

The Perceptions of Educators Relating to the Promotion of the Psychological Well-Being of Abandoned Children

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ABSTRACT

Promoting the psychological well-being of abandoned children raises specific issues. These children have no choices but to live in residential child care institutions. They are called to take part in society, to become autonomous and competent adults. However, these children present difficulties that result in impairment of self-esteem and are identified by negative feelings, as well as failures in their relationship with others. Researchers point out that the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for social affiliation and the need for competence, is essential to the growth of the individual's integrity and well-being. Our ultimate interest is to contribute through this work, to the development of educational practices and the quality of care in the child care institutions. From this perspective, this qualitative research aims to explore the educators' perceptions of psychological well-being of abandoned children, actions they take and the contributions of professional services to promote it. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with educators (N=10) in a residential child care institution. The results show that the educator's perceptions of psychological well-being go in the same direction as the definitions of psychological well-being in the scientific literature. The majority of their actions tend towards satisfaction of the three fundamental psychological needs, which are essential to the development of psychological well-being. They also underlined the important role of professional services, material and human resources in this direction. This research allowed identifying five specific ways to promote the psychological well-being of abandoned children in the residential child care institutions.

1. Introduction

Psychological well-being (PWB) is a major issue for an abandoned child. No one can fill the gap left by abandonment. This child victim is deprived of the love of his or her parents, and deprived of his or her natural environment, which is the family. According to some stories of abandonment experienced by victims of different ages, the wounds of abandonment have been the common factor among them, whatever their age, the institution that took them in or the adoptive family that betrayed them, as well as the difficulties and serious effects of the

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transition from the crèche to the residential care institution, which is a real fracture and an upheaval in their field of representation (Unicef, 2010). Abandoned children living in an institutional environment benefit in particular from material subsidies from donors, while the emotional side is much neglected. Considering well-being as an essential component of quality of life, we therefore should take into consideration the PWB perceptions of the educators who take care of these children, knowing that the satisfaction of psychological needs is considered crucial for the well-being of the individual (Guardia et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Many researchers have argued in different ways that our perceptions guide our actions, and are interrelated (Schellenberg, 2007). Thus, it is important to consider the actions that educators take to promote the PWB of these children.

1.1. Abandoned Children Living in Residential Care Institutions

According to the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, there are at least 140 million orphans and abandoned children in the world, without counting millions of others who are not considered in official statistics (HRF,2020). In Morocco, 129. 485 is the number of children placed in institutions according to the latest statistic (EN, 2016). Their number is constantly increasing. The role of educators is therefore crucial for them to flourish. Until today, the only solution allowed by law in the case of an abandoned child is to send him or her to a child care institution, where the quality of care remains insufficient, and these children often undergo a long period of institutionalization (HRC,2017).

The family of which they are deprived plays an important role in their psychological and social life and it is an important determinant of mental health, particularly concerning children's PWB (Thomas et al., 2017). These children present cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral problems (Hildyar & Wolfe, 2002; Whetten, et al.,2009), yet some of them enter into a process of resilience that is seen in the defence mechanisms they use (Sherr, Roberts & Croome,2017). According to researchers, true resilience is always accompanied by altruism, and that everyone can become resilient if he or she is helped to do so (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes & Southwick, 2015). The theory of self-determination (TAD) postulates that humans, innately, tend to satisfy the three basic psychological needs, namely the need for autonomy, the need for competence and the need for affiliation (Guardia et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, specifying what these needs are, prescribes what the environment must provide for the person to develop and grow psychologically. After reading and analyzing the PWB literature, all the definitions of this concept are encompassed by two approaches that have addressed the PWB when defining psychological health: the hedonistic approach; which focuses on the attainment of pleasure or happiness, and the eudemonistic approach; which focuses on the actualization of human potential, based on clear components.

