

The Design and Development of a New Academic Program for Educators Who Wish to Work with Refugee Children and Families

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Abstract

During the last decade approximately 45,000 refugee children and family members have moved to the St. Louis region and St. Louis, Missouri has become one of the top ten refugee resettlement sites in the USA. As a result, there is a real need for St. Louis area educators to have intercultural communication skills and an understanding of the refugee experience. This paper describes the first steps in the design and development of a new academic program for educators who wish to work with refugee children and families. Forty-five persons, including 25 who were currently working with refugees, completed a questionnaire describing the "best" or "ideal" teacher of refugees. The teaching skills and the interpersonal communication abilities of the teacher were considered to be more important than the teacher's knowledge and expertise ($p < .001$). It is recommended that the new academic program be a graduate program emphasizing in field experiences associated with Webster University's campuses located in St. Louis, Missouri and Geneva, Switzerland. The Geneva campus has strong links with world organizations assisting refugees and faculty who are experts in refugee studies.

A refugee is a person who has fled his or her native country "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (Vernez, 1991, p. 630). More than 45,000 refugees have recently settled in the St. Louis, Missouri region. About two-thirds of the refugees are part of a Muslim-dominated Bosnian community and many of them have been traumatized by the war in the former Yugoslavia. St. Louis is now the largest Bosnian resettlement site in the country. In addition there are refugees from 90 nationalities including large groups from Central America, South East Asia, the former Soviet Union, China, and Africa. Most of these refugees arrived in St. Louis having undergone the physical and psychosocial trauma of forced migration and not knowing the English language, "American culture", or about the U.S. government and social services system. Teachers and school support staff have struggled to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of refugee children and their families. Thus, there appears to be strong need for specialized training and coursework

for educators in the St. Louis region who are working with refugee youth and their families.

This paper describes my first steps in the design and develop of a new academic program for educators who wish to work with refugee children and families. Most often the educators who work with refugees are the teachers of English as a second language (ESL). The ESL classroom provides the "first line of defense" for newly arrived refugees and the ESL teacher needs to know how to "make his or her classroom an effective teaching environment, as well as a welcoming oasis to overwhelmed refugees" (International Institute of Boston, 2001, p.1). Other roles for educators who work with refugees include administrators, curriculum specialists, international educators, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, pastoral counselors, and family educators.

I am a Webster University education professor, a psychologist, and a cross-cultural researcher. Thus far most of my professional work with refugees has been with adolescents living in Norway (Stiles & Ericksen, in press; Stiles, Gibbons, Lie, Sand & Krull, 1998). In the St. Louis area my experience is more limited; although I have been part of a church-related program devoted to "adopting" Bosnian refugees. Due to my lack of knowledge about the plight of refugees at a local level, I thought it would be important to survey prospective students, interested faculty members, and refugee experts living in the St. Louis area. I tried to follow the model of Pryor (2001) who examined multiple perspectives, including those of refugee families and community experts, in order to make recommendations for educational practice in her local school district.

Webster University is an international university based in St. Louis, Missouri with oversees campuses in Switzerland, China, Thailand, the Netherlands, Austria, England, and Bermuda. At the present time Webster's Geneva, Switzerland campus is the only campus that has a program in Refugee Studies. The program is an undergraduate program housed in the Department of History, Politics, and Law; it offers a degree in International Relations with an Emphasis in Refugee Studies. In addition, the Geneva campus sponsors annual study tours and conferences in Refugee Studies.

Webster University's School of Education is beginning to develop educational programs with an international focus. In the summer of 2002 a new teacher certification program in English as a Second Language received Missouri state approval. The development of a program for educators working with refugees is in keeping with the aims of the Beatrice and David Kornblum Institute for Teaching Excellence, an integral part of the School of Education. The focus of the Institute is on improving the education of disadvantaged, "at risk", and immigrant children in the urban public schools.

Method

Participants

The 45 participants included 8 professors, 20 teachers, 4 administrators, 3 mental health professionals, 5 administrative assistants, and 2 writers. Twenty-

five participants were currently working with refugees; 20 were not. Three participants were refugees themselves. There were 13 students and 32 non-students.

