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From Killing Fields to Classrooms: Understanding and Teaching the Refugee Student

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It is too easy to imagine waking up on the moon where nothing looks the same or in a land where no one speaks your language.

Imagine this instead.

Imagine you have never heard of the Beatles. Or Mozart. Or Oprah Winfrey... You've never heard of Elvis... Imagine you don't celebrate birthdays..., Christmas, Chanukah, or New Year's on December 31.... You do not Trick or Treat....

Imagine after having your homeland destroyed before your eyes, building a new life in a land where you have to learn a new language – one that is so self-referential – that you must learn not only the words, but the memories. Imagine coming to America.

(Fiffer, 1991, pp. xv-xvi)

After working with refugee youth for more than two decades, both as an English as a second language teacher in a middle school classroom and as a youth group counselor for the Blue Dragon Explorer Post, a service organization comprised of Southeast Asian refugees and Asian immigrants and sponsored through Boy Scouts of America, I have come to realize that the teachers of newcomers have tremendous power to either nurture a successful school experience or to unknowingly allow a child to fail and fall through the cracks of the schooling system in the United States. Frequently, I observe that the end result, whether a child has a positive acculturation experience of learning to balance two cultures and

languages, or endures a persistent feeling of being an outsider in American society, is directly related to the knowledge a teacher possesses about her students and the experiences and knowledge they bring into the classroom. Because newcomers are not members of any of the dominant groups in American society, they have a difficult time seeing themselves and their experiences in the school curriculum (Nieto, 2004). What newcomers do see of themselves in the classroom may be an inaccurate picture based on incorrect or missing information.

As the number of ethnically and linguistically diverse students in U. S. public schools continues to grow, the need for teachers who are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for effectively teaching diverse populations increases. While immigration patterns and refugee resettlement have changed significantly since September 11, 2001, the number of language minority students attending schools in the United States continues to increase in dramatic fashion, having increased by more than 100% between 1990 and 1999 (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1999). Yet the number of teachers with any specialized training in Bilingual or English as a second language methodology has not grown to meet the demand (Waggoner & O'Malley, 1985; Hodgkinson, 2002). The increase in the culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse student population challenges teachers to acquire appropriate and precise information about the diverse experiences of their students so that they may teach in a manner that is culturally relevant and in a way that allows all students to see themselves reflected accurately and suitably in the curriculum. Without adequate preparation regarding the distinctive and varied experiences of newcomers as well as

appropriate educational practice for their instruction, will the educators charged with providing equal educational opportunity for these students possess the awareness, the attitudes or the skills necessary for accomplishing the task? Will the teacher who lacks information regarding why and how refugees come to the United States be able to acknowledge and address each student's unique needs and requirements so that educational equity and success may be facilitated? The saying "one size fits all" simply does not apply in today's changing society and schools. In general, refugee students want their teachers to be well informed about what they have endured. In fact, they have noted that they feel a sense of isolation because their teachers and peers are unaware of even a small number of the changes they have had to undergo as refugees in a new land (Cowart, Wilhelm, & Cowart, 1998).

Acknowledging that perception governs how a teacher may respond and react to the complex needs of students who have been resettled as refugees in the United States, it is critical that all teachers have accurate knowledge of the facts of immigration and refugee resettlement. Thus, the purpose of this paper is two-fold – to enhance educators' knowledge regarding the refugee experience and to explore how to effectively and equitably address the exceptional needs of the children of refugees in U.S. public schools. Information and insights that have been acquired through much interaction with previous students, educators, and youth group members combined with what has been learned through intense study will be presented in an attempt to provide an accurate portrayal of the many aspects of the refugee experience. The following questions, among the most frequently asked by both preservice and inservice teachers, will be explored:

appropriate educational practice for their instruction, will the educators charged with providing equal educational opportunity for these students possess the awareness, the attitudes or the skills necessary for accomplishing the task? Will the teacher who lacks information regarding why and how refugees come to the United States be able to acknowledge and address each student's unique needs and requirements so that educational equity and success may be facilitated? The saying "one size fits all" simply does not apply in today's changing society and schools. In general, refugee students want their teachers to be well informed about what they have endured. In fact, they have noted that they feel a sense of isolation because their teachers and peers are unaware of even a small number of the changes they have had to undergo as refugees in a new land (Cowart, Wilhelm, & Cowart, 1998).

