

Empowering Refugee Families of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Many refugee students with disabilities are entering their American classrooms for the first time after experiencing adversity and trauma. They may have experienced famine, war, displacement, forced migration and abuse. One can also presume that their special education needs were neglected due to the limited resources that were available to them. While some of these students will have apparent disabilities, others will have social-emotional and other disabilities that are hidden. As the special education team prepares to embark on welcoming and educating each of these students, they will first need to empower the parents.

Introduction

The special education process, which for this paper includes: Domain Documentation, Eligibility and Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings can be very daunting for many families of children with disabilities. For refugee families who have experienced trauma, homelessness and displacement, this process can be very difficult especially when presented in a language that may not be their first language. As a result, the process may need to be more thorough and inclusive (Allen, 2007). According to the National Association of School Psychologists “Given the often chronic and significant stress placed on refugee students, many are at increased risk for developing trauma and other mental health disorders, undermining their ability to function effectively in school. Further, given the environment of their previous schooling and the immigration to the United States, many have experienced significantly interrupted schooling; coupled with language gaps, many students arrive unprepared to participate in school with their same-age peers” (National Association of School Psychologist, 2015).

The special education team and other school personnel must communicate to the refugee family that they value the efforts the family has made to ensure the well-being of their children. They must show compassion for the family’s situation and reassure them that the school and teachers are there to provide the necessary supports for their child with disabilities. It is important to approach families with respect and professionalism. Every effort should be made to assure the family that they are a valued member of the school community and that their child is everybody’s priority (Benson & Martin, 2003). When working with refugee families new to the American educational system, it is very important to consider the special needs of these families using a trauma-informed perspective and empower parents to take ownership of their child’s progress and success (Ristuccia, 2013). In this article, we will discuss specific strategies that will help the special education team in empowering refugee families of students in their classrooms.

Using Trauma-Informed Practices during Special Education Meetings:

1. Special Meeting Considerations: According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), refugee families and their children have experienced significant episodes that “may affect their mental and physical health long after the events have occurred. These traumatic events may occur while the refugees are in their country of origin, during displacement from their country of origin, or in the resettlement process here in the U.S.” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network).

Every special education team member needs to participate in workshops, seminars or in-services on trauma-informed practices (Adelman & Taylor, 2013). It is the responsibility of the special education team to be educated about the impact of traumatic events that impact refugee families (Blaustein, 2013). The school psychologist and the social worker can help the team take into consideration what might cause family members stress during the special education meetings. The special education team members should anticipate that certain components of the special education paperwork can create a sense of unease and anxiety for the family. For example, the family may not like to publicly share information about their previous history in refugee camps or the lack of formal schooling for their children. Instead, the special education team should ask the parent *what information they want to share with the team*. Since the refugee families may be unfamiliar with the special education process due to cultural, linguistic, and other differences, it is very important that the special education team make an exceptional effort to include the parents in all the different components of the special education process. Holding some informal meetings first to help the families understand the special education process may be helpful. With the help of refugee liaisons, the parents can understand their child’s educational needs and how the school is going to address those needs. It would be helpful for the parents to get a sense of the school, the classrooms, and the different professionals who will be providing services to their child, if found eligible. The team should ensure that parents understand their rights in the special education process and that all their questions are answered (Kalyanpur & Harry 2004). Effective communication goes beyond just translating the written materials. The team must explain that the parents have a right to ask questions, disagree, or reject any aspects of the process. When the formal special education meeting is in progress, it is important to inform parents that they can interject and ask questions. It would also be very helpful to pause when discussing technical and jargoned language to explain terminology in understandable terms. The most important message to convey to any parent during the special education process is that everyone is working for the child and that the parents are a very important part of this team effort (Kalyanpur & Harry 2012). These families have limited resources and transportation availability when it comes to getting the services that they need. With the help of the refugee liaisons working with the family, the school can arrange for flexible times to meet with the families and arrange for transportation to the school for conferences and special education meetings.

2. Creating Networks: It is important for the special education team to create an authentic and collaborative relationship between the team and parents. Aside from contacting the family via phone calls or through conversations when they meet the parents at drop off/dismissal times; written communication can also be utilized as a tool, if requested by the parents. Unlike other families in the special education process, refugee families do not have existing familial support systems (Sobel & Kugler, 2007). They do not have the resources for childcare for their other

children while they are required to attend meetings and conferences for their child with disabilities. Therefore, it would be helpful if the school provided childcare while parents are in meetings. When it comes to utilizing community resources, refugee families may not be aware of all the services that are offered within their communities to assist them in helping their child (Elias & Schwab, 2004). The school can work with the refugee liaisons to ensure that families are accessing all possible resources within their community (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Service).

