A Culture of Belonging: How School Leaders Can Provide Support for Refugee Students

Purpose

Education for refugee children in the United States has been shaped by policy, influenced by assumptions and discrimination, impacted by personal history, challenged by previous trauma, and stimulated by welcoming and inclusive school environments. The goal of this paper is to use previous research to call attention to the importance of education for refugee students, the informal and formal local policies linked to refugee educational practices, the uniqueness of the refugee student population’s needs, and what school leaders can do to facilitate this group to succeed in their new school community. This paper coincides with the theme of this year’s UCEA Graduate Student Summit since school leaders are faced with the challenge of providing an equitable education to all students, including the approximate 30,000 refugee children that arrived in the United States just in 2012 (Bridging, 2012; Refugee Resettlement, 2012). This paper strives to provide suggestions for school leaders to rise above this challenge as the purpose of this literature study attempts to address two research questions: (1) What are the unique experiences of a refugee student compared to other English Learners (ELs)?; and (2) What can school leaders do to facilitate a culture of belonging for refugee students?

Rationale

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) declared that “Education is a basic human right. For refugees it is a key to sustainable protection and the hope for a better future. Refugee parents and children consider education of paramount importance” (UNHCR, 2003). Schools have an obligation to systemically set up structures to ensure effective education of their refugee students. To provide refugee students with an equal opportunity in their education is a socially just responsibility.

Because education is of paramount importance to refugee student advancement (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992), researchers have stressed the influential nature of the school environment that families encounter once resettled and argue that “education [is] central to this integration and to reestablishment in the U.S. It was and still is the main avenue for refugees in American society to succeed and survive” (Caplan et al., 1992, p. 41). Those paving these inclusionary academic avenues for refugee students are the leaders of schools and districts.

Findings and Implications for School Leaders

A socially just education focuses on including those students who are historically marginalized in heterogeneous classes which “fosters a sense of belonging for all members of the school community” (Theoharis, 2009). To provide refugee students with a socially just education, several things need to take place to ensure acceptance and inclusionary policies are enacted.

A deliberate intention to set up a culture of belonging is vital. Steps which promote the creation of student groups, mindfulness of administrator’s class recommendations, and systems to prevent both student drop-outs and discrimination will help establish a positive environment for refugee students. Setting up a culture of belonging is a critical foundation to the adjustment and education for this population of students. The refugee students’ experiences and needs should be respected and identified by school leaders and echoed throughout the school district and classroom missions of social justice.

Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) reported that a “adolescents who experienced more attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief in their school, had attained higher levels of self-efficacy” (p. 37). Yet, many researchers have found that (1) ESL classes are often separated
from mainstream classes; (2) there are insufficient remedial services provided by the school; (3) teachers did not feel prepared to assist when issues concerning their refugee students arose; (4) ineffective methods of parent-teacher conferences; and (5) refugee students encountered teasing and rejection by peers (McBrien, 2005; Rousseau et al., 1996; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). Therefore, school leaders are called to provide a culture of belonging for refugee students at their school through inclusionary academic experiences, the creation of student groups and clubs, connecting the school with refugee students’ homes, and providing effective professional development for building staff.

Providing arenas for students to connect with those similar to them is a way to facilitate building relationships while allowing students to “be themselves” (Eisenbruch, 1988). Schools frequently have classes, clubs, and sporting teams that can provide comradeship. The Greeley-Evans School District 6 in Colorado offered a unique and valuable opportunity for refugee students to create a culture of belonging in the community. With several hundred refugee students in the district representing sixty languages, the administration formed and sponsored El Teatro, a theater ensemble, made up of migrant and refugee students (Whaley, 2012). This positive group is an example of an effective way to build community for the students. Other schools and school districts could provide similar opportunities to their students.

Connecting home and school is a way to help support the success of all students but can be of particular importance for the families of refugee students (Walker, Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). Researchers (Ascher, 1985; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; McBrien, 2005; Szente et al., 2006; Theilheimer, 2001; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009) provide several suggestions to bridge this relationship. The researchers suggest that school leaders support the following: (1) have translators available at the school to help ensure accurate communication especially concerning school obligations or parent-teacher conferences; (2) provide written communication to students’ homes which could be translated with the help of case workers, friends, or technology; and (3) have their building “reach out to families and engage them meaningfully in the education of their children” (Caplan, et al., 1992, p. 41).

Finally, school leaders should provide purposeful professional development opportunities that aim to train staff on cultural awareness and practices pertaining to their students while also stressing the valuable contributions these students bring to their class. Opportunities for teachers to learn ways teachers to help their refugee students learn despite their language and cultural differences would be beneficial (Szente et al. 2006). Additionally, partnerships with international community or university members could both assist the staff as they learn more about the cultures of their students and also provide students and families with learning and translation opportunities as they acclimate to their new home (Szente et al., 2006).

**Conclusion**

Researchers Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) note that “adjusting to school and gaining a sense of belonging in their school community is an important phase in the overall adjustment of refugee and immigrant young people” (p. 30). The United States has made it a priority to provide refugees with a safe environment where they can start anew. Schools, therefore are a place in the community where families can connect to their new home in a valuable way if the school leaders can face the challenge of providing a culture of belonging for all. The researcher provides several initiatives that school leaders could implement that would benefit this population of students.
References