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- What is a refugee?
- Why are refugees here and in U.S. classrooms?
- What is the process of refugee resettlement?
- What do refugees experience in the homeland, during escape, in the refugee camp, and in the new host country?
- How does the refugee experience impact learning and teaching?

Overview of refugee resettlement

Internationally, there were more than 11,500,000 refugees and asylum seekers during 2004. Thousands of refugees waited in refugee camps around the world, hoping that they would be able to join the resettlement process and be placed in a small number of countries that accept refugees for resettlement. The United States, Canada, Australia and Sweden led all other countries in the number of refugees that were admitted for resettlement, with the United States accepting more than any other country. Each year tens of thousands of newcomers enter the United States legally as refugees. In 2004 52,868 refugees from such countries as Ethiopia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Myanmar, and Vietnam were resettled in the United States (World Refugee Survey, 2005).

Thousands of children of refugees in America enter U.S. schools, eager to obtain a good education while learning English, the language of their new homeland. The regular arrival of new groups of immigrants, refugees and political asylum seekers adds to the diversity of English language learners (ELLs) in American schools. The newcomers bring with them unique experiences,

languages and cultures that may become barriers in classrooms where teachers lack knowledge of diverse newcomer experiences and misinterpret the new students' choices, behaviors and attitudes. The children of refugees and asylum seekers in particular may have experienced multiple traumas in the homeland, during escape, in the refugee camp, and even in the new host country. They may have suffered torture, the loss of loved ones, exhaustion, and hunger. The experiences of newcomers and their reasons for coming to the United States vary, but their need for an effectual and just education is the unifying thread that binds immigrant, refugee and asylee together to present a formidable challenge to U.S. schools and educators.

What is a refugee?

Many people are familiar with the term "immigrant," but are unaware of how the definitions and experiences of immigrants and refugees differ. Law and Eckes (2000) have said that while an immigrant decides to reside in another country because the grass is greener, refugees flee to another country because "the grass is burning under their feet" (p. 64). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as a person outside of the United States who seeks protection on the grounds that to remain in the homeland would mean persecution or death because of race, religion, membership in a social group, political opinion or national origin. Thus, a refugee is someone who has fled across an international border in order to seek safe haven (World Refugee Survey, 2005). When large groups of citizens of a particular country plagued by political upheaval, ethnic cleansing, or life-threatening civil unrest must escape, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is mandated to

provide protection for refugees and to assist them in countries of asylum (UNHCR). Through their escape, refugees have severed all ties with their home countries and arrive in the refugee camps stateless and without the protection of any country. In contrast, an immigrant is an individual born in a foreign country who has sought and received permission to reside permanently in the United States (World Refugee Survey, 2005).

It is important to note that an asylee is similar to a refugee in that there is a well-founded fear of persecution if sent back to the home country. However, the asylee petitions the United States government for protection and legal recognition after entering the country while the refugee requests protection from outside of the United States. The asylum seeker must prove well-substantiated fear of persecution for the same reasons as the refugee. If granted asylum, the asylee is entitled to the same rights as a refugee, including legal residence in the U.S. and the potential to become an American citizen. Typically, the political asylee and the refugee have had similar experiences in the homeland, but have sought protection through different processes. It is essential to mention that political relationships between the United States and the countries of origin of the refugees and asylees may determine the process that must be followed in order to gain protection (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Is it vital for educators to know whether a student is an immigrant, a refugee or a political asylee? Certainly, citizenship status is not a criterion for eligibility to receive exemplary instruction. However, there are particular experiences and even traumas that are inherent to each different immigration process. An

educator who is knowledgeable about the obstacles and hurdles that a newcomer may have endured will more likely include some aspects of the newcomer's experiences, culture and language in the curriculum, being careful to not lump all immigrants into one group. Students are aware that they have not all had the same experiences and want their uniqueness to be recognized (Coward, Wilhelm & Coward, 1998).

