept than socio-legal protection, thus encompasses the protection of a wide range of rights and legitimate interests of the child and is therefore regulated in different branches of law and legislation of different legal forces [10]. Social and legal protection does not only apply to Czech citizens, but also to any children who are present on the territory of the Czech Republic. If a child finds him/herself in a situation where social protection intervention is needed, the procedure is as follows.

The social workers of the child welfare authorities first check whether there is a person responsible for the child's upbringing in the Czech Republic, and if they are unsuccessful, they begin to address the child's situation. They must find out the age, name and nationality of the child. In some cases, where the child does not have an identity document, the authorities have to base their decision on the stated age and register the child as a stateless foreigner. The Child Protection Authority also establishes the contacts and initials of the child's legal guardians, relatives and details of extended family [11]. If the unaccompanied minor alien is not an applicant for international protection, the municipal authority of the municipality with extended competence is obliged to immediately inform the competent embassy and the Office for the International Protection of Children in Brno. The municipal authority of the municipality with extended competence shall discuss with the embassy the way of connecting the unaccompanied alien minor with his/her parents or other persons responsible for the child. If it finds that there is no person responsible for the child's upbringing in the Czech Republic and that it is not possible to hand the child over to the care of the parents or other close persons, the social worker submits to the district court a proposal for an interim measure placing the child in an institution of institutional upbringing. In the case of an alien child with a language barrier, such a child is placed in the Institution for Alien Children in Prague.

The Institution for Alien Children is a state organization managed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, which works in the system of residential childcare. The Institution for Alien Children takes into its care children of foreign nationality who find themselves in the territory of the Czech Republic without the accompaniment of their parents or other persons responsible for their upbringing. It also receives children whose parents are in prison or custody, and there is no other person in the Czech Republic who could care for them. Children who are themselves criminals, educationally unmanageable, or children for whom other forms of outpatient assistance have not been effective are also placed here. They may also include abused, exploited, and trafficked children.

The Institution for Alien Children accepts children aged 3-18 years on the basis of a court decision - on a precautionary measure, on institutional childcare or on protective childcare. The facility also accepts children for so-called voluntary diagnostic stay, which is the only form of stay in the facility that does not have to be supported by a court decision. In this case, the child is admitted on the basis of a contract between the establishment, the parent, and the child for a two-month voluntary stay. During this period, a comprehensive diagnosis of the child is carried out (psychological, special-educational, educational, medical and socio-legal). At the end of the stay, the child returns to the care of the parents, and the facility recommends further forms of work with the child. In cases where no other solution to the situation is available, the child is placed in a children's home. The child may remain there until the age of majority, i.e. until the age of 18. If the child is still studying, the stay in the children's home can be extended until the age of 26.

3. Research Design

We are utilizing a qualitative research approach that has demonstrated efficacy in prior studies [12]. Qualitative research methodologies have the potential to significantly enrich the contemporary inclusive paradigm [13]. Our initial data collection employs semi-structured interviews and participant observation, with interviews being the predominant method in qualitative research [14]. Notably, researchers have a shifting perception regarding the interview process, emphasizing the need for researchers to reconcile their personal involvement with their professional stance [15].

We contend that an actively engaged researcher yields more dependable results than a passive researcher [16]. As qualitative researchers, we maintain close contact with the subject group, investing significant time within the research environment [17]. This proactive involvement mitigates respondent distrust, particularly in close-knit communities like the children's home we study. Our research design comprises two levels. The primary stage involves conducting interviews, observations, and analyzing pedagogical documentation for initial data collection. Subsequently, the gathered information undergoes grounded theory methods and phenomenological interpretive analysis. The research methodology is regularly reviewed and tailored to meet current research objectives, utilizing a variety of instruments and techniques to respond flexibly to the research context and targeted population. Continuous refinement and integration of new research tools and methods contribute to the ongoing improvement of our research methodology. We view research as a dynamic and continuous process, necessitating suitable research tools and methods. Research objectivity is paramount. Given the potential for bias inherent in qualitative research due to the researcher's presence, we emphasize objectivity and utilize triangulation. Triangulation involves subjecting our findings to scrutiny from other research methods or researchers [18]. Using triangulation of research methods, we enable our qualitative research approach to obtain information based on a solid scientific foundation.

