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It Starts with Us: Including Refugees in Rural Schools and Communities

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Research Article

It Starts with Us: Including Refugees in Rural Schools and Communities

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Rural school personnel across three districts and states were interviewed to learn their experiences working with refugee youth and their families. These eleven individuals held different roles including administrators, special service providers, and teachers of English language learners (ELL). Through qualitative analysis, the broad themes of communication, differences, resources, curriculum, collaboration, and family-school relationships were identified. Data were used to develop recommendations for promoting the inclusion of newcomer youth in rural schools.

The vast number of displaced person across the world may seem like a trend that is far removed from daily life in rural communities. Of these individuals who have left their homelands, many are seeking escape, or asylum, from the dangers presented by war, conflict, and other forms of violence. Refugees represent those individuals who have been granted asylum prior to arriving at their host countries. When refugees enter their host countries, they tend to resettle to metropolitan areas, but many will then move with their families to smaller, rural towns where housing is affordable and jobs are plentiful, often joining other refugees who have resettled to these areas (Marks, 2014). More than half of any refugee population are children who will enter into the local school systems (UNHCR, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand the practices implemented by rural educators that facilitate the inclusion of refugee students and their families. These strategies may form the basis of a guiding practice framework that can be used in other rural and remote areas of the world.

For many refugee families, the process of migrating to a new country is a long, arduous journey and many of these families have experienced traumatic events prior to escaping their homelands, including torture, war, and political terror (e.g., Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Post-migration begins when families arrive in their host countries where they often face a number of stressors including

inadequate accommodations, restricted economic opportunities, and stigma associated with their home country and religion (Slewa-Younan, Guajardo, Heriseanu, & Hasan, 2015).

Berry (1997) outlined a mutual, reciprocal process by which non-dominant groups acculturate to their new communities. For example, a newcomer group that seeks to become part of the community must be met with a degree of openness from the broader population for inclusivity to occur resulting in mutual accommodation among both groups. Unfortunately, mismatches between the beliefs, values, and cultural norms of newcomer and individuals in their receiving communities can result in acculturative stress which may be triggered when the non-dominant group experiences a sense of inferiority, “otherness,” discrimination, language barriers, or poverty (Berry, 1997; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). The context of reception (e.g., Kotzur, Tropp, & Wagner, 2018), defined as the process by which non-dominant groups are received into a system, provides a useful conceptualization for this entry process. As might be expected, a “welcoming” reception from the school and community play an important role in the adjustment of families and their children (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014).

Secondary Migration

After their initial entry, some refugees move to more rural communities, a phenomena referred to as *secondary migration* (Marks, 2014). There are many employment opportunities within the agricultural industry (e.g., meatpacking plants) that do not require English language proficiency, drawing both refugee and immigrant families to communities where these plants are located (Marks, 2014; McBrien, 2005). The relocation of refugee families and students has created a demographic shift within these small communities (Marks, 2014). For example, in 2006, Fort Morgan, CO was predominantly White and Latinx prior to the arrival of 1,000 individuals from Somalia. In the span of a few years, nearly 10% of the town's population was comprised of refugee families (Marks, 2014). As families move, they experience another context of reception. Although there are clear benefits to small communities such as revitalizing local economies, increasing shrinking school populations, and adding diversity and richness to the local community, too often the focus has been on the educational challenges of refugee students (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Supporting Refugee Children and Families

Internationally, educational institutions serve as one of the main community resources to assist refugee students and families as they integrate into new communities (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). This role may be especially important for rural schools that often function as the center of the community and provide social support to both established residents and new arrivals (Bauch, 2001). Schools can serve as a location where school professionals provide services such as English language (EL) instruction and social emotional support to help students and families build community (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Some communities also have navigators or liaisons who help families learn about available resources including housing, transportation, employment options, and the school system.

