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## Traumatized Refugee Students In Our Classroom

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TRAUMATIZED REFUGEE STUDENTS IN OUR CLASSROOM

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2018

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To my family in Canada, London and Minnesota and friends thank you for your support and encouragement. Thank you to my Capstone Committee. Your guidance and patience helped me to complete this project. Special thanks to my parents who are my champions, who inspired me to do great things and always believed in me. Thank you to my students who motivate and inspire me to be an educator.

Refugees are Parents, Artists, Children, Students, Doctors, Business Owners, and Resilient  
Human Beings.

-- U.S Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

What you help a child to love, can be more important than what you help him to learn.

-- Somali Proverb

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

This chapter introduces some of the challenges faced by refugee students that stem from their past experiences and possible exposure to traumatic events. I am researching how past traumatic experiences of refugee students may influence their learning ability and current emotional states and what we as educators can do to support them to succeed in a school environment. My research question is: *What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students who endure trauma?* Based on my research, I would like to create a brochure that is easily accessible for educators to use as needed. The brochure will include information on how traumatic experiences refugee students face have affected the developing brain, and some behaviors the student can show due to possible exposure to trauma. I will propose some practical strategies educators can use to better support students from traumatic backgrounds. In addition, I would like to share the findings from my research with educators, social workers and school administrators in my school.



### **Researcher Background**

I was able to see firsthand the harsh living conditions that my former refugee students had lived in during my visit to Ali Addeh refugee camp in Djibouti, an internally displaced persons camp in Hargeisa, Somali, during the summer of 2014. I learned that the majority of the families who live in these camps have been living there for over 20 years. As an educator, it was eye-opening for me to capture a glimpse of my refugee students' lives before arriving in America. I have always been curious to understand how their possible past traumatic experiences might have shaped their current emotional states and their learning.

My experiences as an educator working with refugee children in public school and my trip to the refugee camp in Djibouti made me want to better understand my refugee students' backgrounds and experiences. I wanted to know: What are some of the past and/or current experiences that affect their emotional state? What kind of trauma have they been exposed to? How much did their past/current family experiences affect them? And, finally, how can teachers support traumatized refugee students in the classroom? I will create an informational brochure to share my findings from the research with my peers in my school building, to support our refugee students' needs.

### **Personally and Professionally**

I have worked with refugee students as a bilingual educator in Minneapolis Public Schools. Unlike most of my coworkers, I was able to bridge the gap between the students, their

families and the school. As a former refugee student, I shared similar experiences as some of our refugee students. I was able to relate and connect through our shared background. Similar to the experiences of my refugee students, my family and I were also forced to migrate from our country due to civil war, leaving behind everything we owned. It is not easy to relate to or understand the life of a refugee child, unless one has been through the process themselves.

For instance, consider the case of Zahra, a second-grade student of mine several years ago. Zahra was born and raised in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, where her parents arrived in 1992 due to the civil war in Somalia. Zahra, her mother and siblings, were able to migrate to the United States; unfortunately, Zahra's father was not able to accompany them. One day in the early hours before school, Zahra overheard a telephone conversation between her mother and a relative about a death of a family member who had a similar name as her father. Shocked and overwhelmed with the sad news she overheard, Zahra went back to bed and pretended to be asleep so that her mother would not notice she was up.

That morning, Zahra came to school just like any other day, but she was not her usual happy, energetic self. With the sad news weighing heavily in her heart, Zahra did not know how to react or to convey her feelings. Just like many other refugee children, Zahra had more life-altering tragic events in her short-lived lifetime than most adult's experience in theirs.

