



SEPTEMBER 2003 SPOTLIGHT:

BACK TO SCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND STRENGTHS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS

For some students, the start of a brand new school year can be a time of great anticipation, as they begin a new grade, with new teachers and classmates, and reunite with familiar friends. For refugee students, it can be a stressful and challenging time.

DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOLS

For refugee families, particularly those for whom English is a second language, the U.S. educational system is not easy to understand.

Many families may have waited years in refugee camps, with limited access, if any, to education. Even for those with formal education before resettlement, the U.S. education systems often differ widely from what they knew. From the requirements made of students, parents, and teachers, the curricula and school structures, to lockers, textbooks, computers, and desks; from school bells and fire alarms to classroom changes and cafeterias, all may be new. Adjusting to such changes in their environment is a daunting task.

A NEW LANGUAGE

"Please take out your science books, turn to page 54, and fill in the names of the animals on the left side of the page."

A simple instruction from the teacher can be quite complex for refugee students. It takes time to translate what the teacher said, figure out the English names of the animals, and write the names of the animals in an unfamiliar alphabet. Refugee students have to take these extra steps constantly to keep pace with their peers all during the school day.

From the first day refugee students arrive in the United States, they are constantly engaged in learning English. Most refugee students have separate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) classes built into their school day, which helps to advance their skills. Still, other subjects, such as math and social studies, are typically taught in English. The first year is extremely challenging, as they struggle to understand what people around them are saying, and how to communicate their own thoughts and ideas.

SCHOOL (MIS)PLACEMENTS

Refugee students sometimes express concern about being "overplaced"—they think school work is too difficult—or "underplaced"—schoolwork is not challenging enough. This can happen for many reasons. Schools may not have enough educational documentation about the student, or may place a refugee student in a grade according to age, even though there has been a lapse in the student's schooling. Educators may perceive refugee students as academically challenged, when they merely lack English-language skills.

VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Youth, children, and their families who have fled their home country due to war and conflicts have been exposed to violence and persecution that continues to shadow them as they adjust to the United States. Some refugee students suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This manifests in a variety of ways, including an inability to focus, hyper vigilance, nervous activity, frequent startle reactions, aggressive behavior, and depression, among others. Some refugee students may be inappropriately assessed as having learning disorders, when the origin of their challenges is related to trauma.

Significant inroads are being made into understanding the mental health needs of children of war, but there is still much to learn and apply to educational efforts.

BULLYING, TEASING, AND DISCRIMINATION

Elementary, middle, and high school are significant periods of physical and social development. Developing positive peer relationships is crucial, yet refugee students may have difficulties making friends in schools. They might be teased and bullied for differences in how they speak, dress, or look, or for behaviors unfamiliar to U.S. students. Often such situations can escalate into physical fights, or leave refugee students in constant fear. Persistent bullying and teasing is difficult to endure on a daily basis, and can lead some refugee youth to drop out of school.

FAMILY PRESSURES AND DROPPING OUT

The entire family copes with many changes while refugees adjust to their new environment. Refugee students are acutely aware of the challenges their parents face in seeking employment, learning English, or understanding medical, transportation, and school systems, all while keeping the family together. Since children tend to pick up new languages quicker than their parents, they may take on the role of interpreters for their parents. This adds to the pressure refugee students experience. They may miss class to help their parents, or may be privy to information not usually discussed with children, such as medical and financial situations. As a result, refugee children often assume a more adult role than they would if interpretation services were provided or circumstances were different. Older refugee youth appear to be particularly vulnerable to family pressures, especially those of working age. Although refugee parents often place great importance on education, some refugee high school students may drop out because they feel obliged to help with family expenses.

STRENGTHS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS

Typically, refugee students and their families place great importance on education. Often refugee parents will make great sacrifices so their own children can excel in the U.S. Such high aspirations are a good starting point for refugee students. The challenge for educators is to provide guidance, structure, time, and attention to the needs of refugee students to help foster their successful adjustment.

Refugee students are a remarkable group who offer many assets to the staff and student body. They bring a different perspective into the classroom. Their cultures and customs create a fertile learning environment about the world. Other students can benefit greatly from learning directly through them about other people and schools in different countries. Refugee students also bring a variety of new languages to each school system.

Educators can nurture such positive contributions, and encourage English-speaking staff and students to learn some of the refugee students' languages from them and participate in cultural exchanges.

Refugee children often have mastered many challenges in their short lifetimes, and demonstrated tremendous stamina and courage. Such attributes should be harnessed by educators and kept strong, so they can benefit refugee children in their roles as students.