

COUNCIL  
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# STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND:

Teaching Immigrant and Refugee Children

Imagine that on a Wednesday morning, you hear a knock on your classroom door. Your center director greets you with a new student at her side. Unlike the other children in your classroom, this child is a refugee, and the few documents you have suggest he might be about five years old. He doesn't know how to hold a crayon or a book, so you suspect he has never been to school. And it's hard to show him how since he doesn't speak a word of English and no one in your program knows his language, one that's uncommon in this country. But you do know, after speaking with the center director, that he has probably been through untold horrors before finding safety in a refugee camp while awaiting a new, permanent home in the U.S. Having limited information on the child's history and not being able to speak his language, how would you respond to his many needs? <sup>1</sup>

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## TRAGEDIES THAT LEAD TO TRAUMA

It can be tough to teach immigrant and refugee children, like this little boy, who have been through trauma. Just talk to Margaret, a New York educator, about her trials with another young learner. "I had my eye on Christopher from the beginning. He stood out," as she recalled in her notes. They described "regular crying" and his tendency to wander through the center "to

look for his mother or find his cousin on the third floor." He also "screamed when he was brought back to the classroom" and "had tantrums at times." So, his mother had been called. "She was a recent arrival from Honduras," Margaret learned, "and there was a traumatic border crossing in which she and Christopher had to leave his two sisters behind." <sup>2</sup>

Children like Christopher can make teachers feel like crying, according to Noelle, another educator who had several immigrant and refugee children in her class. "I felt really sad and frustrated in the classrooms during the fall months. Children would cry and scream," she recalled, "throw up, and pee on the floor, traumatically separating without the possibility of being comforted. No one was able to speak to them the few magic and consoling words they needed to hear: 'Mommy will come back,' 'you are safe here,' or 'you feel scared.' Children who hear those words implicitly know that adults understand them." <sup>3</sup>

It's hard to know what each child has gone through. But we've heard enough horror stories in recent decades to grasp how diverse traumatic ordeals affect the young as they try to adjust to host countries. Young Bosnian Muslim refugees, for example, endured war, genocide and organized rape of their moms. Sudanese refugees survived starvation, attacks by lions, near-drowning in crocodile-infested rivers and long treks across deserts with little food and water. Afghanistan refugee children experienced war and hard labor; they were married off at an early age and watched their parents being murdered. Similarly, Croatian children went through a number of horrific trials before coming to the United States: loss of home and personal belongings, separation

from family members, damage to their belongings, exposure to enemy attacks and death of a family member or friend.<sup>4</sup>

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## THE STRESS OF SEPARATION

Many immigrant and refugee children have been separated from family members, leading to insecure feelings that contribute to problems at school.

Among the children, especially those from Central America and Mexico, it is common for a parent to migrate to the United States and leave the children behind in the care of relatives or family friends. Then after the parents have achieved

some degree of stability in the United States, the children follow. Though the families reunite in the end, the trauma, grief and disruption that come from the separation will remain in the hearts of both the parents and the kids.<sup>5</sup>

Educators see the results of this heartache when they talk to the children's moms and dads. Parents of immigrant students have revealed that they're dealing with deep feelings of guilt for leaving a child behind. Some are also angry that their children don't express thanks for the sacrifices they've made to support them—whether through years of sending money home or saving up enough money to bring them to the U.S. Meanwhile, some children are angry at being torn away from family and friends in their home country—the people who looked after them after their parents left. And this can lead to the type of lasting resentment expressed by a

17-year-old girl named Natalia. “When I came here,” she recalled, “my mother wanted to take care of me, tell me what to do. But I grew up by myself and I took care of myself. I don't need anyone to tell me what to do.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite Natalia's seeming sense of independence, children do need someone to give them a steady sense of love and support in the early years. “The trauma of a forced or sudden separation from parents or caregivers—either at the border or much

earlier in their journey—can put children at risk of toxic stress,” according to Jack P. Shonkoff, director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, as he discussed the basic foundations of long-term learning and health. “First,” he explained, “healthy brain

development in babies and young children requires the consistent availability of a stable, responsive and supportive relationship with at least one parent or caregiver. Second, high and persistent levels of stress can disrupt the architecture of the developing brain and other biological systems with serious, negative impacts on learning, behavior and lifelong physical and mental health.”<sup>7</sup>

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## DISCRIMINATION AND DISRUPTED SCHOOLING

