

## Adolescents Immigrant and Refugees: Identity Issues

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**Received:** January 30, 2018; **Published:** July 19, 2018

### Abstract

This presentation is focusing on immigrant adolescents' behavior at school, which had as main symptom "learning difficulties" and school failure. The adolescents, 13 - 16 years old, in 2<sup>nd</sup> Cross-Culture High School of Elliniko, Attica, were referrals to the School Psychologist's Office. The cause for the referral was "learning difficulties". The purpose of the study was to help the children themselves, the teachers and, of course, the parents of these children to reevaluate their beliefs and understanding of these adolescents' school difficulties and help them find better ways to deal with it.

Specifically, the focus of the study has been placed on whether the adolescents' learning difficulties have been functioning as a symptom that arose from their loss and the current changes in their lives, and also as a reaction to the mechanisms that had been chosen by their parents in order to cope with the aforementioned losses.

A further area of interest was to explore the extent to which the family system, as well as the community of experts, can be motivated to reconsider the issues and experiences of these adolescents pertaining to their losses.

In order to ensure that the "learning difficulties" were relevant to loss, the researcher used all appropriate assessment tools and methods to exclude the possibility of the presence of other neurological, emotional or cognitive disorders such as mental retardation, ADHD, specific learning difficulties, etc. The data of this study were collected via questionnaires, observation at school, and application of psychometric tools as well as through interviews that gathered information from all involved sources, i.e. adolescents, teachers and parents.

This paper gives a base for understanding the behaviour-the main story-and all the attendant feelings that overwhelmed children following their losses, and giving them and us (as specialists) a clue to developing second stories. Great emphasis is placed on relocating and reframing the cause of the "learning difficulties" and avoiding such a label which will hinder further the pupils' adjustment in the school environment.

**Keywords:** *Dominant/Second Story; Losses; Home; Self; Identity; Nostalgic Disorientation; Building; Reconstruction; Mediation*

### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The background of this study was my training as a psychologist in systems' theory and systemic psychotherapy, my training in supporting children in loss and death, and my training in KCC's (Kensington Consultation Centre) on appreciative thinking. Also, White's Narrative approach about dominant and second story ("*...it is important to provide a different territory of identity in which a child can stand prior to speaking about its traumatic experiences...*") [1], Hermans' theory about the Dialogical Self ("*...The dialogical self is based on the assumption that there are many I-positions that can be occupied by the same person... is always tied to a particular position in space and time...*") [2], and, as a teacher, my previous studies on Greek history and literature.

The starting point was the quality of the stories that children and adolescents themselves presented in my office about their lives. These stories were “full” of a dominant story (the first story): “I am one who...”, which was equal to “I am defined by a story of losses”. There was no second/surroundings story about “here and now”, about skills (“what I give value to” → “my history” → “my family” → “my community”), possibilities, or activity /experience in life or connections with others), all of which are connected to resilience: they were all in the shadows. According to White, “... in popular and in professional culture, in the interpretation of, and in the management of, .... in relation to children’s expressions of life, the term action is rarely employed” [3].

According to White’s theory, the first story requires recognition, but there is also a second story of “*how the child has responded to these experiences of trauma*”, which is often overlooked although it provides a safe space to talk without reliving the experience: “*No one is a passive recipient of trauma*” [4].

### Method and Research Questions

**The demographic profile of the participants:** The participants were 13 to 16-year-old immigrant adolescents from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, Africa, the Philippines and also Greek repatriates from Canada and S. Africa. They were all students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cross-Cultural High School of Elliniko in the academic years 1999 - 2008. They were all referrals to the School Counseling Office (of which I was in charge) from the teachers and/or self-referrals from the children themselves, rarely from the parents.

**The cause of referral or self-referral:** The teachers reported “learning difficulties”, meaning: “They don’t get on with the lessons”, “they have difficulties in understanding”, “something happened to this child and he/she doesn’t learn”. The children said: “I don’t know”, “I didn’t do anything”, “something happened to me that bothers me in learning”, “something happened and I want to go out, to scream ...” etc.

**Evaluation tools - Method:** Interviews with teachers, parents and child, Raven’s Progressive Matrices[a non-verbal multiple choice test of general intelligence: in each test item (5 items in total) the subject is asked to identify the missing element that completes a pattern; includes 60 questions, total time 30 minutes], Achenbach Behavior Checklist for 11 - 18 year olds (3 forms: parents, teachers and youth self report, T. Achenbach), “Draw a family” test, House-Tree–Person Test, Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), Half-completed sentences test, Observation in classroom and during the breaks.