In this research, we have a unique opportunity to utilize several in-depth case studies. Case studies are highly effective research tools, particularly valuable for investigating complex issues in real-world scenarios. The frequent use of case studies in qualitative inquiry presents challenges, which can be mitigated through precise language and careful research design [19]. Additionally, our prolonged presence in the research environment enables us to operate within the linguistic code of the target group, providing our qualitative research with deep insight into the issues under study. It was necessary to take into account the sensitive areas associated with the war experience, which has a crushing impact on children's psyche [20;21;22]. Because these are highly vulnerable children, our research strictly adheres to data protection principles and takes into account the ethical aspects of conducting research with at-risk children.

4. Researched Environment

We're researching the children's home environment. Children's home is an institution for the provision of residential childcare. In the Czech Republic, children's homes are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The examined children's home is located in Prague, Czech Republic. This children's home consists of seven family groups with a total capacity of 54 children. It is a standard children's home intended primarily for children without serious behavioural problems. The vast majority of children come from families that can be described as pathological [23]. In recent years, there has been a slight change in the age distribution of new arrivals, with an increase in older children. There has also been a marked increase in the number of new arrivals requiring psychiatric care. The ethnic composition of children is also changing. Currently, children from Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Venezuela, Ukraine, Yemen and Morocco live in the Klánovice Children's Home.

Our research has confirmed pathological family environments as an essential common feature for children in children's homes [24]. The exception is children who come to the children's home as refugees. In the case of these children, we have not observed any pathological behaviour patterns in their original families, the vast majority of them are children from stable families. The refugees can be divided into two groups: economic refugees and refugees from war conflicts. Our paper will focus specifically on children who have found themselves in a children's home environment due to the ongoing war conflict in their home country.

5. Course of Research

It would be illusory to believe that the war conflicts occurring in distant foreign countries do not concern us. The children's homes are proof that even a distant war has an impact on our society. Over the years, we have seen children from the conflict areas of Chechnya and Syria in children's homes, and in the last year, there has been an increasing number of children from Ukraine. We could go on with a list of other areas, such as Afghanistan or Yemen. Moreover, children from all these war-torn corners of our planet can find themselves in the environment of a Czech children's home. For our research, we worked with two children. They were a Ukrainian girl from the Zaporizhzhia region and a young man from Yemen. Due to the need for privacy, we will not use identifiers that could lead to the children's identity being broken. Both children were informed about our research plan and gave us their consent. We obtained additional information from the educational staff of the children's home; we also spoke with the social worker and worked with available documentation. We worked with documentation not only from the field of education but also with medical records and documents related to social and legal protection. We recognized the need for an interdisciplinary approach [25;26] and an inclusive perspective on the studied issue [27].

The research interviews and documentation analysis took place between January and March 2024. Because the author of this paper is employed as an educator in the children's home under study, we were able to spend a considerable amount of time in the research setting. Another advantage of our prolonged presence was that the children did not perceive us as researchers. Therefore, their responses were much more open than possible with an outside research intervention. We are well aware of the limitations of our research. A major limitation of our research is the difficulty of generalizability, as we studied only a limited sample of children. Another significant limitation is that we have focused on highly personal areas of children's lives that are by default understood as difficult to generalize. Given the relatively short time that the issue of children from war zones in children's homes has been an issue, further and especially longer research in this area will be needed. Therefore, we are preparing a series of additional studies in which we will examine the exact numbers of children from war conflict areas in Czech institutional facilities.

