SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Distance Learning Support for Refugee Students

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Abstract

The suspension of onsite classes from March to June 2020 as a result of COVID-19 posed many challenges for educators supporting LAL (Literacy, Academics and Language) refugee youth. This paper reflects on the practices of a collaborative EAL (English as an Additional Language) and LAL high school team. It also addresses the challenges of remote learning for LAL students including a lack of intensive programming and direct teacher instruction, limited technological skills, and communication barriers. In the end, the success of delivering the program in a COVID-19 environment was nested in the collaborative approach.

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on the educational system. While distance learning continues to be a struggle for many students, it has been especially challenging for newcomer refugee youth. On March 20, 2020, onsite classes in Manitoba were suspended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and learning began through distance learning platforms. This type of instruction has posed many challenges for refugee students in Brandon accessing Literacy, Academics and Language (LAL) programming. Without access to intensive programming with daily teacher supports, and given the limited technological skills and communication barriers, distance learning has not been an ideal learning environment for LAL learners. Despite the many challenges, my English as an Additional Language (EAL) colleagues and I collaboratively provided additional supports to make learning accessible for our students. Using the online platform TEAMS, we targeted instruction and interventions specific to our students' needs and language proficiencies. In addition, we utilized our extended community resources such as interpreters and SWIS (Settlement Workers in Schools) to address technological limitations and provide interpretation services. During this time of distress and uncertainty, relationship building (Carrington, 2019) was the key to our students' engagement during distance learning.

LAL Learners in Manitoba

In Manitoba, refugee students with severe gaps in education are known as LAL learners (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2011). These students have had interrupted schooling or a complete lack of formal education due to war and other conflict in their home countries, or other stressors (Baecher et al., 2019). They require intensive programming in literacy and numeracy, in addition to developing their language proficiency and knowledge in mainstream content-area courses (Lee, 2016). Learning is a challenging process for LAL learners and their progress is significantly slower than Canadian-born speakers of English. Between 2016 and 2018, an average of 105 high school students in Manitoba had interrupted schooling and 33 had never attended school (Macintosh, 2020). The suspension of onsite classes due to COVID-19 concerned our school team. Without intensive teacher supports and daily interaction, teachers worried that the learning gap would be widened even further for LAL students.

Intensive Teacher Supports

When school closures occurred on March 20, 2020, educators were concerned about language and skill regression, and students falling behind, without the physical presence of their teachers (De La Rosa, 2020). They worried about their ability to provide the same instruction through a distance

learning platform, since oral communication is developed through social interaction (Granados, 2020). LAL students benefit from intensive teacher supports, differentiated instruction, visual supports, hands-on and experiential learning, and opportunities to interact with peers. All of these factors play a crucial role in bridging the gaps for LAL students. When schools changed to a distance learning platform, educators knew that they could not duplicate face-to-face interaction online (Granados, 2020). Refugee youth already struggle with understanding the educational system and the school culture (Li & Grineva, 2016), so carrying out instruction and outlining expectations are difficult to achieve without physical, in-school supports. Replicating this type of programming through a distance learning platform has been a challenging task for school teams.

To address these issues, my colleagues used TEAMS to communicate with students. First, they created a class page that contained daily messages, scaffolded lessons, and audio and visual supports in simplified language appropriate to their students' language levels. Second, they facilitated daily scheduled class time for students to interact with one another and to check in with the teacher. This provided students with step-by-step instructions and opportunities to discuss class assignments (Belsha, 2020) at a much slower pace. It also encouraged students to ask questions, complete class work together, and request support for other courses if needed. Most importantly, teachers were able to observe students' socio-emotional status and, if needed, refer them to additional supports, such as a social worker, or me, the EAL resource teacher/counsellor. Unfortunately, despite daily teacher access and a structured online learning environment, many students did not engage in distance learning. My colleagues were frustrated because students missed scheduled class time, requested support outside school hours, or did not engage altogether. Around the two-week period of distance learning, we accessed additional supports to address these issues. We reached out to our Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) team.