However, the evaluation of learning level indicated “no problem” in terms of:

- Intelligence
- Personality
- Emotional situation (no disorders)

Thus the question that arose was “If everything is OK, what is going on?”

Then I started to hear their stories, and the key words were Over there–Over here, Home, Unfulfilled desire, In here–Out there, etc. Once prompted along this direction, children started telling their stories about their dilemmas and troubling situations:

- I’m homesick.
- I offend the other children..., I get furious..., I don’t like feeling this way.... I am a good sort... When I was there, I didn’t do such things...
- I want to go back...
- Over there, everything was fine.
- There, I was managing things..., and the other children were not like the children here..., the neighbourhood was different..., the whole life was different...

- I keep telling them [the parents] we should go back. Over there, you don't get so much schooling. They won't listen... I have friends, my cousins, the river...
- I miss my village... They say I should forget about it. I can't. I'm thinking about it all the time...
- Mr. B. (math teacher) yells at me in the classroom... I look at him and I don't understand what it is all about...
- I can't see any trees from my house windows, only cars.... There is so much noise...
- People here don't pay any attention to you. They push you about without caring. Children in school-bus push me, too.
- I liked it better there, but my mum didn't.
- My parents say we aren't going back... I am going back... I phone my grandmother without my parents knowing...
- It's like I am not myself over here.
- My home is back there.
- I'm pretty sure I am going back to *Владивосток*.
- What kind of people are you? You don't even have a piano in your houses... I hear no music coming from your houses...

Then I started to hear their stories, and the key words were Over there-Over here, Home, Unfulfilled desire, In here-Out there, etc. Once prompted along this direction, children started telling their stories about their dilemmas and troubling situations:

And the more I heard the more I realized there was just one story, and it went:

- I tell her (my mother) that we should go back and she cries. I don't mention it to her anymore. I don't want to upset her.
- I am alone. I have to think of myself.
- Greek isn't a language I am going to use in Albania. The kids at school are stupid. They say they like it here. I like my country.
- Of course I am going back. I lie to my mama so as not to upset her... I miss my country.

So I had to think about what it was that looked like school denial, inability to read and write, lack of concentration and attention, inability to follow instructions—a type of behavior such as “*I don't read my lessons, I am not interested in my progress*”, “*I don't like anything*”, etc.—which triggered dysfunctional behaviors such as “freezing”, school failure, aggressive behavior, and finally led to expulsion from school.

### Re-engagement and Reconciliation

In a safe place, under conditions of trust and freedom of expression, I worked therapeutically with individuals (parents, teachers, children) and groups of adolescents in a systemic way, using various techniques such as the Landscape Geneogramme [5], Psychodrama, “Writing letter to...”, “Memories box”, The “life tree” (where every child draws a tree that has a special meaning for him/her: Think of a tree, Make up its story, Write down its secrets, Paint it, Give it a name), etc. Each group consisted of 8 - 10 children with different stories of loss, from different countries. The 1½-hour weekly sessions were conducted by me as a person with stories of losses in my family history.

My aim was to help children to unhang from their life stories as “victims of loss/trauma” before taking hold of their identities; to seek out sources of resilience and alternative open spaces; to elevate their personal agency by exploring areas where they felt they could be influential in their own life, to become an agent in their own story. I saw my role as a therapist as one who helps create double-storied memories with full rather than half recall of the trauma. Thus the first story would be about the losses and the second story would be one of goodness and caring, an alternative territory of identity. I used connections, questions and conversations to co-create meaning. I tried to invite teens to think differently about themselves, to develop stories about their responses and skills, to identify safe places and acts of resistance, to build upon their own responses to trauma (abilities, talents, cleverness, their own understanding of their experiences and competencies):

- Would you say that you first started to...?
- Has this helped you ... at other times in your life?
- What is it like for you to think of a 5-year-old boy/girl doing that?
- And so on, trying to re-engage and reconcile the “then and there” with the “here and now”.

## Discussion

My work with these teens and their parents pointed to a narration about kids who lived here and yearned for “there”: “*Here it is a mess; There everything is fine*”. Parents had the same difficulties: “There” was the ideal paradise, but they could no longer live there; “Here” was a difficult and different place, unfamiliar, hostile. Coming here was the only option, and they couldn’t go back even if they wished to.