3. Display Respect and Empathy for the Family: When dealing with refugee children who have experience from displacement and war, it is very likely that they will exhibit behavioral concerns within the classroom (Becker-Blease, Turner & Finkelhor, 2010; Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne, & Neese, 2014). According to the National Association of School Psychologists, "Extreme stress, adversity, and trauma can impede concentration, cognitive functioning, memory, and social relationships. Additionally, stress can contribute to both internalized symptoms—such as hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, isolation—and externalized behaviors—such as startle responses, reactivity, aggression, and conduct problems" (National Association of School Psychologist, 2015). It is important that the parent understands that this is not a reflection of their parenting or culture. This is an opportunity for all the team members to provide strategies that will help the student manage his or her behavior at school and at home (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler & Feinberg, 2005). At first, the parents might feel that it is the teacher's responsibility to manage their child's behavioral issues within the classroom. However, it is important to create a team atmosphere to assist the child in the transition. This may require informal discussions before the meeting, so the parents know what to expect. During the meeting, the teachers must first present positive behaviors of the student; then they can provide specific examples of the behaviors with which they are concerned. The teachers should ask the parents how they address their child's behaviors at home and whether there are other strategies that they recommend be used within the classroom. The special education team must engage the parents in a way that allows the families to voice their concerns. The special education team should model their collaborative problem-solving approach with the family. They can use hypothetical cases or specific examples of how their child is doing within the classroom to create better learning opportunities. The parents will understand that the goal of the team is to help their child make progress in school and that there will be times when there are setbacks. This may require an informal discussion after the special education meeting to debrief them about the process and decisions made during the meeting. It is during these setbacks that the team may have to reconvene with the parents to brainstorm various approaches that will help their child.

4. Create an Optimistic Vision for the Student's Future: Parents entering the special education maze are often left feeling overwhelmed and anxious about the progress of their children. They are not sure how their child will progress into the future. It is very important for the special education team to help the parents create a positive vision for their child's future. The parents need to be engaged in developing the outcome that they desire for their child (Pena, 2000). The special education team can assist the family in realizing their child's strengths and talents in addition to acknowledging the child's needs as they look for opportunities for growth (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2011). Sometimes it is difficult for parents to envision a future where their child is safe, productive, and thriving. They need to be reassured that they are not alone;

that the special education team will work with them and their community in creating opportunities for their child (Mosselson, 2006). Professionals need to show optimism when discussing the child's progress with the parents (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). They should also connect the families with other parents who have navigated the special education process in a successful way so that they can network and develop friendships. The parents need to know that they are developing the roadmap for their child's future by collaborating with the child's special education team.

5. Allow the Student to participate during the Special Education Process: According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education, "there are more than 840,000 immigrant students in the United States and more than 4.6 million English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). When refugee families are granted asylum in the United States, students with special needs are eligible to receive special education services Under IDEA. As soon the student is identified as having a disability, special education and related services will be provided under the eligibility guidelines of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Whenever it is appropriate or feasible, the student with disabilities should be included in the special education process. Regardless of the student's communication needs, it is imperative that the teachers utilize the student's voice during these meetings (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993). The student should participate at a level that is appropriate for him/her and the special education teacher can facilitate the process. Another advantage to including the student in the special education process is to get the student to discuss any strategies that have helped him/her in the school that the parent can utilize within the home.

Table 1:
Trauma-Informed Practices Recommended During Special Education Meetings

Areas to consider	What that might look like
1. Special Meeting Considerations	Use open-ended, non-probing questions, which allow parents to feel free to share at their level of comfort (“What information do you want to share?”) versus asking specifics about the family’s ordeal as refugees leaving their country of origin.
2. Creating Networks	Use multiple modes of communication (in-person, on the phone, in writing) Provide childcare during the meetings to keep distractions to a minimum
3. Display Respect and Empathy	Reassure the parents that the circumstances, not their parenting styles, are the source of behavioral concerns Talk about the student’s strengths before addressing the areas of concern
4. Create an Optimistic Vision	Focus on strengths and talents
5. Student Participation	Allow the student to self-advocate to the level capable

Conclusion

The special education team must realize that refugee families arriving into the United States have experienced trauma and the schools need to become trauma-informed (Rossen, E., & Hull, R., 2013). Refugee families have experienced severe trauma and it impacts every facet of their lives. The special education team must be prepared to address the complex needs of the entire family unit in order to meet the educational and social-emotional needs of the child with disabilities. They need to be flexible and realize that for these refugee families, the school becomes an extended family; the parents appreciate the relationships that they are forming with their child's teachers and other personnel within the school. These families value this partnership because for some of them the school is the safe-haven that they had envisioned for their child (Warsi, 2017). The school can play a vital role in improving the educational outcomes for their children (Feuerstein, 2000). By engaging and working with the refugee families, the special education team will benefit from this interaction and will have the opportunity to provide the student with a solid education. The refugee families might not be used to having their children participate in the day-to-day activities due to their disabilities, and this would be an opportunity for them to see their child's strengths in self-advocacy (National Association of School Psychologist, 2015). Once they see their child with disabilities from a strengths-based perspective, they will feel more optimistic about their child's future. "The path or journey for a refugee child is complicated and long, and the challenges for these students occur in every aspect of their life" (Stewart, J., 2011, p. 219).

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