Many refugee students have experienced significant interruptions to their formal education which contributes to academic skill deficits (McBrien, 2005). The degree and complexity of students' educational needs is dependent on their previous school experiences and developmental age. Upon entry into the school setting, many students receive EL services because language acquisition is a

critical component of children's adjustment (McBrien, 2005). Approximately 30% of refugees under the age of 18 are considered to have limited English proficiency and are expected to learn the dominant language to access their education (Capps et al., 2015). Although the UNCHR has advocated for educational instruction in the language of the child's country of origin, implementation of this policy would be impossible given the number of different languages and dialects represented (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Still, it is important to recognize that children who are able to balance the language demands of their native and host countries show the greatest educational and mental health outcomes (McBrien, 2005).

Many refugees have experienced trauma due to loss and war (Ellis et al., 2010). These experiences can make it difficult to cope with transitioning to a new set of cultural expectations and norms. Experiences of trauma and resulting PTSD have negative implications for subsequent development; ongoing stressors can impede adolescents' healthy development by reducing their sense of identity and autonomy (Ellis et al., 2008). Furthermore, vulnerable youth may be at risk for further trauma, as discrimination related to race, ethnicity, or religion may function as traumatic reminders (Ellis et al., 2008).

Therefore, school personnel in rural districts may need to adapt practices to help support refugee students and families. However, they are often expected to accomplish this goal with few resources for expanded programming (e.g., ELL and skill building classes, mental health services) and with a smaller number of professionals to help students and families navigate the school setting (Block et al., 2014; Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Unfortunately, school personnel may not be well prepared to adapt their practices to meet the needs of refugee students.

Role of School Personnel

Many rural educators experience communication difficulties with their newcomer students (Hurley, Medici, Stewart, & Cohen, 2011). The National Rural Education Association (NREA, 2016) has made it one of their priority research goals to build educator capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners. Unfortunately, refugee youth are sometimes marginalized by their exclusive placement in EL classrooms where they have limited opportunities to interact with their English-speaking peers

(Moinolnolki & Han, 2017). In turn, EL teachers may experience an increased sense of responsibility for their students because the need is so great, and the resources so limited (Kreck, 2014; Weinstein & Trickett, 2015). Nevertheless, based on their research in Australia, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) noted that school systems that adopt policies emphasizing a growth mindset, school safety, skill development, and supportive relationships experienced success in educating refugee students. These practices are associated with greater levels of student school engagement and achievement (Zengaro, Ali, & Zengaro, 2016).

Therefore, it is important to consider how school personnel such as administrators, mental health professionals, general education teachers, and EL teachers can work together to address the needs of refugee students and families. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of school-based professionals in rural communities. All school districts were located in communities with meat packing plants, an existing immigrant population, and a recent influx of refugee families, all elements that are consistent midwestern communities that have experienced secondary migration. Furthermore, we selected districts with comprehensive services for newcomer students in order to better understand potential best practices for meeting the needs of these youth and their families.

Method

Context of the Study

The school districts where participants worked are located in small towns in the Western and Midwestern United States. These three communities all had large refugee populations established through secondary migration. The community populations ranged in size from approximately 10,000 to 19,000, with the refugee population making up 500 to 2,000 (roughly 5-10%) of the community. Some residents had been in the communities for generations, while others were within months of arrival. Each of these communities had a relatively large Latinx population, both longstanding residents and newcomers (within three years of coming to the United States). Approximately a third of each district's students were enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) classes, sometimes referred to as EL (English learner), depending on the state. The student population in each district was majority White, non-Latinx, with a

number of students from Spanish-speaking countries (e.g., Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador) and Africa (e.g., Somalia, Eritrea).

Our interest in this topic grew from the witnessed changes that occurred in our own community (not included in this study) as refugees from Asia and African countries began to resettle and integrate into our suburban city. We were not formally affiliated with any of the three school systems and recognize that the perceptions of participants reflect those of school personnel and not those of refugee students and families.

