Understanding the Unique Needs of Adolescent Refugee Students

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Abstract

This essay argues for an expanded understanding of three of the Essential Attributes – Developmentally Responsiveness, Empowerment and Equity – established by *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* to address the unique needs of adolescents who are refugees. It provides a practical framework for readers to assist their understanding of the kaleidoscope of issues that face our refugee adolescent population (NMSA/AMLE, 2010). For each of the essential attributes, practical application for the middle grades classroom is offered. These ideas are to assist teachers in meeting the needs of their students who come from a refugee background and to give a foundation in an area that is often overlooked in the current educational system.

Introduction

Maya was born in a Nepal refugee camp to native Bhutanese parents who were forced to flee their home country. She lived in that refugee camp with her family until the age of six. The summer of her sixth year she and her family immigrated to the US with only a few items of clothing, where they knew no one, were without any familiar cultural customs, and where Maya could not speak the language. Because Maya was six, and of school age, she took a test to determine first grade placement and started school a few months after moving to this foreign country. Due to the language barrier, Maya could not understand what the teachers or other students were saying. Each day she returned home from school in tears feeling isolated and very alone. Lunch time was especially difficult for Maya because she had no friends and felt very different from her other classmates. Her mother packed her lunches with traditional Bhutanese food and Maya, after a very short time, asked her to make food similar to what the other students were bringing in their lunches. She felt the need to blend in even from this very early age.

Maya was one of the more fortunate refugee students because her parents were both educated and were teachers in the refugee camp before coming to the US. She understood the importance of school and education. Maya and her family also received help from a church and a local agency so that poverty was not as much of an issue as it is for some refugee families. Maya is now in the eighth grade and feels she has adapted well. She remembers her first grade experience and how difficult it was and how different she felt from everyone else. However, as a middle schooler, Maya is surrounded by other American born students who have no understanding of how the first six years of her life were spent. She is taught by teachers who think of her as "Americanized" but do not fully comprehend her formative background. But Maya, a 13 year old adolescent, must try and blend these two worlds together in a culture that has very limited exposure to life as a refugee.

Refugees are defined as individuals forced to flee their home country due to conflict or persecution (United Nations Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2016). According to the UNHCR, there were an estimated 15.1 million refugees world-wide in 2015. In the US there are over 250,000 reported refugees seeking asylum and over half of these individuals are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2016). These children and adolescents encounter US school systems which are challenged to merge the students' backgrounds with the demands and expectations of today's educational system and often go unnoticed or overlooked. However, if our goal is to educate all young adolescents we must be forward thinking in order to provide the best academic and emotionally stable school environment for these refugee youth (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Hart, 2009; Macksoud, 1992; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007). This essay argues for an expanded understanding of three of the Essential Attributes – Developmentally Responsiveness, Empowerment and Equity – established by *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* to address the unique needs of adolescents who are refugees (National Middle School Association [NMSA]/Association for Middle Level Education

[AMLE], 2010). This article will provide a practical framework for readers to assist their understanding of the many issues that face our refugee adolescent population. In order to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of our young adolescent students, it is vital to understand where each student comes from. For most teachers, the refugee experience is unknown and often unimaginable. However, by seeking to better understand the young adolescent student's refugee past, we as teachers are then able to meet the unique needs for each of our students and help guide them to a more promising future.

Developmentally Responsive

According to the AMLE, successful schools for adolescents must be developmentally responsive "using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions about school organizations, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made" (NMSA/AMLE, 2010, p. 16). In a study focusing on middle school teaming and multi-age grouping, Brinegar (2010) found that the greatest difficulties facing refugee students include: "transitioning issues, language proficiency, and school cultural norms" (p. 3). To address these needs here are a number of strategies that are developmentally responsive and that "illuminate organizational structures and practices meant to provide students with a developmentally appropriate place to feel good about themselves and their learning while also being challenged" (Brinegar, 2010, p. 17). First, teachers can create induction procedures as new students arrive that could consist of a buddy system or inclusion activities to introduce them to their classmates and vice versa (German & Ehntholt, 2007). Specific curriculum that focuses on the refugee student's country or culture can be integrated. Teachers can use various curriculum in literature that speaks from a refugee student's point of view, they can assign students to write their autobiographies, and use practical teaching techniques such as learning common, useful words that will aid the student's assimilation into their new world (Hart, 2009; Hope, 2008; Sarroub et al., 2007). As teachers create a more positive classroom environment, students can begin to feel the security that they need in order to learn (Brinegar, 2010; Hart, 2009; McCloskey & Southwick, 1996).