In class, her teacher noticed the differences in her and asked if she was okay. Zahra assured her teachers she was doing okay. During her English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, I also noticed that there was something different about Zahra; she was distracted and very quiet. I started to engage her in conversation about her feelings and if something had

happened at home. I am not sure exactly what triggered her to open up and share with me; perhaps the word "home" and my connection with her and her family made it safe for Zahra to open up to me after a few minutes. She shared with me the phone conversation she overheard by stating, "*Aabo wuu dhintay*," which means, "My dad passed away," in English, without any tears, just dead faced and showing no emotion. It took me a few minutes to grasp what I just heard from this young girl; the first thing that went through my mind was why Zahra and her sibling came to school. I was completely puzzled when Zahra told me that she did not want to stay at home. After speaking to her mother and older sibling in school, I came to realize that it was a relative and not their father who had passed away. I was relieved for her; at the same time, it was heartbreaking to experience how emotional Zahra became once she learned that her father was not dead. We had several conversations afterwards about asking questions, that it's okay for her to express her emotions and to ask for help when needed. I am glad I was able to support the young lady in dealing with this personal and emotional situation. I wondered, if I had not been in school that day, how would that have affected her? Would she have opened up about it to another teacher? I also wonder how she is doing now, and whether she has found a way to express her feelings when it comes to dealing with emotional situations.

Zahra and many other refugee students who have been through traumatic events before arriving in their host country have learned to deal with their emotions differently than the average child at their age, who has not been through similar life experiences. These students are often placed in schools where they do not see any adults that look like them, which makes it

difficult to form trusting relationships. There have been times where I worked in a school setting and have been the only bilingual, minority, and refugee staff member of color.

One of the many things I have observed over the years working in public schools is how much the classroom teachers and staff struggle to determine the appropriate tools in supporting the needs of refugee students emotionally, socially, and academically. One of the main struggles for school staff is the lack of resources on the refugee student's background; for instance, the type of life they lived, traumatic experiences they might have faced, or family history of any mental health concerns. These, and several other factors, could affect the student's behavior in school and their ability to learn. I believe with the right data and proper training, educators could better serve the needs of their refugee students.

### **Refugees Students' Background**

Who is considered a refugee? According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2015), based on the Refugee Act of 1980, a refugee is an individual who fled his/her native country because of violence, war, or fear of persecution due to religion, tribe, cultural conflict and either political or social group membership. Refugees who flee their country usually do not return to their home country because of fear, instability or they do not have the option to return home. Some of the refugee children might have been exposed to harsh and violent situations such as persecution of families, friends and community members. Some of these children may have witnessed torture or sexual violence, starvation and near-death experiences (Betancourt et al., 2012).

Additionally, immigrants sometimes voluntarily leave their country to find better living conditions, mainly for economic reasons and to be closer to family members who are settled in the host country. The ultimate reason why refugees and immigrants families leave their homeland is to find safe liveable conditions for themselves and their loved ones, for the future of their children. The freedom to express different political views and practice different religions may also be a factor (UNHCR, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2017), from the *2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, the number of refugees from Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America who were lawfully granted permanent residence in the U.S. in 2016 totaled 84,989. Based on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2017) *2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* report, it also stated that most of the refugees have arrived from war-torn countries and from countries with high levels of human rights crisis, such as: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Congo, Democratic Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, Ukraine.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2017) the *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2016* report, there have been more refugees driven from their homes, based on kept records, because of war and fear of persecution. The UNHCR (2017) report, also estimated that more than 60 million refugees have traveled around the world either by land or by water, and millions more are internally displaced, leaving behind everything they own including their loved ones. It is also common for the refugees to initially transition into refugee camps of the neighboring countries. The report further explains that the living conditions in these camps are often unhealthy; small shared living spaces, lack of proper food

and nutrients and most importantly, unsafe water, are common experiences. The majority of refugees are able to adjust and create a new life; however, there are those who suffer from post-traumatic depression. The challenge and the hardship associated with moving and adapting to a new country increase anxieties and also trigger further stress (Betancourt et al., 2012). Many of our students have experienced the hardship alongside their families.

### **Refugee Families' Experiences**

Refugee families go through many obstacles during the transition after they arrive in their host country. Going through extreme dangerous situations heightens their emotions and stress level; it also ignites their fear and flight state to save and protect the lives of their loved ones. Many refugee parents may have had some type of formal education before arriving in their host country, depending on how long they have lived in refugee camps. Although they may have had formal education, the education system in the host country is commonly different from that of their native country (Osman, Klingberg-Allvin, Flacking & Schön, 2015).