Participants

Contacts were made with individuals in five school districts located in rural areas of the midwestern and southeastern regions of the United States that had recently experienced an influx of refugees through secondary migration. Emails were sent to district leaders to determine their interest in participation. Three leaders expressed interest and provided the researchers with the contact information for staff who were identified as the main individuals who worked with refugee students. Out of 13 individuals contacted, 11 agreed to participate. All participants were female and worked in various settings including elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as the district office. Participant positions included administrators (i.e., elementary school principal, EL district coordinator), three mental health professionals (i.e., school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker), five EL/ELL teachers, and one general education teacher. No demographic information beyond educational role was collected.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview prepared by the research team was used to elicit information regarding the experiences of each participant and their perceived successes and challenges of working with refugee youth and their families. Each interview was conducted individually and began by asking for a brief introduction to the participant's location, school population, and job duties. Next, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences through questions such as, "What have been some of the most successful ways to communicate with or get in touch with families?" as well as "What have been the challenges that you faced when working with refugee students and their families?" Throughout data

collection and analysis, we established trustworthiness through individual and shared analysis of potential themes, reflecting on our own experiences, and enlisting support from outside experts on refugee studies to confirm theme development.

Procedure

Prior to beginning this study, permission was obtained from the university's human subjects' research board. Participants completed a consent form giving permission for participation and recording of the interview. Four of the interviews took place over the phone and seven were conducted in person. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted by either advanced graduate students or by a faculty member and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first interviews were conducted at a single school district and initial themes were generated. We then completed this process at each of the other districts. Themes were generated for each site and then compared across all of the sites to consider broader themes.

The research team members independently read and reviewed the transcripts to generate open-codes consistent with the procedure described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Codes were compared and grouped into six broad themes. Within each theme, we identified supporting quotes, omitting irrelevant repetitions, filler words, and side notes to increase clarity. Because of the inherent overlap in some topics (e.g., communication might include language differences and resource issues such as an interpreter), efforts were made to create clear boundaries between different themes using the larger context of participants' input.

Results

The six themes that emerged included: (a) communication, (b) differences, (c) resources, (d) curriculum, (e) collaboration, and (f) family-school relations. We have highlighted subthemes and provided participants quotes to distinguish each theme. Overall, the strongest and most recurrent themes centered on communication and differences, including both strategies and challenges for working with refugee students and families.

Communication

The broad theme of communication included the general strategies that school personnel used to connect with students and their families. Communication is considered a key component of family-school partnerships and is conceptualized as regular, meaningful, and bi-directional interactions (Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2011). Those interviewed not only understood the importance of communication as a primary source of support to help students and parents understand school norms and expectations, they also described the difficulty in achieving effective communication. Some of the key ideas that emerged within this overall theme included strategies related to establishing communication with parents, language differences, and the importance of interpreters and translators.

Many of the school professionals expressed a strong desire to establish good communication with the families of their students. Methods of communication included emails, global call services, parent-teacher conferences with liaisons and interpreters, and weekend group meetings with parents. Individuals noted that a variety of efforts were made to let families know about routine school information. For example, one of the school administrators summarized the many different methods she used to connect with parents.

We have a global call that informs them of school closures or conferences ... those are always in English and then English-Spanish and English-Somali. We have newsletters that are translated to varying levels. ... We have liaisons at each of the buildings ... all have a Spanish-speaking and Somali-speaking liaison that are really responsible for communicating. We send a lot of communications home. Everything is always translated in both languages.

This individual went on to note how the multiple efforts to communicate important events resulted in a high percentage of family attendance at parent-teacher conferences.

Some school personnel referenced the indispensable role of school liaisons in establishing school-family relationships. One ELL educator noted, "[T]here are some parent involvement meetings that parents go to, but I think the biggest thing is our translators and family liaisons because they are the ones that are really involved and talking to the families and know how to communicate to the families." Family liaisons not only helped with

school meetings, but also helped connect families with community resources. Additionally, some districts employed bilingual, bicultural (Spanish and Somali) paraprofessionals. Another school attempted to address the shortage of interpreters by hiring Somali family members with knowledge of English as office staff, playground attendants, and crossing guards. When interpreters were not readily available, these staff members helped share simple, but necessary messages from families (e.g., “We need to leave early for an appointment”). This type of additional support was necessary because there was often only one liaison to support an entire district.