We are not all the same. We have different experiences. We have come for different reasons.

-- Aliya, Indian American student

What is the process of refugee resettlement?

When a crisis erupts in a particular country or region, the UN High Commissioner works with nearby countries to become countries of first asylum. Usually a refugee camp is set up to house, protect and begin processing those who have fled as refugees. The UNHCR may be represented by little more than a tattered United Nations flag atop a tent within sight of the war zone, yet it identifies a safe place to which displaced persons may flee. Within the refugee camp several actions must occur. First the refugee must register with the UN High Commissioner and the U.S. Embassy if he wishes to be resettled in the United States. Next the refugee is interviewed for the purpose of receiving official refugee status. A representative of the United States Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) must also interview the refugee and bestow refugee status if the process is to continue. Once approved, the biographical data is sent to the national office of a refugee resettlement agency such as U.S. Catholic Charities, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, or International

Rescue Committee. The resettlement agency enters into an agreement whereby the agency guarantees the U.S. Department of State that several basic services will be provided for the refugee and family members during the beginning resettlement phase. Prior to travel from the refugee camp, a refugee receives a medical clearance, a security clearance and a brief cultural orientation about the United States (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants). Of particular interest to educators and social service case workers is the fact that the cultural orientation tends to be quite inadequate in preparing refugees for the intricacies of their new membership in American society.

Subsequently, affiliates in approximately 25 primary resettlement sites around the United States receive the refugee and assume the responsibility for resettlement. During the first thirty days after arrival in the U.S., the resettlement agency works to find appropriate housing that is clean and safe and assists the refugee in registering with the Social Security Administration. In addition representatives from the agency enroll accompanying children in school, arrange medical evaluations, and help refugee adults find and enroll in ESL classes. In the award-winning film *Starting Over In America* produced by Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) in 1986, a group of young middle school students share their observations that it seemed as though the U.S. government was giving the refugee students and their families new cars, new homes, new clothes, and bigger, better stores. In reality, refugees receive only a few months of support through the resettlement agency. Afterwards there is no further financial assistance. In some instances congregations at some churches and synagogues sponsor families and provide additional support.

What do refugees experience in the homeland, during escape, in the refugee camp, and in the new host country?

Political unrest, ethnic cleansing, civil war, torture, hunger, starvation, loss of family members, and separation are only a few of the circumstances that lead individuals and families to escape their homelands. Refugee students have endured trauma of an intensity that only other refugees or combat veterans of war may share. Sometimes feelings and memories that have been suppressed may be expressed through something as innocent as a journal entry.

My mom got her first child when she was twenty-five years old. It was a girl. She was the oldest child. Three years later my mom had a boy. He was the second child. A year later my mom was pregnant. The child was a girl. Then, a year later, my mom had her fourth child. It was a boy. Then the war started. When my oldest sister was twelve years old, she died because of hunger. Later on, the third and fourth child died, also of hunger. When my mom was six months pregnant, my dad died. The Khmer Rouge shot him. Three months later, I was born. We came to Dallas, Texas on April 4, 1984. Only my mom, her second child and her youngest, which is me, still lived and made it to the U.S.

--Kamsath, a middle school ELL from Cambodia

Suddenly, escape becomes the only option. Leaving behind all that was once familiar and comfortable – ways of behaving, cultural practices and beliefs, and traditional values – refugees make the decision to flee to a place of safety in a country of first asylum.

The escape experience for many refugees is fraught with terror and danger, including enemy soldiers, land mines, and treachery from authorities seeking bribes. An encounter with a soldier during escape can lead to an instantaneous execution, assault or rape (Warwick, Neville, & Smith, 2006). Frequently, first attempts at escape are unsuccessful and sometimes have deadly consequences.

It took us two days and two nights to get to the Thai border. We saw women raped by the Thai robbers along the way. In front of their families, in front of everyone. The robbers would come up and demand money or gold, and if you said that you didn't have anything, they would kill you. So we gave them everything along the way. We had so little. It was hard for us to believe – the Khmer Rouge were so bad and now the Thai robbers were so bad.