Betancourt, et al. (2012) explained how refugee adults often feel that they have made sacrifices for their children; that, their children should be able to acquire the language and the culture of the host country more easily because of their age level. Betancourt et al. (2012) further stated that the emotional needs of these children are often neglected. Refugee parents dealing with the overwhelming stress of moving to a new country may not realize their own anxiety level; consequently, they are often unaware of the impact it has on their children's emotional state. Oftentimes, these parents pass down their stress, anxiety, in some cases their fear of losing their identity, culture and the distrust associated with their past traumatic events, to their

children. Therefore, it becomes harder for refugee children to find the right balance between their parents' culture and the culture of the host country. Arnold and Fisch (2012) explained how it is also very common for these children to express their stress and anxiety in a way that is detrimental to their education and social life.

### **Caught Between Home Culture and Mainstream Culture**

Achieving a balance between the native culture at home and the mainstream culture in the school system is one of many challenges that refugee children face once they arrive in their host country. The average student spends thirty-five to forty hours per week in school, where they are acquiring the new culture and values. Rousseau and Guzder (2008) claimed that schools play a major role in helping refugee students and their families adapt and assimilate to the norms and values of the school and their new home. If the culture and the values of the refugee student do not align with that of the mainstreams students, the refugee student tends to have difficulty adjusting and usually takes a long time to adapt. If the acculturation process is not healthy and is rushed, especially for those students who already suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), refugee students can interpret the process as threatening to their self-identity and show signs of distrust toward their peers, teachers, and others who come from the mainstream culture (Betancourt et al., 2012).

In this project, I focus on how past traumatic events may affect a refugee student's ability to succeed in school and adapt to their new environment. The goal for this project is to create brochure resources that school personnel can use to create a supportive environment for these students to feel at ease throughout the coping process. The purpose is to fill the gap in schools

that lack resources on refugee students and their experiences regarding exposure to trauma. As Rousseau and Guzder (2008) noted, the best way to support refugee students is to teach the foundations they need on how to deal with their emotions. It is important for schools to invest and understand the psycho-social needs of these students. Based on research summarized in Chapter Two, I will propose best practices and compile them in forms that can be used by schools to support the needs of refugee students.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter One introduced my research question: *What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students who endure trauma?* and established the purpose and the need for the study. The context and the assumptions of the study were also briefly introduced, along with the background of the researcher. In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the literature relevant to refugee students' backgrounds, their emotional states, and teaching pedagogy for reaching refugee students who may have experienced trauma. Chapter Three will provide a detailed description of the how the research project will be conducted, including the research framework, relevant findings, intended audience, and rationale behind the brochure poster format for the project. Chapter Four will present the conclusions and reflections, including how existing research about refugee students has been utilized and how I can apply my findings going forward.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

This study explores the need to understand the learning processes and the school experiences of refugee students. Because these students hail from diverse backgrounds and experiences, often very different than an average American student, it is essential for educators to be given the right tools to support them. I will develop two brochures consisting of informational resources to support teachers in supporting their students to be successful in school. This chapter summarizes and synthesizes relevant research to answer the question: *What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students who endure trauma?* The chapter is divided into three sections: understanding students' background, behavioral and emotional issues, and teaching pedagogy for refugee students suffering from traumatic who have experienced.

#### **Refugee Student and School Experiences**

It is safe to assume that for refugee children and adolescents, the school environment in the host country is different than the school system they are accustomed to. Unfortunately, the circumstances that lead them to become refugees have also caused these children to miss out on the opportunity to attend school and have normal childhoods. Families spend many years being in an unstable environment such as refugee camps where that lifestyle becomes part of a refugee children's life (Betancourt et al., 2012).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (2007) reported that refugee students may process trauma differently depending on their age. Furthermore, the younger students may display the impact of the trauma through unacceptable behaviors in school such as having difficulty in controlling their anger, withdrawal or overreacting to those around them, displaying lack of compassion and clinging to their family for fear of losing them. The adolescent students show behaviors such as dissociating themselves from others and questioning the ultimate motive behind every act. McBrien (2005) highlighted another challenge they face in schools beside their psychological state of mind is lacking academically behind compared to their English-speaking peers. This is mostly due to the disruptions in their education and experiences in the school system.