6. Case Study

Both children came to the children's home from the Institution for Alien Children. Their initial special education and social diagnostics were carried out here. Based on the recommendation of the Institution for Alien Children, the children were placed in the Klánovice Children's Home. They both attend secondary schools. As far as school performance is concerned, both have very good results. The Ukrainian girl is currently taking online distance learning and completing her final year of high school in Ukraine. After passing the final exams, she plans to apply for nostrification of her Ukrainian qualification, which will allow her to apply to a Czech university. The boy is studying the final year of a vocational apprenticeship. After graduation he plans to apply to university. Both of them adapted very well in the children's home, there were no disciplinary problems. The girl is very withdrawn; she does not communicate much with other children. The boy,

on the other hand, is popular and sociable among the other children. Both children come from stable family backgrounds. They keep in regular contact with their families and make use of social networking opportunities. The pedagogical staff contacted assess both children in a positive way.

7. Findings

Thanks to the qualitative approach, we obtained several insightful findings. The findings from the children were compared with the results of interviews with teaching staff and the records in the educational documentation. We coded and then categorized the results into several key categories.

Language: The Ukrainian girl had no significant difficulties acquiring the Czech language. After a few months, she was able to communicate without any problems; only a slight accent remained. Slavic languages are difficult to acquire, especially for newcomers from Arabic-speaking countries. We were even more surprised by the Yemeni boy who, after a very short time, mastered the basics of communication in Czech. The level of communication is sufficient for his social and educational needs.

Religion: The boy is a practicing Muslim. As there have been Muslim children in the past at the Klánovice children's home, the staff was prepared for the needs arising from his faith. We were able to provide halal food but also ensured sufficient privacy to allow the boy to pray regularly. We also contacted non-profit organizations that work to address the issue of integration. We provided training for the teaching staff. This was very important because the Czech Republic is, by default, a very secular country where public awareness of religious issues is deficient.

Interpersonal relationships: Both children repeatedly mentioned missing contact with their original environments. We noted their tendency to be involved only with individuals of their cultural group. This is understandable, but it can lead to exclusion from other children in the children's home. Regarding the joint activities organized by the children's home, the Yemeni boy was mainly involved in football tournaments, while the Ukrainian girl tended to avoid such activities. For both children, we observed a significant tendency to predefine one key teaching staff member of the children's home.

Cultural differences: It was interesting to find out to what extent both children adore their native countries. In both cases, we noted their assertion that the school system in Yemen and Ukraine is better than in the Czech Republic. Another intriguing finding was related to the children's views on the political situation in the world. The opinion of the Ukrainian girl on the war in her homeland was accepted by the educational staff of the children's home without issue. However, we observed a discrepancy between the Ukrainian girl and children with Russian roots. The debates of the Yemeni boy on the situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were interesting. The boy stated that in the predominantly pro-Israeli Czech environment, he was confronted several times with outright disagreeable reactions.

8. Conclusions

During our research, we observed no difficulties in the interaction between the Ukrainian girl, Yemeni boy, and other children living in the Klánovice children's home. In other words, it may seem that both children have no issues. Both have quickly acclimatized, rapidly acquired the Czech language, and are successful in school. This fact is, of course, positive, but these achievements may divert the attention of the educational staff of the children's home from serious problems that are not immediately apparent. The fact that children do not show signs of psychological problems does not mean that they do not have them. It is, therefore, our duty to be aware of these specifics and strive to provide maximum support for these children.

Our research activities have outlined several areas that Czech children's homes must urgently address. There will be a significant need to strengthen the language competencies of pedagogical staff. Basic language requirements should include fluent English and at least one other Slavic language. In addition to language proficiency, there will be a need for intensive training of pedagogical staff in religious matters. Czech educators will need to accept the fact that religious questions are of significant importance for practicing Muslims or practicing Orthodox Christians. We will need to prepare the Czech system of children's homes for the future; we must prepare for the arrival of children who will be forced to leave their homes due to further armed conflicts. We must recognize the complexity of the situation faced by children coming from war-torn areas and ensure conditions that enable them to cope with their challenging life circumstances.

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