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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Bio-Social-Emotional Needs of Immigrant Students, with a Focus on Central Americans

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PART I: BACKGROUND

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which individuals learn to understand and manage their emotions, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. For immigrant students, this process holds additional challenges, as they learn these skills while also navigating complex emotional reactions to social and academic displacement, trauma, and family reunification.

"I am from El Salvador. My uncle, brother and I decided to come to the U.S. because the gangs were threatening us. One of my friends was killed. On the way here we were kidnapped in Mexico and held for three months until a ransom was sent. There was another man with us who had all five of his fingers on one hand cut off by the kidnappers, and then they stabbed him to death right in front of my brother and I. Once we got to the border, we were caught by ICE and my uncle was sent back home. I saw a counselor when I first got here, and now I don't have nightmares anymore."

HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION AND CURRENT TRENDS

Immigration to the United States from Central America has long been driven by economic difficulties and violence. In the last four decades, these countries have experienced civil wars, crippling poverty, increased gang violence and narco-trafficking, and disintegration of civil structures.

According to World Atlas statistics, since 2014 El Salvador and Honduras have been named as countries with the highest murder rates that are not at war. Children are either targeted for recruitment into an expansive network of gang activity or are living under their threat. Consequently, the flow of children entering the United States has increased as they seek safety. These children do not have refugee status, but rather must independently find and fund legal counsel. Without such assistance, they risk being deported to the countries they fled.

From the years 2013-2015, the Migration Policy Institute reported a spike in Central American unaccompanied minors crossing the Mexican border into the United States, totaling 77,000 during this period. High Point High School in Prince George's County, Maryland, currently has the largest numbers of ESOL students in the state. The total 2017-2018 ESOL enrollment thus far has topped 1,200 students. With increased anxiety over changing immigration policies, ESOL students are withdrawing or transferring to other schools at unseen rates; over 400 ESOL students have withdrawn from High Point this academic year. Students report that they are receiving deportation and voluntary departure notices, are re-locating to more affordable housing, or are choosing to work in order to prepare for a return to their home country, in spite of the safety risks.

BIO-SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Newcomer immigrant students place particular demands on school staff, not only for specialized instructional interventions, but for social and mental health supports as well. Improving instruction requires awareness of intercultural communication and appropriate responses to students exposed to trauma, family loss, uncertain legal future, and cultural adjustment. Immigrant children are more likely to face numerous risks to healthy development (Close & Solberg, 2008).

Biological needs to consider include access to health care and immunizations, interruption of eating/sleeping patterns, pre-existing health conditions, and the impact of chronic stress and trauma on the body. Limited exposure to sun and physical exercise also take their toll on newcomer immigrants from countries where most of their daily life took place outdoors.

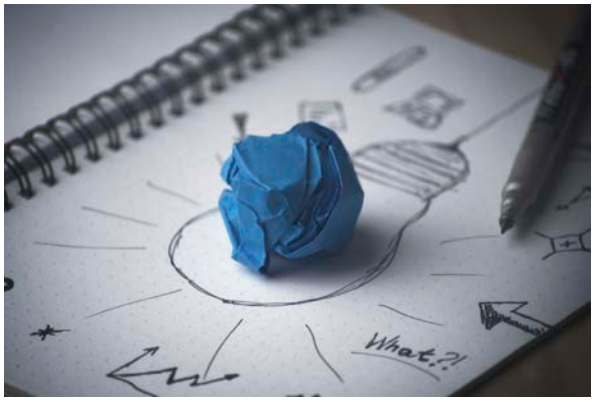
Social needs for belonging within their academic community cannot be overstated. A study of Latino students in the United States confirmed that students who felt more connected with their teachers and their school were also more motivated to attend school, which was in turn associated with better achievement (Close and Solberg, 2008). Newcomer students need opportunities to build relationships with their new peers, experience success in their new language and school, and begin the long task of attachment at home with biological parents or caretakers who may be virtual strangers.

Newcomer students also need assistance with acculturation and orientation regarding school procedures, U.S. education norms, legal requirements such as attendance and immunization, and community resource information on low-cost health care and legal services. The students need an opportunity to understand that their culture shock, adjustment, and challenging relationships with unfamiliar family members in the context of time – that their current emotional state, be it stress, depression or anger, is temporary.