Settlement Workers in Schools

SWIS is a joint partnership between Westman Immigrant Services and Brandon School Division. Their job is similar to that of cultural brokers, whose role is to connect "different cultural groups to enhance practice and communication" (Brar-Josan et al., 2019, p. 512). In the Brandon School Division partnership, SWIS workers provide services to their clients and children, such as information and orientation on Canadian culture. They act as liaisons between their clients and schools to "facilitate culturally sensitive communication among school staff, students, and families to foster cultural understanding" (Westman Immigrant Services, personal communication, June 9, 2020). At our school, the SWIS workers are onsite on a weekly basis. Their main goal is to help students and families settle in Brandon and to make students feel comfortable at school. SWIS workers have a strong existing collaboration with our LAL and EAL team. Over the past two years, they have provided student supports in the form of workshops, presentations, activities, and individual student meetings. Prior to school suspension, most of our students and families were already connected to a SWIS worker. It was therefore a simple process for them to support us in communicating with families and gathering information about the lack of engagement in distance learning. One of the main reasons students were not engaging was limited technological skills.

Lack of Technological Skills

Technology plays an essential role in distance learning. In addition to gaps in literacy and numeracy, LAL students also possess a limited knowledge of computer literacy. For this reason, engaging with teachers online, accessing school work, and submitting assignments has been difficult. Students are not yet able to use and are not comfortable using online platforms on their own (Breiseth, 2020). Their parents and siblings face similar challenges with technology, so LAL learners have little to no support at home. Although our school provided students with laptops and start-up instructions for distance learning, students still struggled to keep up with assignment expectations without continued explicit instruction, especially in their non-LAL classes.

In order to support students and their families with technology, our team accessed the support of our SWIS workers. First, we created a spreadsheet at our departmental student intervention meeting. We organized the students into red, yellow, and green zones to identify which students were and were not engaging in distance learning. We then added columns to indicate whether the students had access to technology (school provided or not) and internet access. Next, we created a triage process to focus on students who were not engaging altogether. Finally, we connected virtually with our quarto-lingual SWIS worker and began to contact families. Using the data gathered, we made an action plan to follow up with students. Our support included virtual online meetings with screen sharing and direct first language translation. This allowed the students to see the steps to access their class materials and resources. If slow internet connection was the issue, the SWIS worker provided additional supports to families, such as information for contacting internet providers. Coordination of these meetings was effective, but came with challenges.

Coordinating meetings with all parties involved was difficult. It required connecting with families ahead of time and guiding them with step-by-step instructions for logging on to the computer, turning on Wi-Fi, and navigating through TEAMS. SWIS workers also made reminder calls and reviewed instructions to log on the day of the meetings. The greatest challenges occurred if one person did not join the meeting. It meant setting an alternate date and coordinating another set of schedules. If this process did not work for specific students, individual teachers then provided print copies of books and school work. If transportation played a factor in the students' ability to pick up printed homework, teachers delivered work directly to their homes. Using a triage process, we were able to focus on students requiring the most intensive supports. Afterwards, we saw an increase of student engagement in distance learning and, most importantly, students and their families made stronger connections with the school team. The ability to communicate information to students and families in their first language was a critical factor in the success of these meetings. Language has been, and continues to be, a barrier between LAL students and schools.

Language and Communication Barriers

Communication is a pre-existing barrier between LAL students, families, and teachers. Newcomer LAL students possess limited English skills to participate in basic conversations. To bridge the language barriers, Brandon School Division has relied on in-person meetings with interpreters and SWIS workers share important information to newcomer families. Although the same supports are still being used during COVID-19, meeting in person is not possible. Arranging a phone meeting with all parties involved, or a meeting online, is a much more complex and frustrating process. During school suspension, the amount of information has been intense and overwhelming. It has also been primarily shared in English and has therefore been inaccessible for newcomer families with limited English skills. Refugee families already feel stressed by their lack of language proficiency and are intimidated by the Canadian school system (Koyama & Ghosh, 2018), so it is no surprise that many chose to opt-out of distance learning due to communication barriers.