1.2. The Importance of the Educator in Promoting the Child's PWB is Therefore Crucial

Most claim to have the well-being of the child naturally in. But do the people who take in and care for these children in the child care institution, put the welfare of the children at the top of their list of concerns? According to the scientific literature, the question of the child's PWB is difficult to circumscribe, but previous research suggests that well-being can be improved by all actors in education (Schleicher, 2018).The mission of the educator is therefore crucial to the development and well-being of these children in the institutional environment. The latter must consider their basic needs and their best interests, in accordance with the international protection system (Ciliberti & Badillo,2015). As Richard Cloutier, also a psychologist and associate professor emeritus at the School of Psychology of Laval University, Canada, has insisted, emphasising the relational side of the educational experience for the child and his or

her well-being (Cloutier,2011). The contribution of quality professional services and quality resources is also necessary for the well-being of the individual, through help, support, care and guidance, especially for children with difficulties (Rurka, 2007). This study sought to answer the following questions:

- How do educators perceive the conception of the child's PWB?
- How do educators promote the PWB of children through their actions?
- How do professional services and resources promote the PWB of abandoned children living in institutions?

1.3. Objectives

The goal is to promote the PWB of abandoned children living in child care institutions, through the development of educators' practices. To be able to achieve this objective, we first should know the perceptions of these educators, to ensure an appropriate and relevant intervention, and to this end we have set objectives of this research as follows:

- a) Describe the educators' perceptions of the child's concept of psychological well-being.
- b) Describe the educators' perceptions of their actions to promote the psychological well-being of the children in their care within the institution.
- c) Describe the educators' perceptions of the contributions of professional services and resources to promote the psychological well-being of children living in institutions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Operational Concepts

Perceptions: Perceptions are the ideas adopted by the educators and direct their actions towards abandoned children.

Psychological Well-being: Psychological well-being is the good psychological balance of the children, which is manifested through their behaviours. Giving importance to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, the need for competence, the need for autonomy and the need for social affiliation, as necessary dimensions for the child's psychological well-being, according to the theory of self-determination.

Abandoned Child: Abandoned child, is the child whose parent (s) refused to take care of him or her by filing the appropriate legal documents.

2.2. Description of Participants and Location

This research was conducted in a residential child care institution, in the city of Fez, Morocco, which has a 216-bed capacity and currently houses 142 children (only male) aged 3 to 17. The children are divided into three age categories; the first from 3 to 7, and the second from 8 to 13, gathered in one pavilion, and the third from 14 to 17 in a separate one. The participants of this research comprised 10 female educators who only care of children aged from 3 to 13(to give a certain homogeneity to the research), and who accepted voluntarily to participate in this research and to be interviewed. The four remaining ones, refused for their own reasons. Regarding the characteristics of the participants, working with abandoned children aged from 3 to 13(males), in a child care institution, was the only characteristic retained.

2.3. Research Tools

The semi-directive interview is the tool used in this research. The interview guide was developed on the basis of the research problematic and the conceptual framework. The

interview guide consisted of 11 open-ended questions. The interview is subdivided into five dimensions, which were given particular attention in this research: the conception of the PWB, the conception of abandonment, actions to promote the PWB, advocacy for the needs and rights of abandoned children, the contribution of professional services and resources. To provide respondents with an understood term, the term «good balance» was used in the interview questions. For greater clarity, it was added «that a well-balanced child is a child in good mental or psychological health».

2.4. Data Collection

Before starting the research, an internship was carried out for one month within the institution, to become familiar with the staff, especially the educators. All interviews occurred in a children's room, face-to-face with the educators, at times when the children were at school. Before beginning the interviews, the educators were first thanked for their collaboration and for having kindly and without hesitation agreed to be interviewed. The objective of the research and procedure were explained, reassuring them that all their personal information will be kept strictly confidential and that they may receive a copy of the transcript of the interview, if they wish. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 min to one hour.