--Paul Thai in Fiffer, 1991, p. 65

Typically a refugee has little time to prepare for escape. Most possessions, including important documents such as diplomas and family records are often left behind.

Once the decision is made to flee, virtually every refugee begins a process of uprooting. It is significant for children that they seldom have any control over the decision to leave. The decision to leave usually rests in the hands of adults. However, there are a few exceptions in which juvenile undocumented immigrants elect to flee abusive homes or homelands for a safer life in the United States. In an article in the *Dallas Morning News*, Rodriguez (2002) describes a case in which two young sisters fled their home in Mexico because of an impoverished and abusive mother who punished them by putting chili in their eyes. The little girls believed there was no alternative but to pack their favorite dolls,

say a quick prayer, and float across the Rio Grande to safety in the U.S. In 2002 there were nearly 5,000 juvenile undocumented immigrants in the U.S., arriving primarily from Mexico, El Salvador, China, Honduras, and Guatemala (Rodriguez, 2002). Once here many of the young undocumented minors are placed in Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services detention centers until they can prove their need to be given asylum and be placed with family members or foster parents or be deported.

For all other children who are newcomers, including refugees, immigrants, and political asylees, the power to leave or stay in the homeland lies with parents or guardians. The lack of power and choice is part of the uprooting experience that Igoa (1996) characterizes as having six stages. The first three stages consist of mixed emotions, fear or excitement in the escape, and curiosity and generally occur prior to arrival in the new host country. A time of inner turmoil takes place upon learning that there will be a departure from home. The child is sad to leave behind friends and family, but is happy to go to a new and safe location. The escape occurs during the second stage and may be full of terror, crossing dangerous terrain with land mines and in the presence of enemy soldiers. Life in a refugee camp varies from camp to camp. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is mandated to provide for the safety and basic needs of the refugees, the urgent nature of the refugee's escape makes it impossible to keep dangerous elements out of each camp. A school may exist, but teachers and materials are in short supply, leaving classrooms in refugee camps in short supply. Depending on world events and willing host countries, refugees may remain in refugee camps for months or decades. During the third stage of uprooting the child

undergoes a time of curiosity regarding the new place and what the new life may hold. Fiffer (1991) tells a story about a refugee youth in a refugee camp who finds out that he and his family will be resettled in Dallas, Texas. The young man is very excited about the prospects until someone describes Dallas as a place not unlike the wild, Wild West where one might be shot by a cowboy in the middle of the street. Nevertheless, the patriarch of the family states that "he would rather be shot by a cowboy in America than by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia" (p. 2). The young refugee indicates that his father's attitude helped the family have a positive attitude about going to America.

While the first stages of uprooting have a long lasting impact on the refugee child, it is the final three stages that provide the most opportunity for teachers to positively influence the newcomer in school and life. During the fourth stage the child may experience culture shock as the reality of attending school and learning in a new language becomes apparent. This stage is made more difficult by the mismatch of school and home language and culture. The newcomer doesn't understand school routines and feels isolated and lonely. Depression is common (Ooka-Pang, 2005).

As for me, school was a nightmare. I felt nervous and was a little shy. After my mom and my brother left me there, I cried and cried until it was time for lunch. I didn't know what school was for me back then.

--Kamsath, a middle school ELL from Cambodia

Stages five and six, assimilation or acculturation, into the mainstream are characterized by the uprooted child's choice, often greatly influenced by school experiences and peers, to either

assimilate or acculturate. Warwick, Neville, and Smith (2006) state that the adjustment of refugee students may be helped or hindered by their daily experiences in the new host country. If the refugee student interprets the message of the school to be one of excluding diversity, the decision will be to assimilate and give up aspects of language and culture with the hope of finding acceptance among native-born American peers. Igoa (1996) states that if this occurs, the child may spend later years searching for an integrated sense of self. If the refugee student believes that participating in two or more cultures and languages is worthwhile and strives to maintain a balance through acculturation, the child will be more successful in the mainstream of American life.