These consequences are enduring for the many immigrant children who lack the reassuring presence of a stable caregiver or parent. The children are at high risk of cognitive delays and impairments in executive function and self-regulation skills, for chronic

health issues such as anxiety, depression and cardiovascular problems. They also have a harder time learning, and lower rates of high school graduation. And there are factors that put the children at an even greater disadvantage when they arrive in the U.S. The discrimination they may encounter as part of a racial or ethnic minority group may add to the stress they already feel and make it even harder to adapt to a strange, new place with a different culture and rules.<sup>8</sup>

After resettling in the U.S., it may also become clear that there are holes in their knowledge and skills resulting from disruptions in their schooling. These gaps may consist of a few weeks of missed school, or sometimes years. But schooling for many refugee and immigrant children tends to be sporadic, as educators need to understand, especially when it comes to their grasp of English. Refugee children are frequently exposed to several languages of instruction over the course of their migration. And even if children have some exposure to English, the quality of English-language instruction in countries of first asylum is dodgy and often poor.<sup>9</sup>

Experience in an English-language school system also doesn't guarantee proficiency in the language, and there are added factors that lead to confusion and limit children's ability to learn. Past experience with teacher-centered pedagogy may leave resettled refugee children unaware of the behavior and approaches to learning expected of them in U.S. classrooms. Explicitly teaching refugee children to ask questions and otherwise engage in learning may be essential to their acculturation to U.S. schools. Teachers also need to realize that refugee children may be influenced by prior experiences of discrimination in school settings. Often, they lack a positive sense of ethnic and cultural

identity that can give them the confidence to perform well and fulfill their promise.<sup>10</sup>

In short, past experiences can affect how children react to school and form relationships with teachers and peers. This is especially true for refugee children whose tragic stories have dramatic repercussions for their academic success. Yet these stories are often hidden from U.S. educators and staff in early childhood programs. Factors such as language barriers, privacy concerns, cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes can stand in the way of educators' efforts to relate to the children and make them feel they belong.<sup>11</sup>

These roadblocks make a lasting impact on our youngest children because the experiences children have in their first classrooms form the basis for how they think of themselves as learners, students and members of the society around them. When schools view immigrant children in a positive way—and offer them intellectual, academic, creative and culturally responsive learning experiences, children are more likely to connect with the greater community in our country. Conversely, children are less likely to fit in and form bonds when schools focus on deficits like trouble speaking English or little knowledge of U.S. culture.

The damage may be even greater if children suffer discrimination, and it can take on diverse forms. Young immigrant children may experience discrimination through their personal treatment and the type of learning experiences that they receive at school. This type of discrimination may take the form of negative interactions with school staff and peers, including hurtful comments about children's accents and appearance, impatience with those who struggle to express themselves in English, and tougher discipline than that imposed on other children.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, immigrant children may be subject to inadvertent discrimination as a result of general demands and pressures in the early care and education system. Teachers may be under the gun to improve test scores, leading them to focus mainly on command-driven tasks and leaving little room for the more creative, child-centered instruction that boosts academic engagement, problem-solving skills and self-esteem. In addition, teachers may also have low expectations for immigrant children, though the kids have cognitive or special skills that go unnoticed. For example, educators often fail to realize the importance of bilingualism and home language skills, so they try to pry the children away from their home language and culture. Yet strong ties to family and home culture support learning, while distance from them inhibits cognitive and emotional growth.

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## FACING RESISTANCE FROM FAMILIES

Educators can shorten the distance by reaching out to the families of their immigrant students. But they don't always do so since immigrant parents' care and concern for the early education of their children often go unnoticed by preschool teachers and other staff. And teachers may contend with some cultural clashes when they try to engage with immigrant parents. Teachers expect parents to approach them to discuss any concerns about their kids. Yet many immigrant parents either feel intimidated or think that it is inappropriate to approach their children's teachers. Many come from traditions in their home countries where teachers are authority figures who are not to be questioned.<sup>13</sup>

Besides these differences in culture, a number

of other concrete reasons keep immigrant parents and teachers apart—and sometimes stand in the way of the children's progress. Many of the families are poor and work at jobs that don't allow them to come to school events. Then there are the very real fears some families have about sending their children to school when their immigration status is in question. When there are rumors of raids by immigration authorities, it "creates an atmosphere of fear" and parents keep their children home from school, said the director of a dual-language preschool in Wyoming. "Attendance is critical and when students are not in school, they're falling behind," he explained. "Most kids can bounce back after missing a day or two, but the ability to do so decreases the more trauma in your home lives."<sup>14</sup>