Another area of support falling under the category of developmentally responsive is peer support. Especially during the adolescent years, peer acceptance is enormously important (Lerner & Galambos, 1998). For refugee students it is even more important for seven reasons, according to Brinegar (2010); "(1) teachers ultimately stay behind, but friends move on with students; (2) friends help ease isolation and fear; (3) they stimulate learning; (4) they stimulate oral language development; (5) they teach reading; (6) friends act as counselors; and (7) they help validate…students" (p. 18). Refugee adolescents, just like most adolescents, want to feel "normal". With the support of peers, adolescent refugee students begin to feel welcomed in their new world (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Hope, 2008).

In addition, refugee students need to bond with other refugee students (German & Ehntholt, 2007). By creating a safe space for them to share with one another, they can find that they are not alone. These groups can "be powerful in promoting the student's emotional development, problem-solving skills, learning and positive social interaction" (German & Ehntholt, 2007, p. 153). These support groups offer refugee adolescents the safe space needed to explore how they are feeling in a place where they know others have gone through similar experiences. For refugee adolescents who feel segregated because of language or cultural barriers, this form of community can provide a space that few other places can, as well as offer a sense of identity (Fazel & Stein, 2002). Hope (2008) found that "refugee children need to know that they are not unique in their struggle to make friends and integrate into what is often a hostile, or sometimes indifferent school environment" (p. 298). By understanding the proper developmentally responsive techniques to help refugee students integrate and transition into the middle school setting, teachers can establish their classroom using this understanding and set up a safe space for all students to learn.

Empowering

The next essential attribute concerning educating young adolescents is empowering, by "providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge" (NMSA/AMLE, 2010, p. 16). This attribute might be one of the most powerful for refugee adolescents in promoting both academic and emotional success. In order for teachers to help empower their students, they must first understand issues and associated terminology that are unique to refugee students. Trauma is a

commonplace occurrence in the life of many refugee students. According to Macksoud (1992), "A widely agreed definition of trauma refers to an external event that is intense, sudden, and that overwhelms the child's capacity to cope or master the trauma at the time" (p. 2). Often refugee adolescents have experienced direct personal loss or harm (Fong, 2007; McCloskey & Southwick, 1996), family loss or separation (Boothby, 1992; Gaytan, Carhill & Suarez-Orozo, 2007; Hart, 2009; Husain, Nair, Holcolmb, Reid, Vargas, & Nair, 1998; McCloskey & Southwick, 1996), witnessing of murder or other violent acts, homelessness, hunger, persecution (Boothby, 1992; Hart, 2009), deprivation of basic needs (Husain et al., 1998), kidnapping, torture (Macksoud & Aber, 1996), and forced performance of violent acts (Boothby, 1992). Because of the often excessive amount and prolonged exposure to trauma, many refugee adolescents are diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Hart, 2009; Layne et al., 2001).

With this trauma comes a multitude of common symptoms that refugee adolescents exhibit such as: disturbance of sleep, nightmares (Boothby, 1992; Hart, 2009; Macksoud, 1992), difficulty concentrating or remembering things (Hart, 2009; Macksoud, 1992), play involving traumatic themes, diminished interest in enjoyable activities, emotional detachment from parents or friends, increased state of alertness (Macksoud, 1992), avoidance, decreased involvement with other people (Fazel & Stein, 2002), poor academic performance (Hart, 2009; Layne et al., 2001), substance abuse, lack of confidence, and depression (Layne et al., 2001). In addition to PTSD symptoms, refugee students also often arrive in the US with a variety of physical health issues such as: inactive tuberculosis, hepatitis, intestinal parasites, respiratory tract infections, malnutrition, incomplete immunizations, anemia, and surface antigen (Fazel & Stein, 2002; McCloskey & Southwick, 1996). With all of these psychological, emotional, social, and physical issues that refugee adolescents experience, school systems must be aware of the unique needs and be prepared to assist as they work through this often tumultuous time period. Trauma often takes the feeling of control away from the refugee student. In order to help empower our young adolescents, teachers must understand the signs and symptoms of trauma and be prepared to help students begin to deal with their past and present experiences.