These three stages of uprooting require an adjustment and an acclimation for the newcomer that can be greatly enhanced by a caring and well-informed teacher. It is critical that the child receive help and guidance to learn the new school program while at the same time experiencing a welcoming and accepting environment. If the message of the teacher and school is one of inclusion, assistance, and support, then the path to acculturation will be the logical choice for the child. However, if the refugee child perceives that his native language and culture are inferior in the eyes of the school, the decision may be to reject anything pertaining to home culture and language. Students, teachers and administrators in both formal and informal settings communicate the values and expectations of the school. Yet, students look to the teachers to set the tone for what is appropriate. Providing a welcoming, orderly, accepting and peaceful environment at school will assist young refugee students in dealing with their past experiences (UNHCR, 1994).

How does the refugee experience impact learning?

Teachers need to realize that failing to stop stereotypical talk among other students is the same as condoning it.

--Vijay, a high school student of Indian American heritage

Everyday when I come home from school, my dad say do you have money for the electric? Do you have money send to your mom in Vietnam? That is why I cannot do my homework. I want to, but I have too much headache. So I just throw it.

--Dong, former high school student from Cambodia

The refugee experience potentially has both an affective and academic impact on schooling. The academic impact may be due in part to an education that has been sporadic or non-existent because of war and political upheaval. Refugees have commonly endured a complete loss of services, including schooling, for a lengthy period of time prior to deciding to leave the homeland. Education while fleeing does not occur. Schooling in the refugee camps varies widely. Teachers are usually quite scarce, classrooms are overcrowded, and school supplies are difficult to obtain. It is rare that a refugee student arrives in a U.S. classroom without having missed weeks, months, or years of their schooling. In fact there are refugee students of middle school and high school age who enter public schools in the U.S. with no prior education (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002).

In addition there is a tremendous affective impact of the refugee experience. Depending on the number and severity of traumas suffered, the newcomer may be vulnerable to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kemp & Rasbridge, 2004). They may experience depression, nightmares, flashbacks, sleeplessness,

and loss of appetite. While the child senses that something is wrong, there is frequently the inability to describe the feelings and worries that are uncomfortable. In most instances the child does not possess sufficient proficiency in the English language to express deep feelings and fears. In addition, refugee children may perceive that no adult in the frantic world of school is interested in hearing their stories. In school PTSD serves to raise the student's affective filter, described by Krashen (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002) as attitudinal factors such as anxiety and fear that ultimately block learning. Typically, Krashen has referred to the classroom situation when considering the effects of a high affective filter. However, previous events, experiences and traumas greatly affect how a refugee child feels about a particular situation, including a classroom. If a child feels discomfort and anxiety from any source, the affective filter will be high and will serve to block learning.

Newcomer parents are often traumatized as well, having lost loved ones and homelands and may be unable to detect the symptoms of PTSD in their children. Thus, the parents may unknowingly exacerbate the situation by failing to provide the support, comfort and guidance that are so essential during this time (Coward, Wilhelm, & Coward, 1998). A lack of knowledge of available resources coupled with different cultural beliefs regarding mental health intensifies the problem (Kemp & Rasbridge, 2004).

Barriers to acculturation

Successful acculturation into a new society and culture involves a balancing of first language and native culture with the

second language and new culture. Through this process of blending, both cultures and languages are respected and valid. The newcomer comes to realize that it is possible to participate in two or more cultures and speak two or more languages without having to give up substantial aspects of either one in order to fit in and belong (Law & Eckes, 2000). Newcomer students and their families usually encounter one or more barriers to acculturation, including language and cultural differences, mistrust of authorities, fear of retaliation, ignorance of laws, and a lack of advocacy (Cowart & Cowart, 1996).