Instrument

A questionnaire asked participants to rate on a scale from 1 [not at all important] to 7 [very important] twenty characteristics and areas of knowledge in the “best” or “ideal” teachers of refugee children and families. Five of the items referred to general elements of effective teaching, “best practices” in education and interpersonal learning guidelines (Rogers, 1969; Sprinthall, Sprinthall & Oja, 1994; Walberg, 1990). Four of the items concerned skills specific to refugee educators, five concerned knowledge of the refugee experience, and four concerned knowledge of refugee culture and language (Marsella, Bornemann, Ekblad, & Orley, 1994; International Institute of Boston, 2001; Pryor, 2001). Two additional items referred to international experiences including travel and language learning. Further instructions were, “Use the space below or reverse sides to add comments.”

Procedure

The questionnaire was field-tested and revised three times. Approval for the project was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Webster University. Participants were recruited by posting and mailing letters with the following information, “Could you please help me, a Webster University professor, to design and develop a new academic program geared for educators who work with refugee children and families?.... I am seeking “input” - ideas, opinions, and advice from students, prospective students, interested faculty, administration, and staff members, and refugee experts in the community. You can help by filling out this brief anonymous and voluntary questionnaire; it takes less than five minutes to complete.”

Results and Discussion

Forty-five persons, including 25 who were currently working with refugees, completed the questionnaire. Due to the small sample size, there very few statistically significant differences between groups. When persons working with refugees were compared with persons not working with refugees, they gave more qualified responses and assigned lower ratings to the importance for the teacher to have specialized teaching skills geared for refugees ($p < .05$). When students were compared with non-students, students thought it was more important for educators to have knowledge of the refugee experience and culture ($p_s < .05$). There were no statistically significant differences according to participant’s occupation (professor, teacher, administrator, mental health professional, administrative assistant, mental health professional, or teacher). When the responses of all participants were grouped together, the teaching skills and the interpersonal communication abilities of the teacher were considered to be more important than the teacher’s knowledge and expertise. The mean ratings assigned to teacher characteristics and skills (6.83) were significantly higher than the mean ratings assigned to teacher knowledge (4.82) ($p < .001$).

Skills and characteristics of educators

A surprising result was that the most important characteristics of the “best” or “ideal” teachers of refugee children and families were not specifically related to refugees but to general teaching effectiveness and interpersonal skills. (See Table 1). In their comments participants wrote “the teacher must show a genuine interest in the students.” They wrote that good instructional techniques and communication skills were “necessary”, “absolutely important”, and “true for all students”, not only refugee students. “It’s also very important that the person working with refugees has empathy for people, a willingness to listen, and to share of him/herself.”

Table 1
Important Teaching and Interpersonal Skills for Educators Who Work with Refugee Children and Families

	Mean	Standard deviation	Sample size
General Elements of Good Teaching	6.41	.53	45
Sincere desire to communicate	6.96	.30	45
Positive reinforcement	6.57	.70	42
Friendly but focused	6.53	.83	43
Cooperative learning	6.07	1.12	43
Connects instruction	5.82	1.33	44
Elements of Teaching Refugees	6.06	.75	45
Makes classroom safe place	6.61	.81	44
Creates lessons for needs	6.31	1.00	45
Refers to community resources	5.80	1.32	45
Learns about families	5.43	1.17	44

Some of the teachers who were currently working with refugees qualified their responses on certain items of the questionnaire. Whether or not the teacher should use praise to motivate and reward students would depend on the students’ cultural background; “too much praise could be suspect.” Some refugees would be unfamiliar with cooperative learning and might need to be given instruction in this learning format. Connecting instruction to prior experiences would make learning meaningful, but “some do not want to be reminded of prior experiences.”

There was a high level of agreement among respondents that the teacher would need to make the classroom a safe place. “Without a sense of safety students may not come and may not learn.” Participants stated that a feeling of safety was especially important for refugees because many “had been in danger and suffered tragedy before or during their flight from their homeland.” Respondents also agreed that lessons and activities should recognize the needs of refugee students or “the lessons can be perceived of as useless.” Learning about the families of students was considered to be especially valuable when

working with female students. Learning about families should be done “after the teacher has gained confidence of individual students.”

The responses to the questionnaire suggest that Webster University students enrolled in a new academic program would benefit from general courses such as Educational Psychology and Interpersonal Communication, courses designed to enhance teaching abilities and communication skills. Even more important would be field placements where future students could gain experience working with refugees and practice teaching and communication skills. The overall mean rating for the importance of teaching and communication abilities was 6.83, but the mean rating for the item, “Through academic study at the university, the teacher has acquired a general theoretical knowledge of the refugee experience” was significantly lower, 5.05. Even the university professors rated skills as more important than theoretical knowledge. Field experiences for future students could be arranged with the St. Louis area schools and community agencies that are serving the rapidly growing population of refugees. Webster University’s campus in Geneva campus has strong links with world organizations assisting refugees – the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the International Red Cross; field placements might be arranged there too.