In 2016, High Point conducted an anonymous survey of 294 newcomer students from Central America to help understand the scope of their social-emotional needs. Responses revealed that 52% had experienced gang/community violence in their home countries or on their journey to the United States, 35% had interrupted education, 45% had a loved one die in the previous year, 37% reported experiencing insomnia or nightmares regularly, and 79% reported a need for legal counseling.

As trauma research has documented, children who have experienced trauma, fear, separation from family, and isolation are subject to a variety of psychological stressors and mental health challenges. Studies have shown some develop anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other conditions. Once in the United States, these students continue to worry about family members and friends who remain in their country; family members become ill, friends are murdered, relatives disappear. Trauma can cause interrupted sleep, poor concentration, anger/aggression, physical pain and/or social withdrawal. Trauma also can interfere with attention, memory, and cognition – all skills that are fundamental in learning.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



SCHOOL-WIDE INTERVENTIONS

Provide staff training on behaviors to watch for.
School-wide interventions begin with training staff so educators are familiar with the geo-political causes of immigration, and the impacts of trauma. Staff training is necessary in order to understand and interpret behaviors a student may exhibit during their adjustment period – be it silence, disorganization, or disengagement.

Provide immigrant students with specialized orientation.
School staff can also provide a sense of safety to students and facilitate mastery of their new surroundings through teaching expectations and routines with visual reminders, supporting a culture of respect, and correcting with warm firmness. Bilingual orientation guides help with the task of mastery. These guides may include: a map of the school; information on community resources; important staff to know; websites and apps that can support English language learning; school procedures regarding code of conduct, absences, library use, and inclement weather policies; tips for managing culture shock; and strategies for building trust with new family members. Bilingual social work and family support staff are vital.

School staff must also help newcomer students be aware of gang activity. Unaccompanied minors in particular are at an increased risk for recruitment either at school or in their communities. Students need to know the methods for recruitment (intimidation, skipping parties, drug trafficking), refusal techniques, and school staff who can support them.

TEACHER INTERVENTIONS

As teachers, we can draw on the research and interventions for trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive learning environments to respond to immigrant student needs. Marlene Wong of the Support for Students Exposed to Trauma program has designed school-based curriculum to support school-wide understanding and interventions to mitigate the impact of past trauma.

All the best instructional techniques we have will depend on the student's availability to engage with and learn from us. This need to belong has long been recognized as one of the most important psychological needs in humans (Maslow, 1943). Hence, our most essential tool in engaging with all youth, especially youth with traumatic histories, is ourselves – our warm, caring, dependable, steady, relational, limit-setting selves. As educators and support staff, we provide this necessary positive mirroring and a belief that students' resilience is stronger than their challenges.

Use mindfulness techniques in the classroom.
Resiliency and post-trauma growth research emphasizes the need for students to learn emotional regulation, how to relate positively to others, and how to reason through challenges. Mindfulness techniques and grounding exercises can help students by teaching an awareness of their body and their mind in the present moment. Using five minutes of class on a routine bases for check-ins related to self-awareness (emotional state, physical and cognitive energy), deep breathing techniques, guided meditation, and simple movements to stimulate or calm the brain are all skills that students can learn in order to regulate their mind and body. These exercises can change the energy of the student and the energy in the classroom.

Engage in classroom community building.
The circle process is another method for strengthening classroom community and enhancing self-efficacy. Using one or two prompts and inviting students to respond provides an opportunity to build connections and normalize their experiences of adjustment. In addition, invite older student leaders who have lived through similar experiences, to share their challenges and successes with newcomer students.

Given the changes in immigration policies specifically towards Central American students and families, we are likely to see an increase in anxiety-related and depressive behaviors. This could be manifested by poor attendance, self-harm and suicidal ideation, increased drug use, and dropping out of school. As caring educators, we need to know the daily realities of our students and how we can best address their needs, to support what they most desire – a safe and better life for themselves and their families.

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RESOURCES

- **Helping Traumatized Children Learn:** www.traumasensitiveschools.org
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** www.nctsn.org
- **Niroga.org:** www.mindfulschools.org
- **BRYCS: Refugee Children in U.S. Schools: A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel:** www.brycs.org/publications/schools-toolkit.cfm
- **Families Forever:** www.childrenspsychologicalhealthcenter.org/content/view/25/44/

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