3. Results

3.1. Perceptions of the Child's Concept of Psychological Well-being

The PWB perceived by educators, answering the question: 1. "How do you know if a child is mentally well-balanced?" is the following: For half of the educators, a child with good balance is one who is happy, comfortable, balanced, in good humour and active: "If he is in a good mood, behaves well with others and is doing well at school"; "A balanced and active child"; "When he feels happy, glows with ease, sits comfortably and speaks clearly and confidently". For the other half, it is a child who behaves well and has good relations with others: "For me a child who has a good balance, I see it in his good behaviour, in his good relationship with other children"; "He communicates well...he plays with his brothers"; "He has good behaviour, that is to say, he is unaggressive". Other characteristics have also emerged, which show the child's good balance, such as success at school, good cognitive functioning and autonomy: "Through his behaviour: if he is intelligent and succeeds at school"; "Through his words, he succeeds at school and if he reacts with me". Some differences appear in their perceptions of PWB, giving more importance to one component than to others, but in general, the educators share conceptions that go in the same direction. When describing abandonment by educators, through the answer to the following question: "2. Could you describe to me, in your own words, what an abandoned child is like?" The aim is to determine whether the educators consider the child's conception of PWB in their concern. All the educators' perceptions take two directions: the first direction focused on the relational side; the parental and family relationship: rejection by the parents, deprivation of a family and abandonment by the mother: "This is a child who has lost his parents. He is a child who has lost his parents, who does not have a family or origins"; "He is a child who has been marginalized by society, a victim and alone in the world"; "He is a child who has suffered several acts of abandonment, the first is that of his mother, the second is when he leaves an association to take him to another because of his age, and within these movements, he undergoes a series of displacements from one educator to another". The second direction focused on the sentimental side: difficult feelings, pity or contempt felt by society, deprivation, suffering, and emotional deprivation: "It's a very difficult feeling! He suffers from emotional deprivation"; "...He always feels abandoned and this feeling becomes even

worse when nobody takes care of him, unlike the other children who have been taken in”; “He is a child deprived of everything, of tenderness and of a family environment”. The expression abandoned child itself says it all”.

3.2. Actions to Promote the Psychological Well-Being of the Children

Concerning the actions performed by the educators to help the child feel better about himself, some use communication and listening with the child: “Yes, of course! I communicate with the child ...”; “I listen and I talk to him ...”, other educators help the child with his homework: “Yes! I help him improve his study performance...”, some use punishment, considering it beneficial for the child: “I punish him by depriving him of go out, play or take his snack, if he does something bad, so that he can learn. Because it is forbidden here to hit the child, how can you discipline him then? It works ...!”. One educator mentioned that sometimes ignorance is enough for the child to learn “...If I want to punish him, it is enough to ignore him”. All the teachers do actions to help the child feel good about himself, each in their own way. Regarding the actions that the educators do to help the child make friends and get along with others, according to their perceptions, we find that all educators do actions to help the child in this regard: “Of course! I encourage them to make friends within the institution and elsewhere, friendships that can last over time, that they can count on and exchange visits with when they grow up”; “I encourage them to create new friendships at school, at sports centers and in all places they go”. With the exception of two of them who affirms that the child in the institution has no problems at this level and that he integrates easily: “The children here no longer have problems with relationships with others; they integrate easily and quickly ...”; “In the institution, the child integrates easily with others”. Concerning the actions that the educators do to help the child put into practice his abilities and to learn new things, according to their perceptions; some focus on physical and sports activities: “I try enrolling the child in his or her preferred sport or cultural activities, football, Taekwondo, or theatre ...”; “...if a child is gifted in football... I contact the administration to enroll him in a club or sports hall”. Other educators give importance to cognitive activities: “...During weekends and holidays, I tell them stories, I give them drawing and painting workshops, or we go out ...”; “I tell them stories to inspire them”. Generally, the educators have shown their willingness to improve the children's skills and sense of competence. As for the educators' perceptions of the actions they perform to improve the child's autonomy, we note that all educators have the same objectives in this regard; Teaching the child to dress himself, make his bed, arrange his wardrobe, wash his socks and bathe alone. Four teachers recommend that children should rely more on themselves because they will not always be at their side, preparing them for the future.