Teachers can help facilitate this empowerment by allowing students to talk and write about their experiences. To begin, those working with adolescent refugee students must understand that time does not heal trauma (Summerfield, 1999). Students need to discuss their experiences, yet many teachers feel they have a lack of time in their schedules or are fearful of allowing their students to share their experiences because "they will feel overwhelmed by what they hear" (German & Ehnthholt, 2007, p. 153). However, studies have found that allowing refugee students to share their experiences through speaking, drawing, singing, and other activities can help them work through and hopefully overcome some of their traumatic memories (German & Ehntholt, 2007; Goenjian, Karayan, Pynoos, Minassian, Najarian, Steinberg, & Fairbanks, 1997; Lefort, 1994).

Hope (2008) also found that refugee students "valued teachers who asked about their experiences and included them in the curriculum" (p. 298). Looking at the importance of refugee literature in the classroom, Hope (2008) found that when teachers used literature that told of a refugee student's life, students were able to share experiences with the class, which in turn helped define their identity and self-recognition. By using literature that told of other refugee stories, this assisted the students in the classroom by allowing them to feel "normal". According to Hart (2009), "The effects of trauma on school performance appear to be most significant on those subjects requiring high levels of concentration, such as maths, physics and grammar" (p. 359). Because of this discovered direct correlation between the severity of trauma and school performance, it is vital for teachers to understand the degree of trauma each student has experienced and how that trauma may affect his/her academic performance in order to help empower students' academic futures (Hart, 2009).

Teachers must first get to know each student and recognize their strengths and weaknesses and reestablish a sense of trust. Sarroub and colleagues (2007) followed one adolescent male Kurdish refugee from Iraq to try and understand his experience mainly in reading and literacy. They discovered that he felt lonely and isolated. The resettlement to the US left him confused in many areas including culturally and religiously. He had trouble controlling his anger and sleeping at night. His role in the family as earner was stressful due to the fact that he had trouble finding and keeping a job due to the above issues, as well as a lack of a formal education in Iraq. And

finally he only felt understood by a couple of teachers (Sarroub et al., 2007). All of these issues played a role in his performance at school. But one of the most important findings was that this student liked his teachers because they were "nice" and this helped him want to attend school more regularly (Sarroub et al., 2007). He focused in on the fact that they cared about him and his life and they showed this concern by speaking to him about things other than school work. Although this was a small study, it shows the importance of understanding and caring for students and how that impacts students' motivation for learning.

Refugee students who have witnessed a great deal of aggressive and violent behavior can act out these same behaviors in a classroom setting. They often have a lack of trust with authority figures, because it was often these same people in authority who were the most violent (Boothby, 1992). With this knowledge, a teacher can take the necessary steps to reestablish trust with the student and more fully understand why the classroom disruption is occurring. Because "often school is the first place where a refugee child can experience consistency and emotional containment", it is important that teachers begin to provide the necessary classroom atmosphere that is needed for refugee students (German & Ehntholt, 2007, p. 152). Refugee students also require more reassurance and consistency in the classroom (German & Ehntholt, 2007; Hart, 2009). With this knowledge up front, teachers can set up their classrooms to provide the proper experiences that refugee students need and hopefully lessen the amount of anxiety the student may feel. This lessened anxiety and feeling of emotional safety is what can promote a more challenging academic focus for an adolescent refugee.

