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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 significant pre-post changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, and what behaviors emerged after instruction that would build a basis for conceptual change in their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, and what whether students who engaged in the curriculum experienced rights base curriculum on freedom of religion or belief to determine whether an educational method works.

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, 2016)” 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).

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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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.