3.3. The Contributions of Professional Services and Resources to Promote the Psychological Well-Being

When the educators were asked to identify the professionals who to date, have helped these children significantly, six educators stressed the contribution of all staff in helping the child without distinction: “...But in fact, each person contributes actively and positively according to their means and skills ...”; “All staff contributes in his own position”. The remaining four educators cited professionals who have helped the child importantly according to their perceptions, such as the psychologist, the principal and the school support teachers. All the educators stated through their perceptions that they greatly appreciate the subsidies from benefactors and the various activities and outings that they organize for them: “The outings and events that they organize for them contribute in a concrete way to raise their morale and making them happy, thanks to the subsidies from benefactors”, they insist also on the importance of their contribution to the children's equilibrium and that these activities raise

their morale and make them happy: “The gifts, the summer camps, outings to the best cafés and restaurants, to the playgrounds subsidized by the benefactors make them delighted”. This contributes concretely to their balance, according to their perceptions. Only one educator appreciates the Pedagogical assistant, according to what she does with the children regarding their school: “I think ... the pedagogical assistant, she is concerned about the enrolment and school affairs of the children”. Regarding things to be improved in professional services or resources for the child's balance, according to the perceptions of the educators, nine educators insist on the importance of reducing the number of children for each educator, so that they can take care of the child and give him or her more time and help him or her with homework. They also stressed the need to find a solution to prevent children from moving from one institution to another and from one educator to another, which further aggravates their feelings of instability and insecurity and will inevitably influence their psychological balance: “We must reduce the number of children for each educator, at least six children for each one. We must not separate the child from his educator by moving him to another one, to separate the age groups, because this has a harmful impact on the child's and the educator's psyche. It is necessary to offer them a family atmosphere as much as possible”; “It is necessary to keep the same educators for each group of children, because their change may disturb the child and make him psychologically unstable and undisciplined ...”. Other things need to be improved according to their perceptions: To offer training to the educators to improve their psychological knowledge, learn new techniques to accompany the children and to intervene in the different situations they face “...The educators need training to improve their level of treatment of the child and to understand their needs and how to intervene effectively with him”.

4. Discussion

4.1. Perceptions of the Child's Concept of Psychological Well-Being

According to the scientific literature, PWB was first defined with great precision by Bradburn as the preponderance of positive affects over negative ones (Bradburn,1968). This is revealed by analysis of the data. Despite the negative affects experienced by abandoned children, they also experience positive affects. Other researchers also consider the PWB a summary of the positive and negative emotions felt by an individual (Simon & Durand-Bush, 2014) . It has also been found that some educators gave more importance to positive emotions as an important component of PWB, more than others, others to the relational side, and some to competence. This appears similar in the Andrew and McKennell definition, who gave the importance to cognition and affection in the assessment of PWB and suggested a distinguishing between them to define it (Andrew & McKennell,1980). Ryff also defined the PWB, according to deductive determination by key components; Self-acceptance ,personal growth, autonomy, positive relationships with others ,and control over the environment and purpose in life (Gao & McLellan, 2018).Massé and his collaborators defined the PWB, according to an inductive determination, by the following components :Self-esteem, balance (emotional level, professional and family activities), happiness, sociability and social commitment (Gao & McLellan, 2018). Voyer and Boyer made a synthetic construction of the previous definitions of PWB, giving these components: Self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy, happiness, relationships with others, control over the environment and purpose in life (Voyer& Boyer ,2001). Educators have generally focused on basic psychological needs: the need for competence, which reflects a person's desire to exercise his or her abilities and skills, the need for autonomy, which is the need to feel ownership of choices, execution of actions and achievement of results, and the need for affiliation, which is the need to be valued by someone else (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Satisfying these needs gives vitality to the

