

1-18-2019

Protecting Vulnerable Children in the Middle East and North Africa From Violent Extremism Through Rights-Based Education

Mary Ann Rea Ramirez
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2019>

Recommended Citation

Ramirez, Mary Ann Rea, "Protecting Vulnerable Children in the Middle East and North Africa From Violent Extremism Through Rights-Based Education" (2019). *2019 Program & Posters*. 15.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2019/15>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Symposium at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2019 Program & Posters by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Protecting Vulnerable Children in the Middle East and North Africa From Violent Extremism Through Rights-Based Education

Mary Anne Rea-Ramirez, Ed.D.

Problem

On a playground in San Diego, California, a group of refugee children began fighting. As they were broken up, a teacher overheard one boy say to another that he was part of ISIS and would get him back.

Similarly, thousands of miles away on a playground in Erbil, Kurdistan, a group of children were playing a game where they pretended to be members of ISIS. As their teacher drew close to them, she was horrified to see that they were pretending to behead one of the boys.

Shocked at what they witnessed, neither teacher knew what to do or how to respond. And they are not alone.

Many of the world's children are scared and traumatized, surviving in an environment hostile to people of diverse religions and beliefs because neither they nor their teachers have the tools needed to respond.

Purpose

The purpose of this mixed method study was to evaluate the effect of a rights based curriculum on freedom of religion or belief to determine whether students who engaged in the curriculum experienced conceptual change in their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, and what behaviors emerged after instruction that would build a basis for pluralism.

Significance

While governments and organizations have called for education to address the problem, there has been no data thus far to show whether an educational method works.

The classroom is, in many ways, the front line of efforts to prevent and counter radicalization and confront extremist ideologies and the intolerant ideas that threaten the security and stability of a community, region, nation, and the world. It is in this context that educators, in particular, have a unique opportunity to counter the ideas which fuel aggression and promote values which foster peaceful and pluralistic societies.

Social Change Implications

The data from this study indicates that not only did students have significant pre post changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding freedom of religion or belief, but that they exhibited instances of increased empathy by standing up for and defending the rights of others even when their beliefs differed. Instances of decreased aggression and violent reactions were also documented.

Theory or Framework

Hardwired's training model is based on conceptual change theory, which refers to the development of new ways of thinking and understanding of concepts, beliefs, and attitudes (Murphy & Alexander, 2008; Rea-Ramirez, 2008; Orey, 2010; Lundholm & Davies, 2013). "This occurs through restructuring elements of existing concepts, but goes beyond just revising one's ideologies to actually restructure the underlying concepts used to develop those beliefs (Rea-Ramirez & Ramirez, 2018)" and ultimately one's behavior.

Relevant Scholarship

The children of Iraq, in particular, have never lived during a time of peace and have frequently witnessed instances of intolerance, extremism, violence, and killings against their neighbors and families because of religion.

Possibly the most effective way to address the recurrent pattern of religion-related intolerance, was through the training of teachers who would then be able to instill in youth the value of religious freedom and pluralism. It was also believed to be important that this training model for teachers could be locally owned, sustainable, and scalable. It could also be taught in any class regardless of educational level or subject and did not require a curricular change or new textbooks.

Curriculum grounded in conceptual change theory and pedagogy was the basis for a rights based education in freedom of religion or belief based on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Research Question

What is the effect of a rights based curriculum for freedom of religion or belief on youth in the MENA, based on conceptual change theory and practice.

Participants

Participants included students in classes taught by the teachers trained. The classes included a variety of makeups including all one religion and one gender, mixed religions and mixed gender, mixed religions and one gender, and one religion and mixed genders. Students ranged from 9 to 20 years of age, with an average age of 14.4 and were grouped in similar ages within each class. Classes included those in displaced person communities, government public schools, private, and private religious schools.

Procedures

Data was collected using a pre-post survey that included scenarios of issues students might encounter related to Article 18. Additionally, analogies, drawings, student comments, and actions were collected by the teachers. Focus groups were held with the teachers six times after their training and teaching the lesson in their classroom. Teachers had been trained in assessment and staff was actively involved in the collection of data to insure accuracy and integrity.

Analysis

Pre-post survey data was analyzed using a t test on aggregated student data from all three countries, then by country, by gender, by religion, and by type of classroom. Anecdotal evidence was coded for categories and then themes were generated.

Findings

Results of the Pre-Post survey showed statistically significant conceptual change with a $p = 0.0001$ in all aggregated categories. Themes that emerged included:

Human Dignity, Equality and Inclusion of Religious Diversity: Students demonstrated greater respect for and inclusion of women, girls and members of minority communities in the classroom.

Gender and Religion: Mixed-gender and mixed-religion classes exhibited the most significant conceptual change in the program. Displacement and Conflict: Students displaced by conflict demonstrated the most significant conceptual change in learning environments with religious and/or gender diversity.

Students' understanding, respect, and empathy for the rights of others increased through multiple lessons over time.

Interpretation

Students demonstrate increased knowledge about freedom of religion or belief, exhibited increased empathy, and changed in their reactions based initially on fear and misconceptions. Students comments and actions demonstrated a desire to engage with others who believed differently and to stand up for the others' beliefs.

The lessons were effectively taught in multiple subject areas, without teaching religion, and requiring no change in the curriculum.

Limitations

This study was conducted in three countries of the Middle East and North Africa with 1161 students. Therefore, it cannot be generalized globally without further study with a wider population.

Recommendations

To further document the effect of this program, a longitudinal study is needed to follow the effects on students over several years. It is also recommended that the program be extended to other areas in the region and globally.

Hardwired recently received a request from the Kurdish Government to train all of their teachers, with the potential of reaching 1.8 million students. In addition, there is interest from Jordan and Saudi Arabia to introduce the program with their teachers, as well as extend it in Lebanon and Morocco.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through a grant from the British Commonwealth and Foreign Office and in collaboration with Hardwired, Inc., a 501c3 organization working on religious freedom throughout the MENA.