Since schools are the primary place where these students spend a great chunk of their time, it is also the place that most influences their emotional and language development. It is safe to say that some of the behavioral issues displayed in schools by refugee children and adolescents stem from different aspects of their life experiences. For some of these young adults adapting to

a new culture, learning a new language, conforming to the new laws and regulations can be challenging (Betancourt et al., 2012).

### **Behavioral and Emotional Issues Refugee Students Face**

Some refugee students would fall in the traumatized category although it is not easy to pinpoint to what degree their experiences during war or the aftermath of the war have traumatized them. Many aspects such as leaving their home country, often loss of direct support from extended family and friends, loss of the cultural norms and even separation from loved ones can shape their emotional well-being. It is essential to understand how the refugee's deal with their distress experiences; we must first acknowledge the need to learn their cultural and religion perspective on mental health and emotional well-being. Lin, Suyemoto and Kiang (2008) expressed that sociocultural trauma has a multigenerational impact within families and communities and affects the very definition or meaning of membership and belonging within that community for many of them whether or not they have experienced first-hand torture, killings, starvation, or loss of family members. For the majority of the refugees, culture might define how they responded to trauma based on the intersection of their faith and culture; most view traumatic events as fate from higher powers and accept it. Therefore, some of the refugees' beliefs on how to deal with trauma might not align with some of the Western methodology (Korn, 2001).

A study by Goodman (2004), found that for refugee adolescents the main method of coping that was common among the participants was suppressing traumatic memories and anything that they associated with the traumatic event. The study also highlighted that such

suppression may lead to higher rates of depression that are often untreated. The fundamental basis for these psychological symptoms may very well be related to the extension of the traumatic situation they have been exposed to. Goodman (2004) noted that suppressing traumatic memories by adolescent refugees may be their way of managing and coping with their horrible past experiences.

### **How Trauma Impacts the Developing Brain**

Many researchers agree on the connection between early childhood exposure to trauma long term health issues such as depression, anxiety, and many other psychological illnesses as well. Some of the research identified how trauma is a toxin to the brain and the body by altering physical and chemical structure of the brain development (Murray & Fortinberry, 2006).

According to Souers and Hall (2016), when children are exposed to trauma, the brain development processes shifts its course to stress response instead of development, which can have long-term consequences. Furthermore, the body naturally responds to unknown stress by either fighting, fleeing, or freezing. The brain releases chemicals into our body that help us to survive the heightened stress situation. However, when the chemicals are released in high levels it becomes toxic to our body and brain. Also since a child's brain is so fragile, when one is, or has been, exposed to consistent high levels of stress, it can affect brain development, memory processing, mood, and relational skills.

As Monahan (1993) indicated, some of the aspects that are considered as the sources of childhood trauma are physical and mental abuse, child neglect, illness in the family, or death. Physical trauma is when there is an assault to the body or the brain. Meanwhile psychological

trauma or mental abuse occurs when there is an assault to the emotional state of child's feelings and thoughts. When a child experiences repeated and overwhelming stress, its impact can be observed through a child's inability to develop normal coping mechanisms, and through hindering a child's ability to manage his/her behavior and emotional state when dealing with the world around them. A child can also be exposed to trauma indirectly through family members or caregivers who are emotionally distressed (Murray & Fortinberry, 2006).