Knowledge of Educators

Although teaching and interpersonal skills were considered to be most important for educators, having knowledge of the refugee experience and knowing about refugees’ religions, customs, and culture were also considered to be valuable. (See Table 2). Educators “should learn about refugees’ plight” and be familiar with the signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. “Knowledge of past events in a student’s life enables a teacher to better understand a student’s fears and apprehension.” Although it would be helpful to know why students left their native countries, “you need to respect privacy and the student’s or family’s willingness to disclose.”

Considered to be even more important than a knowledge of refugee students’ culture and traditions, was for the “teacher to be open to students’ sharing about their cultural experiences.” Participants stated that, “being interested in learning about” was more important than having already acquired knowledge about refugee students’ cultural and religious backgrounds. “Sharing cultural experiences builds relationships” and “the more the teacher knows about the native countries – the better.” Most participants indicated that it was not important to be able to speak the languages of the refugees. Some respondents indicated that this would be almost impossible in their classes where diverse students often come from different countries and language backgrounds.

Travel outside the USA was thought to be “important for understanding other cultures.” Some participants thought that travel would be beneficial, but not essential; “the teacher should be well read if not well traveled.” Studying a second language was considered to be valuable. “Anyone who teaches refugee families ought not only to know a second language but that person ought to be taking another language him/herself....It would aid the teacher’s understanding.”

Table 2

Important Knowledge for Educators Who Work with Refugee Children and Families

	Mean	Standard deviation	Sample size
Knowledge of Refugee Experience	5.19	1.13	45
Knows about effects of trauma	6.21	1.08	39
Has studied refugee experience	5.05	1.46	44
Knows why they left	4.86	1.56	44
Knows about political events	4.86	1.53	44
Knows about arrival in USA	4.79	1.44	43
Knowledge of Refugee Culture	4.55	1.13	45
Knows their customs	5.31	1.33	45
Knows their religions	5.27	1.39	44
Knows their arts and culture	4.88	1.29	43
Knows their languages	2.84	1.54	45
Has International Experience	4.24	1.65	45
Has traveled	4.27	1.86	45
Knows foreign language	4.23	1.84	43

The participants responses to the questionnaire underscore the importance of studying the mental health aspects of the refugee experience and well as learning about the culture, arts, language, religions, and political events of students' native countries. In terms of curriculum, it seems that educators need to acquire an understanding of the psychological effects of trauma and forced migration. Future students in the new academic program might benefit from an introductory course in Counseling and a specialized course about the psychosocial adjustment of refugees. The responses to the questionnaire suggest that Webster University students enrolled in a new program would benefit from courses such as Multicultural Education, Comparative Politics, World Religions, World Literature, and Comparative Educational Systems. Language study and international travel would also be helpful.

My next step is to share this paper and my recommendations with my colleagues in the School of Education at Webster University. Together we will decide what kinds of graduate programs would be most appropriate – an Advanced Graduate Certificate, a Master's degree, an Educational Specialist degree, and/or an on-line program with field placements.

Conclusion

As I envision the program at this time, students would study theory and research pertaining to refugee children and their families. In addition, they would participate in field experiences associated with Webster University's campuses located in St. Louis, Missouri and Geneva, Switzerland. In St. Louis there are several schools and community agencies attempting to provide psychosocial help and educational services for the rapidly growing population of refugees;

Webster University should further develop cooperative relationships with these St. Louis area groups. Webster University's campus in Geneva has close ties with world organizations assisting refugees – the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the International Red Cross. And, several faculty at the Webster Geneva campus are experts in refugee studies. Perhaps students in this new academic program could take part in the annual study tours and conferences in Refugee Studies sponsored by the Geneva campus.

In summary, I hope that information gathered from this brief questionnaire about the “best” or “ideal” teacher of refugees will help to create a new academic program. The goal is for Webster University graduates of the program to possess a balance of interpersonal skills, specialized knowledge, academic training, field experiences, and educational skills to work with refugee children and their families.

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Author Notes

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