organization, internal congruence, and psychological integration (Guardia et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Our multi-dimensional approach to the conception of PWB, has allowed us to be satisfied only with educators' perceptions, as is the case here in our research of PWB of children, which can be observed daily by educators within the institution. Demonstration of spontaneous satisfaction, expression of positive affects, expectation of self-efficacy of the child, spontaneous engagement in activities, are the observable dimensions used by research for several decades to evaluate the subjective well-being of children in their environment (Cloutier,2011). The conception of the PWB, therefore, seems to have been designed by the educators in the institution, through observation of children's behaviour. Our results are therefore in line with the findings of the PWB literature According to Alan Saks and Gary Johns, experience is among the factors that can influence perceptions (Alan & Gary,2011). With experience, organizations can learn to make finer perceptual distinctions and learn new types of categorizations (Sumner & Samuel ,2009). Several studies have been conducted on maladjustment and psychopathology among abandoned children, while few studies have examined their well-being. Positive psychology is concerned with discovering and reinforcing what is positive in human beings (Shelly& Haidt, 2005). In our research, despite the difficulties and negative affects experienced by an abandoned child, the educators also talked about what is positive in that child. This seems to be reinforced by a study which was conducted among abandoned children and orphans living in institutions, which showed that these children present problems in their self-representation translated into damage to their self-esteem and revealed by negative feelings and failures in their relationships with others (Whetten et al.,2009). Some of these children, enter into a process of resilience to face their situation, which can be seen in the defence mechanisms they use (Sherr, Roberts & Croome, 2017). This process of resilience is defined by the capacity to overcome a trauma and/or to continue to build themselves up in an unfavourable environment (Tisseron, 2017). Hence the importance of the role of the educator in the institutional environment.

4.2. Actions to Promote the Psychological Well-Being of the Children

The educators do different actions to help these children and to improve their PWB, according to their perceptions. The importance given to the actions of fostering, considering the institution is not only an accommodation and catering environment for abandoned children, but also a social environment, where the children acquire the emotional and social skills they should improve and develop. Considering more that the educators of the institution actively contribute to the promotion of the well-being of these children, through their actions, giving meaning to their lives: "I explain to them that it is not the end of the world, and that there are many people who have lived through the same situation, and they have continued their lives and continued their studies. They have reached great positions and built their families", by preventing mental health problems: "...unless someone suffers from a mental problem, then I take him to the psychologist", by cultivating social interaction: "I encourage him to create new friendships at school, at the sports halls and in all places he goes to", by leading the child to have self-confidence: "If I see someone who has finished his homework and has mastered a subject, I ask him to help his brothers with their homework, to make him feels competent". A recently published chapter, which reinforces our research findings, presented the results of PISA 2015 on student well-being, which focused on initiatives by policy, teachers and parents that could be useful in promoting student well-being, noting that school is not only an environment for learning academic skills, but also a social environment where children acquire the emotional and social skills they should grow (Schleicher, 2018). It argues that well-being can be improved by all those involved in education if they pursue the following four objectives (Schleicher, 2018) :Ensuring that children give meaning to their lives; preventing mental and physical health problems; cultivating social interaction at school

and creating school environments conducive to the development of caring, responsible and respectful adolescents; and building students' self-confidence and engagement in school life so that they can learn and think for themselves. According to the theory of self-determination, human beings innately, tend to satisfy three basic psychological needs (Guardia et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000): the need for autonomy, the need for competence and the need for affiliation. The satisfaction of these three needs is essential for their growth, integrity and well-being. Based on educators' perceptions; it appears that all of their actions tend to satisfy these three basic psychological needs, with or without their consciousness. Educators also take actions aimed at the feeling of competence, by improving their skills. Educators' perceptions regarding the feeling of autonomy generally tend towards the same objectives that correspond to their ages: teaching them to dress themselves, make their bed, arrange their wardrobe, wash their socks and have their bath alone. Children act primarily to obtain a reward; to have an outing, either for lunch or dinner or a visit to the educator at home, after obtaining permission from the administration, or to avoid punishment; to be deprived of an outing, to play or simply to be neglected by the educator. These results conform to the extrinsic motivation (Paquet, Carbonneau & Vallerand ,2016): the theory of self-determination, which implies that the person starts to do an activity according to a consequence that is external to him or her; Obtaining a reward or avoid punishment, is the primary reason the person acts; As well, positive feedback on the person's performance reinforces his or her intrinsic motivation. The latter translates into the pleasure and satisfaction that a person experiences when doing an activity because they find it interesting. In other words, educators tend to promote the PWB of these children, by taking actions, conscious or not, to satisfy the three basic psychological needs.