Monahan's (1993) research has shown the level of stress hormones released (e.g. cortisol) impacts the emotional state of the child, altering it into a state of hyperarousal when it should not be. The damage to the brain development is a consequence of early childhood trauma and chronic neglect especially during early days of a child's life. When the brain is chemically and structurally forming, it is a critical period when a child learns to connect with others and it could be long lasting damage if that process is interrupted. As the child transitions into adolescent and adulthood, it might lead to lack of the ability to connect, bond or relate with others. Damage reversal requires time and adequate care. The memories of the earlier childhood trauma tend to be carried throughout the adult's life-cycle and it sometimes causes depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and other mental health forms (Karr-Morse, Felitti, & Wiley, 2013).

Schmid, Petermann, and Fegert (2013) noted that when a child has a positive experience with a place, event, or person, their brain will always associate it with positive thought. However, if the experience is negative, stressful, or toxic, then it tends to have a negative effect on the child's developing brain. Consequently, the child may tend to associate a given event negatively even though it may now be a positive experience. Goodman (2004) suggested that the

consistent stress and exposure to trauma can also biologically create a permanent state of fear that can hinder the child's impression and reactions to their environment. These reactions include overreacting to non-threatening situations, and losing their ability to distinguish between safe situations and non-safe ones.

In order to better understand and support refugee students who might have been exposed to traumatic events, one needs to have a better understanding of how trauma can alter the brain's chemical and psychological state, along with an understanding of how the brain stores these traumatic experiences (Souers & Hall, 2016). At some point in our lifetime, we all have experienced both easy and difficult situations; we have the tendency to apply these experiences to our daily lives either consciously or subconsciously.

For example, some of the refugee students who come from East Africa view dogs as dangerous and unclean animals because in their home country, dogs are not pets; they are considered wild animals who are unhealthy, untrained, and can attack people at any given moment. This is in contrast to the positive experiences of typical American children who associate dogs positively, due to their culture and past experiences.

### **How to Best Support Refugee Students in the Classroom**

Today there are numerous classrooms across the country filled with refugee students from various backgrounds, and many times schools are not ready or don't understand their students' backgrounds. Because of the influx of the extensive range of refugee students, schools have to create and implement different teaching methods to meet the needs of their diverse student population. The "one model fits all" approach will not work. Therefore, many of these

students will continue to suffer an educational gap during their transitions and resettlement to their new home country (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008).

According to Rousseau and Guzder (2008), some teachers are great advocates for refugee children and would go beyond their duty to support them and their families; however, they explain there are always some teachers who are reluctant to consider the refugee students' characteristics. It is important for teachers to be self-aware of the reasons behind their reluctance, for instance, it is common for people to feel overwhelmed in situations they are not familiar with. Rousseau & Guzder (2008) further summarized that it may be harder for the teacher to deal with the issues, because the teacher may not want to face the reality of the refugee students and their families.

It is also critical for a teacher to respond and treat each student's experience as unique to him or her. Each child will respond differently depending on his or her coping mechanisms and on each traumatic experience. A study done by Cole et al. (2009) highlighted how teachers need to be aware that many traumatized children will have difficulty when it comes to academic and social tasks that require the student to understand the perspective from the other person's point of view. Based on their own personal experiences, usually traumatized children do not have a sense of self, as they learned to monitor the emotions of the adults in their lives before they can express their own. Cole et al. (2009) further expressed that perhaps understanding that traumatized children might also not have developed the association between cause and effect relationships due to a lack of unpredictable and inconsistent environment in their lives is also an important

aspect for educators to consider when giving consequences for unacceptable behavior during school hours.

### **Building Positive Relationships**

A key role an educator can play in any student's life is to be present and supportive. When it comes to traumatized students, creating a positive relationship and accepting the student even when student is having difficulties is vital. In some cases, the student may not have an adult in their life who accepts them and believes in them no matter what (Souers & Hall, 2016).

In the study on childhood trauma Goodman (2004) suggested that educators create a classroom environment that promotes community building by showcasing positive relationships among peers and adults. This plays a great role in the healing process, which supports students academically, socially and behaviorally. Goodman (2004) also stated that it is important for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to acknowledge the likelihood of lack of strong relationships between the adults and the children outside school, which can influence student relationships with adults in the school setting.