Children who have lost their homes: the question that arises at this point is about the meaning of the phrase “*I am losing my home*”. In Homer’s *Odyssey* (8<sup>th</sup> c. BC), Ulysses describes homesickness as “smoke” and “earth”, meaning smoke as something intangible, a fantasy, and earth as something like nature-palpable, concrete.

The phrase “*I am losing my home*” refers to losing something familiar, the house that represents each family’s history, and at the same time to something more abstract like the home country. The “home” as a familiar space integrates opposite meanings such as joy-sorrow, presence-absence, hope-disappointment, etc. It contains also the different parts of our self, the different “selves” of oneself, and makes us feel secure and safe. In the absence of home the integration of all these meanings is missing or doesn’t work, the opposite meanings become literal on a “right-wrong” basis and then the narrative gets stuck on this polarization [2].

Refugees and immigrants feel homesickness, nostalgia for a “home” that no longer exists, whether they return or not; it doesn’t exist in the way it used to be. What does not exist is mainly the psychological aspect which needs to be re-created. These people’s identity is no longer a unified whole. Its elements are fragmented. Refugees and immigrants lose the elements that provide cohesion to a place of reference: scents, sounds, the quality of light, and so on. They sense this loss but are not sure, because nothing is palpable. This leads to what we call “nostalgic disorientation”, which appears when there are no systemic correlations to provide a sense of trust and security in life [6]. Particulars of identity are now unconnected. Nostalgic disorientation ‘freezes’ the mosaic upon which identity is built; it is not that the identity is lost, but its components are no longer connected. When that happens, the different sub-selves of a person do not communicate. The “master” self is the nostalgic-self. The child sticks to this self and nurtures it through a nostalgic narrative [2]. The feeling is one of desperation, and the loss of the familiar space creates polarization: “*I had it – I don’t have it*”, and leads to dysfunctional behaviors together with a silent trauma, silent losses not visible to themselves and their parents nor to the teachers or the specialists. In the school context, the alarm signal is bad performance, denial to learn, lack of attention in the classroom, withdrawal, absence of any motivation to learn or form relationships. At this point we have to consider the conditions they have lived in from the point of view of “before and after”, the related losses and the phases in the process: prediction, disastrous events, survival, adaptation to the new country. The reception country, as a place of a better chance, provides as an answer to nostalgia a new meaning to life, a new lifestyle, a new context, a new approach to reality. So, the child and the family, which is under re-adjustment not under disorder, is in danger of being labeled and assigned specific roles.

The unfulfilled desire represents an idealized picture of the past. It is a false reality: Their country has also changed, but remains a cohesive element of identity: The unfulfilled desire serves as a strong means for reuniting all the factors of identity. Nostalgia becomes a narration that makes them stick to the past as they try to fight their disorientation, but it is no use. Trying to do so, they become connected with one another through religion, political associations, family bonds, etc. The unfulfilled desire puts the personal loss in a common collective context and then becomes a separate element of identity that makes any therapeutic access harder. Each family lives between past and present and tries to strike a balance between them; for example, children wear T-shirts with footballers or singers from back home, grandmothers tell stories from the “old” country, and so on. Sometimes it is the parents who flirt with the new life and sometimes the children, but not both at the same time, and so they manage to keep the homeostasis.

### Outcomes

Almost 1/3 of these children managed to re-narrate the story about their selves and their lives (“the crisis as an opportunity”) in a more useful way, to function within the school society with a self as a new “whole”, including their losses. Another 1/3 returned to their home countries, and 1/3 left school. Ten of these students went on to study psychology at the University of Athens.

The children who managed to work out their losses in a successful way had parents who understood their behavior as a “sign” to speak up for themselves (to explain, express their own fears, anxieties, sorrows). The same parents managed to elaborate their own losses in a more helpful way for themselves.

Intelligence, personality traits and learning capacity were good prognostic pointers.

### Conclusions

There are lots of ways to “read” a behavior. “*Learning difficulties*” or behavioral problems often emerge when a child’s narration is stuck.

The struggle for survival at any cost and the quick adaptation “for a better life”, without re-engaging the “before” and “after” narration, leads to serious dysfunctions on an emotional and practical level.

Working with children who have endured losses and significant changes, I sometimes lost my strength in the process of seeking ways forward.

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**Volume 7 Issue 8 August 2018**

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