4.3. The Contributions of Professional Services and Resources to Promote the Psychological Well-Being

Professional services play a primordial role for the PWB of abandoned children, as well as the resources, both material and human, from which they benefit. They positively and concretely influence the PWB, according to the perceptions of the educators. Some of them underline the efforts of the staff of the institution to support these children without distinguishing their profession. Other professional services are perceived as being more important than others in consolidating these children within the institution, such as the psychologist, speech therapist and school supporting teachers. The latter service contributes importantly to support these children in their study, except for some of them who have some learning difficulties. The ability of professionals to inform, guide and support helps develop a sense of self-efficacy, skills and empowerment that are conducive to well-being (Rurka, 2007).

Educators highly value the resources available to children. These resources contribute effectively to their PWB, which is revealed by our results. Most educators' perceptions emphasize that the children feel happy and motivated when they receive a gift or an outing organized by donors and benefactors at the various recreational venues. The educators perceive that associations and volunteers contribute more to the PWB of these children, through the sports activities that they organize for them and the registrations that they make for these children to other leisure activities that they prefer, to alleviate the feeling of abandonment from which they suffer. The various contributions of the professional services and the material and human resources, help the children in a concrete way to strengthen their interpersonal relationships, to create new friendships, to be able to do tasks that correspond to their ages and to improve at their schools, giving them rewards and gifts to motivate them. According to the theory of self-determination, social environments that promote the

satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs make it possible to stimulate people's internal dynamism, optimize their motivation and maximize results in terms of psychology, personal development and behavior (Paquet, Carbonneau & Vallerand ,2016). However, social environments that hinder the satisfaction of these needs decrease motivation and have harmful effects on general well-being and performance (Paquet, Carbonneau & Vallerand,2016). Note that the difficulties experienced by abandoned children and the constraints faced by the institution are no longer known in our research. But we wanted to understand how these services and resources contribute to the PWB of abandoned children living in institutions, to improve the quality of these services, believing in their importance in this regard, this seems to be revealed by the results of our research.

5. Conclusion

In this research, we explored how the educators perceive children's conception of PWB, through their experience in the institution, focussing on optimal functioning, the joy of life, relationships with others, and success at school, cognitive functioning and autonomy. This research has also allowed us to explore the actions that educators take to promote the well-being of the children in their care. It was also found that their actions as a whole go towards satisfying the three basic psychological needs, the need for competence, the need for autonomy, and the need for social affiliation. The educators also intervene to defend the needs and rights of children in the environments they attend, often at school, where children suffer from stigmatization. This research has further revealed that the perceptions of educators as a whole appreciate the professional services and resources that children living in the institution benefit from, highlighting their concrete effect in strengthening children's interpersonal relationships, creating new friendships, being able to do tasks that correspond to their ages, and improving at their schools, motivating them with rewards. This research identifies five specific ways to promote the PWB of these children. First, decrease the number of children for each educator. Second, avoid consecutive displacements of these children. Third, the benefit of training. Fourth, to learn new techniques of accompaniment, and intervention with those abandoned children. Fifth, fighting the stigmatisation surrounding abandoned children. In this research, working with abandoned children in a residential care institution, with children aged from 3 to 13, was the only characteristic retained. In further research, it seems promising to consider other characteristics such as age, marital status, experience, and level of education. It is important to mention at the end, that despite all efforts made by individuals or institutions to improve the psychological, legal, social and health condition of these children, it is absolutely impossible to truly compensate them for tender embrace that represents a source of security and protection for them- an attachment figure” as John Bowlby; the pioneer of attachment theory called it, knowing that this attachment figure may not be the real parent, but must intervene in the first weeks of a child’s life(Bowlby,2005).

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