Supporting the Success of Student Refugees Using a Multi-Tiered Systemic Approach

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Abstract

School counselors are in a unique position to support the development and success of student refugees. This article presents a multi-tiered systemic approach for school counselors to enhance the social/emotional, academic, and career development of student refugees in K-12 schools. The article elaborates on culturally sensitive practical interventions for working with this population of students.

Keywords: student refugees, school counselor, multi-tiered systemic support, ASCA model

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (UNHCR, 2010). More than 3 million refugees have been admitted to the United States since the Refugee Act 1980 came into effect (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). In 2016, the United States admitted 84,994 refugees from 68 countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Congo, Ethiopia, Democratic Republican Congo, Syria) of which 32.6% were school–age children (U.S. Department of State, 2018). At the end of 2018, 70.8 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide due to persecution, conflict, and violence with children under 18 years of age constituting approximately half of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2019).

Pierce and Gibbons (2012) identified that refugees usually experience migration in four stages: pre-migration, migration, third country resettlement stage, and the new living conditions. At each stage, refugee children and their families must manage the challenges resulting from “displacement, transit, and resettlement” (Mupenzi, 2018, pg.128). They are also at risk of exposure to multiple human rights violations (e.g., rape, torture, prostitution, slavery, war crimes) during pre-migration. In the migration stage, many refugees travel through perilous territories and spend periods living in refugee camps. There is potential for re-traumatization during third country resettlement stage as families seeking relocation recount pre-migration issues during the asylum-seeking

process. Finally, in the new living conditions stage, children and families engage in a process of acclimation in the host country, which may be include employment issues, poor living conditions, social exclusion, and the potential for acculturative stress, coupled with unresolved pre-migration trauma issues (Pierce & Gibbons, 2012).

The above experiences have implications for student refugees' well-being and their social/emotional, academic, and career development in K-12 schools. Student refugees are at risk for mental health issues due to war related trauma (Bemak & Chung, 2017), family separation (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011), and exposure to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse (United Nations Children's Fund, 2012). They are at risk for linguistic and cultural barriers, stigma associated with seeking mental health services, and psychological symptoms (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016) such as high rates of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and attention - deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011), all of which may have implications for their social/emotional development.

Student refugees' mental health issues may affect their academic performance and career development. In the new living conditions stage, they may have an added pressure of adjusting to and coping with unfamiliar school experiences (Abkhezr et al., 2015), while balancing different cultures at home and school. They may face discrimination in school settings (Dryden-Peterson, 2015), experience bullying (Thomas, 2016), isolation from peers, and lack of support from teachers, classmates, and other school-related personnel (Roxas, 2011). Additional challenges may include illiteracy, placement in an age-appropriate grade despite substantial educational deficiencies,

racism, family responsibilities, and social or economic hardships (Correa-Velez et al., 2016; Mupenzi, 2018).

Despite the complex needs of student refugees in K-12 schools, there is a dearth of literature regarding how to support this vulnerable student population. School counselors are in a unique position to offer support, as they are responsible for developing and delivering comprehensive school counseling programs. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in advocating for inclusive education systems that meet the needs of all students, especially those who are underrepresented, vulnerable, and experience obstacles in academic performance (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). This article aims to fill a gap in the literature by presenting practical, culturally sensitive interventions that school counselors can employ to support the social/emotional, academic, and career development of student refugees in K-12 schools using the ASCA National Model (2019) as a framework. The interventions are presented in a multi-tiered approach, which acknowledges and builds upon the strengths of student refugees. Finally, the article highlights areas for future directions for school counselors working with refugee students.

A Multitiered Systemic Approach for Student Refugees

School is an ideal environment for addressing the needs of student refugees (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). School-based services are accessible; they enhance student resilience, behavioral and social adjustment, promote academic progress, link students to the broader community, and provide preventive services (Fazel & Stein, 2002). The ASCA model (ASCA, 2019), which was designed to promote equity among all students in K-12 schools, serves as a useful framework to guide practice. This model can be

adapted to work with student refugees using the four components (define, manage, deliver, and assess), which provide structure for the organization, implementation, and maintenance of school counseling programs. The ASCA model encourages school counselors to ensure that activities are relevant for all student populations and delivered across a multi-tiered system of supports. To be more relevant for student refugees, the authors suggest tier 1 focus on systemic interventions, tier 2 on classroom and small group interventions, and tier 3 on individualized services under the three domains of social/emotional, academic and career needs.