In the classroom, teachers worked to communicate with students using teaching strategies that were responsive to students’ academic needs. One ELL teacher shared, “The more examples and ‘hands on’ you can give them, that helps them more academically. I think the biggest behavioral thing that we encounter as a district and a school is sometimes the language barrier.” This teacher seemed to recognize that some of the behaviors she observed reflected students’ inability to communicate their needs, rather than behavioral problems.

Differences

Another important theme that emerged was the experience of different cultures coming together within communities. Within the broad theme of bridging differences, three sub-themes emerged: (a) overcoming prejudice, (b) responsive practices, and (c) understanding sources of trauma. Even though many of the rural communities had integrated other populations (e.g., Latinx families) and had well-established networks of bilingual educators and English language classes, the arrival of refugee students required an adaptation to these practices. Participants acknowledged the diversity of appearance, religion, and traditions and the complexity of integrating newcomers into the culture of rural communities.

School personnel believed that it would take time and facilitated interactions between groups to establish integration. In an effort to bring families together, one district hosted an international festival to celebrate diversity. These efforts seemed to reflect the educators’ beliefs that they were responsible for finding ways to support the religious, cultural, and life experiences of students and families. Another district included Muslim prayer time into the work

schedule of their paraprofessionals, although they acknowledged associated challenges:

For example, the cultural liaison, we actually see that partnership with the mosque as part of their job duty. But for a paraprofessional who’s expected to give direct service in the classroom, we’re not currently as willing to just let them be gone for an hour and a half in the middle of the day. So they see that discrepancy and there’s lots of, a lack of happiness around those decisions. And while those are not my decisions to make at all, I think how we deal with them does reflect where we’re at as a district.

Teacher participants described their attempts to learn about their students and acknowledged their own limitations in understanding the new families entering their districts. One ELL teacher described her own struggle by stating, “Even greeting them, I had to learn when it was okay, and when it was not. It’s just a matter of my own experiences, and trying to put myself in their shoes, which is hard when you haven’t been in their shoes.” Despite their lack of familiarity, participants expressed an openness and desire to welcome refugee families and learn about how to make their practices responsive.

Finally, participants shared their own lack of awareness and limited ability to support students who had experienced trauma. One interviewee, an ELL teacher, recalled something a student had told her in the context of a minor classroom accident, “One little girl comes up and she pats me on the shoulder and says, ‘It’s okay, in my country we step over dead bodies.’ We don’t even really understand where they’ve been.” This knowledge of past experiences seemed to heighten teachers’ empathy for students and families. A school counselor noted, “I think that’s another piece, if we could have someone who understands the trauma these families have experienced” in response to her wish for more specialized services for families in her district. Many participants mentioned the critical need for (and lack of) mental health services for families and children in their communities.

Resources

Resources can play an integral role in effectively integrating refugees into their new communities. Within school districts, internal funds (e.g., McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance) were allocated to expand programming, hire additional paraprofessionals, and contract with

interpreters. In some instances, community funding helped to offset costs of programming. For example, a local meatpacking plant provided financial resources to the school district to hire an instructor to offer English classes to families. Another district received a grant to help fund a cultural liaison to assist with interpretation, translation, and enhance cross cultural communication. Two districts had created “Newcomer” programs to help students learn English, bridge academic gaps, and to orient to the school setting. These programs were typically taught by ELL teachers and offered a home base for students who were in their first or second year in the United States. The school principal described their program as only providing support to those students who had very limited English language to facilitate social language development.

The goal of the Newcomer programs was to support students in building friendships and navigating the school environment. Teachers were able to get to know their students and any environmental factors that might interfere with their learning. For example, one participant described a program in her school designed to address food insecurity by providing a backpack of food to be taken home each weekend as needed. Participants seemed to recognize that meeting the educational needs of students was not sufficient and attempted to address the needs of families and expand their own knowledge of additional resources.