Equity

The final essential attribute to educate young adolescents centers on an equitable education and "advocating for and ensuring every student's right to learn and providing appropriately challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student" (NMSA/AMLE, 2010, p. 16). This equitable education can come through the lens of empathy. "Literature indicates that an ethos of caring deeply and empathically about children and their welfare has been identified as being at the heart of purposeful teaching, vital to personal happiness and daily attitude renewal, and essential to inspiring children to care about their own learning" (Boyer, 2010, p. 313). Empathy is defined in a social learning or educational setting as, "the ability to perceive the personal emotional experience of another person" (White, 1999, p. 123). Teachers who demonstrate empathy get inside the feelings of another person and identify with that feeling (White, 1999). Teachers must take what they know about students coming from a refugee background and show them that they sincerely care about their situation in order for refugee adolescents to both emotionally and academically thrive in their new, often confusing school setting.

Many studies have been conducted to show the importance of empathetic teachers both generally and specifically with refugee students (Boyer, 2010; Brinegar, 2010; Hope, 2008; German & Ehntholt, 2007; Nieto, 2006; Sarroub et al., 2007; Sezen-Balcikanli, 2009). Nieto (2006) looks at what it means to be an effective teacher by asking the question, "What does it take to become effective teachers of students of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse backgrounds? (p. 457). Her purpose for analyzing what makes an effective teacher is the "growing research…that good teachers make the single greatest difference in promoting or deterring student achievement" (Nieto, 2006, p. 461). Although she is not specifically looking at empathy alone, she finds it to be an extremely important characteristic for effective teachers.

Nieto (2006) found that effective teachers share five traits: "(1) a solid general education background, (2) a deep knowledge of their subject matter, (3) familiarity with numerous pedagogical approaches, (4) strong communication skills, and (5) effective organizational skills" (p. 463). And although effective teachers do need these five skills, Nieto (2006) proposes five additional skills that are also essential to effective teaching: "(1) a sense of mission, (2) solidarity with, and empathy for, their students, (3) the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge, (4) improvisation, and (5) a passion for social justice" (p. 463).

Nieto (2006) defines her second new skill of 'solidarity with, and empathy for, their students' as "having a genuine respect for their students' identities – including their language and culture – as well as high expectations and great admiration for them" (p. 466). The ability for teachers to respect students' identities, which many refugee students have felt they have lost, has the capacity to reach them when perhaps nothing else will. Nieto (2006) encourages teachers to learn more

about their individual students' families, communities, and culture. This connection helps students feel secure in their new environment, providing them the support to learn the academic content.

In another study focusing on empathy, Boyer (2010) conducted research based in a grounded theory approach working with teacher candidates and their empathy development. He found that within the field of education "empathy is the ability to interpret signals of distress or pleasure with effortful control" (p. 313).

> The use of empathy in the classroom in the midst of 20, 30, or more students must look different than in a one-on-one therapist-client or doctor-patient relationship. Not only must a teacher be able to recognize the often not so overt signs from students in times of both "distress and pleasure," but the teacher must keep complete control over the situation in order to diminish any additional stress that could be caused from the situation(s). (Bouton, 2016, p. 18)

By using an empathic approach to teaching, we not only create an equitable environment from which our refugee students can learn and grow, but we also meet the needs of all of the young adolescent students in our classrooms. This, in turn, guides all young adolescent students to "challenging and relevant learning opportunities" (NMSA/AMLE, 2010, p. 16).

Conclusion

In order to successfully educate our youth who come from a varied and diverse refugee population, we must consult the four essential attributes laid out to us in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*. Our classrooms need to be developmentally responsive, empowering, and equitable. As teachers, we have a unique role in the lives of our students. We must teach based on each student's academic needs, but often before academic learning can occur, we must gain our students' trust. For those who come from a refugee background, this place might be dark and lonely. However, before a child is capable of learning math, science, social studies, or English they must first feel safe and secure in their classroom. It is for the Mayas in our classrooms that we must learn about these unique needs of adolescent refugees and respond and teach accordingly.

Maya is now a happy eighth grader and doing wonderfully. She believes that she has adjusted well to her new life. She has friends, some of whom were girls in her first American classroom where a teacher saw a lonely little girl and prompted others to befriend her. Maya's story is one of triumph and success. She is doing well both academically and emotionally and is looking forward to her future as a U.S. citizen. However, without the help from Maya's teachers, her story could look very different today. So it is with Maya in mind that propels this discussion and keeps a focus on students who come from very distant places with heartbreaking stories. It is for these students that we learn, and by learning about them we become better educators ourselves.

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