Tier 1: Systemic Interventions

Social/Emotional Development

Competencies in this area guide school counselors to help students manage emotions, learn, and apply interpersonal skills (ASCA, 2019). Student refugees may present with a number of psychological difficulties due to migration trauma including school problems, lack of concentration, irritability, anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression, and PTSD (American Psychological Association, 2008; Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Ehntholt et al., 2005). Thus, it is necessary that schools utilize trauma-informed practices to support student refugees. On a systemic level, school counselors can create a positive and inclusive school climate; develop healthy relationships; and focus on the strengths of this group to help build self-confidence (Alexander, 2019). First, school counselors must foster positive relationships with students and their families to promote their social/emotional adjustment (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Furthermore, collaboration with school personnel and community resources is also necessary to support the adjustment of student refugees (Suárez-

Orozco et al., 2010). School counselors may serve as advocates for student refugees by influencing policies, removing barriers and discriminatory practices in the school (Rumsey et al., 2018). Finally, school counselors must be aware of the students' language, cultural and religious practices, holidays, and gender dynamics (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014).

Academic Development

In creating school environments conducive to the academic development of student refugees, school counselors are encouraged to use the ASCA mindsets and behaviors for student success to guide practices, plan student refugee programs, and assess growth and development (ASCA, 2019). Successful initiatives will require collaborative partnerships with significant stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school nurses, social workers, and administrators) and in-service training to support stakeholders' understanding of the history, cultural backgrounds, and unique needs of student refugee groups in their respective schools (Goh et al., 2007; Thomas, 2016). Such training should highlight the challenges faced by this population (discrimination, stereotypes, and micro-aggressions) and the strengths they bring to the learning space. For instance, resilience in the face of adversity, persistence in their search for better education and career opportunities (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Mupenzi, 2018), and a positive view of education as a gateway to opportunities and freedom (Thomas, 2016; Uptin et al., 2014). Through training, school counselors can support teachers and other stakeholders to develop an awareness of attitudes and inclusive practices that promote the academic development of student refugees (Lerner, 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Such practices include proper induction procedures to support student refugees'

acculturation to the educational system and create opportunities to discuss and celebrate student refugees' cultures and diverse backgrounds (Goh et al., 2007; Lerner, 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Career Development

In an effort to develop and enhance career competencies (ASCA, 2019) for student refugees, school counselors are encouraged to utilize culturally relevant assessments to evaluate career needs and to sensitively interpret assessments in order to enhance their usefulness (Abkhezr et al., 2015; ASCA, 2019). School counselors are also encouraged to practice from a social justice framework, demonstrate understanding, and work to remove barriers that limit student refugees' career choices, while supporting them to develop human capital and skills (Abkhezr et al., 2015; ASCA, 2019). Finally, school counselors support the use of context and culture when defining career development as they attempt to understand students' conception of work, values, and prestige (Abkhezr et al., 2015).

Tiers 2 and 3: Individual and Group Interventions

Social/Emotional Development

Utilizing specific trauma informed practices is essential for all tiers. School counselors may help students identify and express their emotions, practice mindfulness, stress management strategies, and create individualized emotional regulation plans (Alexander, 2019). Counselors may assist students by providing effective student-centered short-term interventions. For instance, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), and cognitive behavioral intervention for trauma in schools (CBITS)

are evidence-based interventions found to be useful in the treatment of PTSD, anxiety, and depression in refugee children (Franco, 2018).

Group counseling in the school setting is a practical, affordable, and efficient method for helping students (Ehntholt et al., 2005). Groups can also help reduce stigma, normalize children's responses, and establish immediate support networks (Ehntholt et al., 2005; Fazel et al., 2009). School-based group cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention may be effective in decreasing post-traumatic stress symptoms and improving behavioral and emotional symptoms in refugee children suffering from PTSD (Ehntholt et al., 2005). In addition, cultural adjustment groups that explore student refugees' experiences in their native and host countries may provide them with safe counseling experiences where they can explore their feelings and thoughts following the migration and acculturation process (Killian et al., 2018).

Research suggests that school-based creative arts and music interventions may also be effective in meeting the psychosocial needs of refugee children (Quinlan et al., 2016; Ugurlu et al., 2016). Specifically, art and music may be helpful in reconstructing meaning (Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009), processing traumatic experiences (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009), managing grief and loss issues (Choi, 2010), and rebuilding social networks (Betancourt et al., 2010). In a study where art and music interventions were used, behavioral difficulties, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, and peer problems were positively impacted. Art activities included sculpture, painting, drawing, sand play, collage, photography, puppet and mask making, creating group murals, storytelling, and drama. Music therapy activities involved lyric analysis, songwriting, instrumental/vocal improvisation, rapping and musical games, learning how to play

guitar or keyboard, listening to music, sharing songs from original culture or religious background, dancing, and performances (Quinlan et al., 2016).