Curriculum

Many participants focused on the need to adapt the school curriculum to help refugee students be successful. Within this theme there were three interrelated subthemes: (a) linguistic diversity, (b) issues concerning graduation, and (c) the use of technology. Teacher participants were especially concerned with how far behind refugee students were academically. They recognized the importance of using alternative strategies and modified curriculum to meet the academic needs of students, keep them motivated, and help them advance as quickly as possible. In one district, ELL staff had created sub-tiers in the leveled materials so that students could recognize their progress more readily. Some educators empathized with the difficulty experienced by students as they learned a new language. One ELL teacher noted,

You are really thinking about the kiddos coming in and looking at them and trying to build on

their strengths, but also knowing it is a challenge to be sitting in a classroom absorbing a language you don’t know all day long, and how frustrating that can be.

Part of the concern for school personnel was the limited amount of time until students would be required to end their high school education (age 21). For teachers of adolescents who were significantly behind academically, the challenge of helping these students graduate in just a few years was daunting. Participants noted how the use of reading programs on the iPads helped students to learn English. One interviewee, an ELL teacher, mentioned, “[At] high school, we have a one-to-one iPad ratio. So, each of our students get to take home an iPad every single day.”

Collaboration

The theme of collaboration captured the numerous ways that school personnel worked with one another and community members to meet the needs of their refugee students and families. They described creating special work groups that focused on identifying and solving problems, sharing curriculum, and developing strategies to meet the needs of students. In one school, the principal had set aside time in the school day to encourage collaboration. In another district, an ELL teacher noted how living in a small community facilitated these partnerships:

(H)aving worked in the school and previously working in the middle school and high school, I know some people from there, so I could say “hey this is going on” or they can message me “hey we are seeing this.” Also, we live close to other towns when we have some trainings and other stuff you meet other teachers and stay in touch with them.

Collaboration was viewed as a strategy for enhancing the capacity of school personnel to work with refugee students and families. However, some expressed the need for more formal professional development to expand their competence. Participants described wanting to learn more about the culture of their families, about working with students who had experienced trauma, and increasing their knowledge of different strategies for teaching students who are EL. One administrator shared, “I have to provide professional development to my EL team but also to classroom and content area teachers,

so I do lots of professional development out in the buildings to increase teachers' capacity."

Family-School Relationships

Beyond simply communicating with families, school personnel sought ways to involve parents and to help them adapt to their new communities. Participants described a variety of ways that they attempted to build these relationships including: conducting home visits, creating parent programs, and helping families address their needs. Through their home-visits, participants believed they developed a better understanding of the culture and lifestyle of their families. They also thought these visits might help families feel more comfortable and strengthen their relationship with educators. One ELL teacher emphasized the importance of sustained effort at building relationships:

The school has to make a big impression on the first day and make them feel welcome. And after that is a follow up, not just "Oh I met you, goodbye". I think we need to, and I'm planning on doing that as well, home visits. I've heard from many of them that they like that. They like teachers to go and visit them and see what their life is.

Many participants provided examples of the extra efforts they made to meet the needs of students and families. Levels of poverty are greater in rural areas and even though parents might be employed, families sometimes struggled to meet basic needs. A school counselor noted:

[A]fter having them in the class for a while the teacher might notice that this family might need some help with clothing or other types of supports; that student might have said something and they pick up on those things... It's not just really designated to one person, but as a building how do we figure out what any student needs and rally around and support them for whatever the need is?

Almost all interviewees mentioned at least one example of having gone beyond their expected roles to meet the needs of a child or family.

Participants valued opportunities that encouraged parent involvement such as offering English classes, invitations for classroom observations, and volunteer positions. One participant noted the importance of providing "English classes for the parents, just survival English skills, just getting them more involved in the school." In fact, several participants

mentioned parents' positivity and responsiveness when they were directly involved in their child's education. These educators believed that parental involvement improved students' academic success and strengthened the bond between the schools and families. One ELL teacher enthusiastically noted, "I love them all. I have 100% of my parents show up for parent teacher conferences." She went on to explain how families' schedules were taken into account, which in turn, helped parents to attend school meetings and collaborate with teachers. The general education teacher echoed the commitment she observed among families by stating, "I've had parents where I've called up and I've left a message and said 'Call me so we can meet' and they're in the front office 15 minutes later. So they're very responsive."