Similar to technological support, we used our SWIS workers as interpreters to contact home in first language and share information on behalf of specific teachers and the school. We used this process extensively at the beginning, but discovered that many things were lost in translation and that follow up calls needed to occur. Within three weeks, we adapted our process to a call or video conference meeting on TEAMS and included everyone who was involved with that specific student. Our collaborative team included the classroom teacher, EAL resource/guidance teacher, SWIS worker, interpreter if needed, and the student and parent(s). Although difficult to arrange, the process was the most effective way to work through the challenges. We communicated information to families about school updates, picking up school belongings, accessing additional supports such as food banks, strategies for taking care of mental health, school expectations, and homework help. The meetings also provided the students and their families, the opportunity to ask specific questions in their first language, which they were most comfortable using.

In addition to using SWIS workers, the English as an Additional Language team created a TEAMS page for all English as an Additional Language students in our school. This was a platform to share important school information, motivational messages, and specific challenges (such as reading a book aloud or a cooking demonstration) that students could participate in to develop their English skills. They also had the opportunity to win prizes. Our SWIS workers were included on the page and had the ability to post messages in students' first languages. Within the first two weeks, we saw an increase of student engagement on the group page. The higher proficiency English students uploaded exemplars and wrote supportive comments to one another. This provided the visual and auditory support for students with a lower level of English proficiency. For many LAL students, school is a priority and is considered "one of the best things about being in Canada" (Stewart, 2011, p. 68). The combination of using the Settlement Workers in Schools and working as an EAL collaborative team, helped us address many of the communication barriers for our students. Our primary goal was to keep them connected to their school community.

The Need for Collaboration and Connection

As educators, "it is easy to fall into isolation" (Carrington, 2019, xxii). The impact of COVID-19 forced us into isolation and made our jobs as educators even more complex. During school suspension, the English as an Additional Language team created a supportive and inclusive learning community to meet the specific needs of refugee students. As a result, the students benefitted because the focus was on their specific needs and support was available (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019) through a team of educators and community supports.

During COVID-19 school suspension, the EAL team used exhaustive resources in attempts to engage students in learning. Unfortunately for some students, learning was not possible because many had added stresses such as taking care of younger siblings (Macintosh, 2020), a home environment that made it impossible to learn, triggered trauma, lack of electronic devices for all family members, and parents who were unable to support due to their own limited language proficiency, literacy, and computer literacy. For these students, the most important consideration was their emotional well-being. To continue to keep the students connected, the EAL teachers phoned students and arranged social-distancing home visits. The visits included the entire EAL teacher team, arriving in separate vehicles to drop off school supplies, paper copies of homework, small motivational prizes, and larger participation prizes for those engaging in the challenges. A lack of support and encouragement from parents and teachers are some of the reasons that refugee students drop out of school (Yohani, 2010), and our team wanted to ensure that students were felt supported and connected during this uncertain time. In order to keep students connected, the EAL teachers used face-to-face conversations to unite with their students (Carrington, 2019). Making connections and building relationships was key during distance learning.

Conclusion

Newcomer refugee youth are at a great disadvantage during COVID-19 distance learning. Since school suspension, LAL learners have attempted to engage online despite previous disrupted schooling or lack of formal education, weak computer literacy skills, and limited access to technology. Without the appropriate context and support of interpreters, same-language peers, and community supports such as SWIS, problems in communication are more complex than ever. Despite these challenges, the EAL team at my school used a collaborative approach to support LAL refugee students. Using TEAMS, we adapted instruction to our students' needs and language learning proficiencies. With the support of the SWIS workers, we provided first language supports to aid with lack of technological skills and communication barriers. Through collaborative practices and building connections with each other and our students, we supported our LAL refugee students.

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About the Author

Agnieszka Desjardins is a Master of Education student at Brandon University. Her passion for teaching youth with learning differences led her to pursue her studies in inclusive education. She is currently a resource/guidance teacher supporting high school EAL and LAL students.