Play therapy may be an effective intervention for children who have experienced trauma, since children gain a sense of control while reenacting traumatic events within a safe space (Landreth, 2012). Group child-centered play therapy in the school setting was found to be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, decreasing behavioral problems, while increasing appropriate emotional expression, prosocial behaviors, conflict resolution skills, and empathy (DeRosier et al., 2018).

Academic Development

As part of tier 2, school counselors may support stakeholders as they develop classrooms or small group environments conducive to students' academic success. For instance, *buddy systems* that strengthen classroom induction, explain classroom expectations, provide homework support, and connect student refugees to the school community (Bouton, 2016; Roxas, 2011). In addition, equitable learning opportunities, where school counselors or teachers develop curriculum using culturally relevant narratives from student refugees, may provide student refugees with an opportunity to speak up more and to explain more about themselves to their peers (Bouton, 2016; Hek, 2005). Finally, it's important to understand and diminish triggers in the classroom that may re-traumatize these students (Alexander, 2019).

School counselors focusing on individualized planning may support students' access to preparatory classes for relevant standardized national tests and to English as a second language services (Hastings, 2012) depending on current levels of English language skills. Counselors may facilitate access to peer mentoring programs that

support student refugee's acculturation and sense of belongingness, minimize incidents of bullying and isolation, and reinforce development of conversational English language (Hastings, 2012; Thomas, 2016). In tiers 2 and 3, school counselors may utilize closing-the-gap action plans/results reports (ASCA, 2019) to set goals that align with ASCA mindsets and behaviors (Fraser, 2012), while supporting students' academic resilience by building on their strengths and positive view of education (Uptin et al., 2014).

Career Development

School counselors enhance the career development of student refugees through the use of career counseling in classrooms, small groups, or individually. Counselors are encouraged to advocate on behalf of student refugees, consult with other significant stakeholders, and use theory-based conceptualizations of counseling goals, concerns, and intervention strategies (ASCA, 2019; Okocha, 2007). The literature has identified several theories best suited to work with people from refugee backgrounds, which can be adapted for career counseling especially at the middle and high school levels, including narrative career counseling. When using a narrative approach, school counselors facilitate story telling through the development of concepts such as life themes, subjective meaning, reflection, connectedness, and agency. Through narrative counseling, student refugees may regain their sense of self, confidence. They may be able to tell their stories of pre and post migration and explore their preferred alternative life and career narratives (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017; Abkhezr et al., 2018).

In designing classroom curriculum for career counseling, school counselors are encouraged to develop activities that support students' career development, career understanding using qualitative and quantitative assessments, and career success.

Activities might include information on financial aid stipulations relevant to their refugee status and guidance on the overall college admission process (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). Qualitative and informal assessments may involve the individual or combined use of card sorts, life career assessments, lifelines, occupational trees, and life career rainbows (Okocha, 2007). Finally, school counselors, especially at the high school level, are encouraged to create opportunities for shadowing and mentoring by professionals in careers similar to the student's potential career preference. Such programs may enhance participants' knowledge of workplaces, increase self-confidence, and build networks of role models. During mentoring, school counselors may offer workshops on career aspirations, career goal development, and strategies to fill gaps in knowledge (Bradford & King, 2011).

Future Directions

Currently, there are few recommendations for school counselors working with student refugees in K-12 schools. This article fills the gap by offering practical interventions from the literature using a multi-tiered approach that can be applied in schools based on the cultural, contextual, and the specific needs of their student refugees. School counselors are in an ideal position to advocate for student refugees, raise awareness regarding issues that affect them, deliver professional development to school personnel, facilitate communication with parents, and collaborate with community agencies to provide support. School counselors are also encouraged to support student refugees' acculturation process by teaching a comprehensive school counseling curriculum and encouraging a mutual sharing of cultural identities and experiences. Overall, school counselors are urged to build on the strengths and

resilience of student refugees when developing interventions. As school counselors continue to work with increasing numbers of student refugees, they are urged to seek professional development opportunities related to trauma-informed practices, supervision, and consultation when working with this population of students. In addition, they are encouraged to develop school counseling programs that utilize evidence-based research and culturally sensitive practices in their work with student refugees. Finally, school counselors already using best practices with this population of students are advised to share their work through social media, professional conferences, or other training opportunities to address the gap in practice, research, and literature regarding student refugees.

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