Language difference is frequently cited by educators as a source of frustration for ELLs and their teachers (Ooka-Pang, 2005). When few educators have the knowledge and training necessary to plan and implement appropriate lessons and supporting activities that will facilitate language growth simultaneously with development of content knowledge, the anxiety of the ELLs along with the sense of inadequacy of unprepared teachers combine to create a barrier to acculturation. In the age of high-stakes testing and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) educators and administrators are tempted to look beyond the individual needs of newcomers who are learning English as a second language to the academic demands of tests and proof of adequate yearly progress (Cooper, Ramirez, & Cowart, 2005). While assessment and appropriate regular progress are essential, the language learning process, developmental in nature, is difficult to expedite. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) suggest that the educational plan for newcomers generally consists of rapidly leaving behind the first language while quickly learning the English language. There are consequences to such a plan of

action, the primary result being that the prior knowledge of the first language that would greatly assist in the learning of English and would augment the learning of others in the classroom is ignored (Cummins, 1994). Thus, students who possess a first language and may be literate in that language are encouraged to abandon the use of a vast resource for learning in school. When this occurs, once again, language difference is allowed to be a barrier to acculturation rather than a helpful tool for students and educators.

Another possible barrier to acculturation is cultural differences. Even the most educated refugees from large urban areas who have already experienced success in their homelands will encounter tremendous changes in cultural practice in the United States. For refugee families from very rural and isolated areas the different cultural practices, religious views, manner of dress, and standards for interpersonal relationships that they will find in the United States are frequently overwhelming. Law and Eckes (2000) have named several changes that ELL students experience, including the following:

- A change in geography or climate.
- A change from rural to urban settings.
- A change in the size of the living environment and/or the economic situation.
- A change in the culture of school.
- A change in social status or opportunities or goals.
- The change itself – traumatic and frequently life-threatening.

- A change in the language.
- A change in the way language is used.
- A change in their relationship with their parents (p. 63-65).

The school changes require much adaptation to the school setting while a great deal of adjustment to American society in general must occur. Refugee families often find that the role of parent and child is reversed because the child usually has more opportunity to learn English quickly. The children in these families must serve as interpreters at home, with the landlord, in doctors' offices and during parent conferences at school. Conflicts arise from the role reversal, particularly when a child is elevated to a position of authority he would not normally possess. In addition, the different cultural practices of refugees may make them targets for hostile comments, prejudice and even discrimination. The thoughtful educator will face a daunting task of assisting the refugee student with adjustment to American schools and life while at the same time protecting the student from uninformed and hurtful comments and actions. It is significant that the stresses caused by the mismatch of home and school culture will endure until acculturation, or the balancing of the first and second languages and cultures, takes place (Igoa, 1996).

Three other barriers to acculturation, mistrust of authorities, fear of retaliation, and ignorance of laws, pertain primarily to the parents of refugee students and do not apply specifically to the school setting, yet they impact the perception of refugees regarding what should occur at school. Refugees, accustomed to being harmed by those in positions of authority in the homeland, bring with them a fear that the same may occur in the United States.

While teachers represent authority, refugee parents from many cultures revere education and teachers, and truly trust educators to do what is right for their children. Outside of the realm of education, there exists a fear that if they complain about any problem or mistreatment, there may be a swift retaliation. Fiffer (1991) describes an event in which the patriarch of a refugee family, having been robbed of a black and white television during their first days in America, is coerced by another family member to report the incident to police. When a police officer arrives to take the report, the father tells the rest of his family to stay inside and lock the door so that even if he dies, the other family members would live. When the police were unable to find the stolen item, the family was still happy because the police officer was nice and did not harm them. The refugees' mistrust of authorities and fear of retaliation coupled with a general lack of knowledge of laws and appropriate practices in the United States work against a positive acculturation experience.

When new groups of refugees from various countries around the world are resettled in different sites in the United States, there may be no previously established group of people from the same countries and speaking the same languages to advocate for them. Thus, they may have a difficult time having a voice and expressing their needs and desires. Politically, the newcomers may remain virtually invisible for decades. While they are not actually invisible socially, a paucity of political clout tends to render them powerless within the schools and society. Forced to allow others to advocate for them, the lack of advocacy from members of their own group perpetuates a sense of helplessness over their own destiny. Anger and rebellion, against the new

culture may result, thereby inhibiting the acculturation process (Nieto, 1994).