Schools are an important institution in rural communities and as such, can serve as a leader in facilitating the integration of refugee families. One individual, a school counselor, described her perspective on the role of schools in facilitating community integration.

Whether it be that we have more family meetings and then people can meet each other and learn from each other and start to develop some of those community supports. And sometimes I think they might need to be led by a group of people, so how do we help bridge that gap? And maybe we are the people to start that and lead those meetings so people feel like they can connect without feeling uncomfortable asking for help.

Powerful comments about connecting refugee families to the school and community were heard throughout multiple interviews.

Discussion

As refugee families join new communities across the world, promoting positive school experiences for their children contributes to better outcomes (e.g., Block et al., 2014; Dryden-Peterson, 2015), particularly in rural communities where many are increasingly making their homes (Marks, 2014). Therefore, a better understanding of the perspectives of rural educators of refugee students may provide insight into the school factors that help support the resettlement of refugee families. The broad themes of communication, differences, resources, curriculum, collaboration, and family-school relationships were noted throughout the interviews. Participants framed

these topics both in terms of the practices they believed were successful and the ongoing needs of the school and community. There seemed to be a clear emphasis on empathy, problem-solving, and relationship building with the goal of building relational trust between families and educators (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The findings of this study present potential practices for rural school teams as they build school and community capacity. The identified themes were similar to research conducted in urban areas and other countries (e.g., Hurley et al., 2011; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012); however, there were certain strengths and challenges that were distinctive to rural contexts. For example, school personnel described many connections with one another across settings and even in neighboring communities. Also, they knew of available resources and were able to access them to expand the supports provided within the school (e.g., English classes for parents, food program for weekends).

Participants emphasized the importance of enhancing the capacity of the school personnel through ongoing professional development opportunities. Across the three districts, more than half of the participants cited the importance of expanding their knowledge of refugee students to better understand their unique needs. Small districts might coordinate their efforts to offer these types of workshops across schools and neighboring districts. These trainings could be provided by community liaisons (who represent different refugee populations) or through online resources (e.g., the Bridging Refugee Youth & Children Services website). Another example of capacity building was the development of a centralized system for facilitating enrollment, a practice that was supported by Miller, Thomas, and Fruechtlich (2014). By increasing knowledge and facilitating entry, school districts can lay the foundation for a more welcoming and affirming school environment.

In order to help families navigate the school setting, teachers and other school personnel can invite families to observe or volunteer in their children's classrooms. In one community, the elementary school was next to the housing complex where many refugee families lived, making it easy for parents to come to school. In other communities,

regular visits to school might not be possible or may need to occur through ride sharing. The process of adjusting to school and community may also be facilitated by helping families build connections to other families who are also new to the school setting (Miller et al., 2014). Through these efforts, school staff and other parents had the opportunity to see refugee parents as mothers, employees, and community members – making their similarities more visible than their differences (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

School districts had found innovative ways to overcome their limited resources by accessing funds from the community, reallocating internal funds, and offering positions to individuals from the culture who could serve dual roles (e.g., paraprofessional and family support). By facilitating simple interactions between families and school staff, schools signaled that all families were welcome. In each district, there were designated cultural liaisons who offered more formal services to facilitate communication between school personnel and families.

Participants were aware that many students and families had experienced trauma, consistent with other research related to refugee populations (e.g., Ellis et al., 2008; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). School or community mental health providers can be helpful in educating staff about the potential effects of trauma and how they might manifest in the classroom. Working with community service providers, leadership teams can identify local needs and implement research-supported practices to address the academic and mental health needs of all students (e.g., Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Small communities rely on collaboration and communication across all stakeholders.

This pilot study highlighted some of the specific strategies that were perceived as successful within a small number of rural districts. The perspectives of refugee students and families were not gathered, so it is unknown whether these practices were considered effective within the refugee community, representing an important area for future research. Other areas of further study include best practices for delivering academic programming, accelerating learning for students with significant educational gaps, enhancing refugee parent involvement, and strengthening the culturally-responsive practices of school personnel

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