It's difficult for teachers to get to know just what's going on in the lives of immigrant families and children who've faced a lifetime of fear. Unless parents volunteer this information, teachers are unlikely to know if a child is a refugee or immigrant who's been through traumatic events. And most of the parents are unwilling to share this information. "I don't believe teachers need to know why we left our country," said one refugee mom. "It is not necessary. What matters is that my child gets the same education as the other nonrefugee children. I want teachers to talk to my child about his experiences only when he brings it up," the mom said.<sup>15</sup>

The resistance of parents like her puts more distance between educators and immigrant families, a problem that is especially acute in cities and towns newly exposed to immigration. Sudanese parents in Iowa City, for example, had little understanding of what happens to their children at school. Mexican and Chinese parents in Nashville

also reported little communication with teachers. But even in cities with long histories of immigration, the links between parents and teachers can be weak. Mixtec parents—those speaking indigenous Latin American languages—struggled to communicate with the Spanish-speaking teachers at schools in Phoenix and New York City. Bosnian parents in Phoenix didn't feel comfortable talking to teachers about what their kids were learning in class. Nigerian and Dominican parents in NYC believed school staff looked down on them and generally ignored their opinions. <sup>16</sup>

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## TRAINING IMMIGRANT TEACHERS

Yet they, like many other immigrant parents, did have trust in teachers who came from the same community and spoke their home language. So, promoting the diversity of the early childhood workforce is an important aspect of providing high-quality services for children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Children's basic language skills and identities are formed during their earliest years. And educators who share children's cultures can provide the continuity between the home and early learning centers that leads to meaningful engagement with children and parents. <sup>17</sup>

Besides sharing languages and traditions, educators must know how to improve immigrant and refugee children's performance in school and reduce future gaps in achievement. Children need competent teachers to do their best. So, immigrant educators, who make up a large and growing share of the early childhood workforce, should have more chances to gain the training they need. So far, they've often faced roadblocks related to a variety of factors—most notable

being a lack of accessible training programs that integrate English language, adult education and early childhood care and education course content. <sup>18</sup>

One answer to their need for viable training is the Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential offered by the Council for Professional Recognition. Over the history of the credential, the CDA has been sensitive to the cultures of children and families from around the world. In 2008, the Council published the first edition of its textbooks in Spanish. And it ramped up its efforts to reach more diverse groups of young learners as new waves of immigration from Africa, Asia and the Arab world changed the demography of our nation. <sup>19</sup>

In 2013, the Council's commitment to ensure equity in education for all children led it to establish a Department of Multilingual and Special Programs that offered CDA assessments in the languages that candidates speak with the children they serve. The Council understood the need to recruit a more diverse early childhood workforce because children respond better to educators who resemble them, know their culture and speak their language. So, it has worked with educators in 24 languages—including world languages such as Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin and those for more specific populations, such as Haitian Creole, Navajo and Yup'ik spoken among Alaska's Eskimos and Aleuts. <sup>20</sup>

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## STEPS TO MAKE CHILDREN FEEL SAFE

But whatever language children speak or wherever they come from, educators can take some measures to help. They can be champions for immigrant and refugee children and provide a much-needed source of stability



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and support. They can make family a priority since the children's success partly depends on their families being connected to basic needs such as clothing and food. We need to understand, as one Colorado educator put it, that we must strive to serve both children and their parents. "For kids as young as the ones I teach," she explained, "keeping the routine going is vital, as well as reassuring them that we love them and want them here in school with us. When the kids go home feeling happy and safe, that seems to reassure parents, too, but I wish I could do more."<sup>21</sup>

And there are some ways that early childhood programs can fulfill her wish. They can work with social services to reduce immigrant parents' stress and help them make a safe, nurturing home. They can develop awareness and sensitivity training for staff so every adult in a program understands the hardships children face as they adapt to a new country. And they should educate all children for diversity by dispelling biases and myths about different cultures head on.<sup>22</sup>

**They can be champions for immigrant and refugee children and provide a much-needed source of stability and support.**

Most of all we should listen to immigrant and refugee children, whose plight was poignantly put in 2001 by Save the Children, a global advocacy group for the young. "Our childhood is passing," it wrote in a plea to the United Nations. "There has been war and drought in our country for so long now. Many of us have had to leave our homes and many have died. Each year, there is more sickness and poverty. Though

you have come and heard our stories many times, we do not see anything changing for us and we do not know what you are doing with our stories."<sup>23</sup>—a touching plea for us to build bridges that help families and children feel less like strangers in a strange land. Educators who are sensitive to the stresses these children face have already taken a big step to giving them a safe place to learn and grow.

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