How may a teacher help refugee students to overcome these barriers to acculturation? First, it is essential to understand that many of the barriers are only barriers if they are allowed to be. An educator who comprehends the enormous task of learning English as a second language will use appropriate ESL strategies to make all instruction comprehensible. An approach to teaching that is highly interactive and utilizes a multitude of visual aids in a classroom that functions as an accepting haven will facilitate successful language growth. An appreciation of the complexities of the refugee experience will enable an educator to understand some of the behaviors and choices of refugee students and parents. Similarly, the knowledgeable teacher will invite the refugee experience as well as the cultural and linguistic experiences of newcomers into the classroom so that students may see themselves reflected in the curriculum and will believe that school is a place for them. Communication with the parents of refugee students, while challenging due to the language difference, must be a top priority. If parents are to understand what is expected of them and their children at school, they will need information in a format they can understand. Materials should be sent home in the first language of the parents. All meetings with parent groups should have interpreters for each language represented. It is the willingness to inform on the part of the educator that will enable the refugee parents to begin to trust authorities while no longer fearing retaliation. As newcomer families become aware of laws and common practices in the United States, they will start to have a voice and advocate for themselves and their children.

Recommendations for educators

- Remember that newcomers do not know what is expected of them in school. If they have attended school, their schooling may have been vastly different from that of U.S. public schools. Many students who are refugees will begin their formal schooling in America. Each teacher will need to teach school routines, practices and expectations.
- Refugee students in general arrive in the United States speaking another language. Whenever possible use the students' knowledge of their first languages as powerful resources in learning a new language and new content area information. Please note that students from Liberia do speak English and will simply need the help of teachers to adjust to the new host country.
- Find ways to facilitate the involvement of the parents of refugee students. The expectation of parental involvement is quite new for many newcomer parents. Translators for all communication may be necessary initially. The parents have much to offer and will gladly participate if they are able and if they are made to feel welcome.
- Avoid exacerbating cultural differences and conflicts. Among the greatest fears of the parents and grandparents of refugee students is that the young ones will forget their cultures and languages. Assist students in understanding that both the native culture and American culture are valid and have wonderful merits that should be celebrated.

- Incorporate materials, read alouds and activities that not only accomplish curricular objectives but also allow students to learn about themselves and others.

- Investigate the prior experiences of your newcomer students. Learn about their countries and the positive contributions their groups have made to the U. S. and the world. As one teen-aged Asian student stated, "We don't know about each other; we don't even know about other Asian cultures. And our teachers don't know about us either." (Coward, Wilhelm, & Coward, 1998, p.404).

- Create a safe, supporting environment that is respectful of all individuals in the classroom. Establish routines for most of what transpires in your classroom and teach those routines to the newcomers. This type of structure benefits all students and allows the newcomer to participate even when not everything is understood.

- Note that newcomers are unaware of the process of democracy and the unique aspects of American history. They simply have not been exposed to this information that Americans hold so dear. Therefore, teachers will need to plan lessons and activities that enable newcomer students to learn about democracy and the buildings, branches of government, agencies and historical details that make up American society.

- Remember that many cultures value the community over self. This will influence student behavior and preference, particularly for cooperative learning.

- Give non-English speaking newcomers the most important gifts of time and patience. The process of second language acquisition cannot be rushed. Newcomer students will need much time in order to learn enough English to be able to learn actively and independently, especially in a content area classroom.

Conclusion

Refugee resettlement will continue to impact the public school classrooms as long as the United States remains a beacon of liberty and freedom to oppressed people worldwide. The caring, knowledgeable, and insightful teacher of newcomers can facilitate an effective equitable education for newcomers while simultaneously enhancing the learning of other students in class. By so doing the teacher truly touches many futures – those of the students and those of members of American society. It has been suggested that no mystery exists regarding how to successfully teach all students. Many believe that educators already know all that is needed in order to help every child be successful. Refugee students in today's classrooms are among the custodians of the American society of tomorrow. A measure of assistance, support, and appropriate teaching from teachers today may impact not only the lives of refugee families in the United States, but also the quality of American life for decades to come.

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