Another aspect that can interfere in the relationship between the teacher and the student is when a challenge or an unwanted behavior leads to a power struggle between them in order for the student to feel a sense of control due to lack of control in a past or present traumatic experience. Souers and Hall (2016) suggested creating environments where the traumatized student feels a sense of control within activities such as being able to choose which helps them feel safe. To avoid such battles between the teacher and the student and to focus on building a



positive relationship with the student, they suggested setting up a plan with the student ahead of time to create a space where the student can take a break when they feel overwhelmed, triggered or need to regulate their emotions (Souers and Hall, 2016). Giving options to traumatized children helps them feel a sense of control and views the teacher as being fair to them.

Consistency is another key factor that is essential for teachers to develop in their daily classroom activity. Commonly, classroom teachers have set a daily routine in the classroom; for students with past traumatic experiences of inconsistency, it is really important for them to have consistency more than their peers. For teachers, it is an important to provide consistent, structure and clear expectation for these students. For refugee students, knowing what to expect, provides a sense of safety for them. They can build trust in their teacher because they know what to expect from them. What does consistency look like is a question many teachers ask, knowing there are always things that causes interpretation whether its celebration, visitors, unknown school drills or other things. Consistency basically means giving enough time for activity transitions. This includes warning students ahead of unexpected activities such as fire drills, or any other lessons or games that involve making loud noises or turning off the lights. These and any other unexpected events might be triggering for students.

### **Training on Trauma for Educators**

Another study by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network-Schools Committee (NCTSN-SC) (2017) recommended that school staff get proper training on childhood trauma, which can help them to develop the skills they need to handle and recognize the behaviors that are associated with trauma when addressing situations with traumatized students. When teachers

are given tools such as training and resources, they can help traumatized students to regulate their own emotions, which helps them both academically and socially in the school setting. Having a communication channel between counselors, social workers, teachers, and school administrators about the student's background and family is an essential piece to create and execute an effective plan for the student to have a successful outcome in school (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola & Vander Kolk, 2003).

As identified by Cook et al. (2003), building connection with families is also essential as different cultures have a wide range of approaches when it comes to family dynamics, roles and responsibilities, including the child's role in the family, along with how therapy and interventions are perceived among families.

### **Significance of the Research Topic**

The purpose of my capstone project was to provide accessible resources for the classroom teachers and other school personnel on refugee students who potentially have been exposed to traumatic events and offer recommendations for educators on how to best serve them. One of the struggles I faced as I worked on this project was finding techniques to consolidate all of the rich resources on my topic into two brochures. Throughout my research, I learned that there was an abundance of information to be shared; however, when it comes to serving traumatized students, we have to consider all the possibilities of traumatic experiences students come with and factor their experiences into any intervention or services schools are considering. Throughout the years, depending on what is happening around the world the number of refugee families who enter the United States of America varies. As more refugee families enter the public school

system, there is a clear indication that more must be done to prepare for and meet their needs.

The needs of refugee families will differ based on their national origin and experiences, although there are some common factors among refugee families.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Project Description**

#### **Introduction**

My research question for my project is: *What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students who endure trauma?* In this chapter, I discuss how I created informational brochures for educators and school administrators. To address my research question, the brochures will include information on what is adverse childhood trauma, the effect of trauma on the developing brain, along with some recommendations for educators on how to best support traumatized students' needs in school. In this chapter, I talk about the project method, framework, audience and setting, the project description, and the chapter summary.

#### **Project Method**

The technique I chose was to collect information on my research question and to create informational brochures for educators to have who work closely with traumatized refugee students and their families from that research. The brochures will be kept in the classroom and school office where they will be accessible to anyone who needs to support their students.

According to GI Supply blog (2014), using brochures as a tool to educate your target population is beneficial in that it relays knowledge of the topic in an accessible way.

### **Project Framework**

The brochures are a collection of information on trauma, its effect, and teaching methods to support students based from my research. Though information on trauma and its effects can apply to all traumatized children, the brochures and the research focused particularly on refugee students. The goal for the brochures was to have easily accessible material for educators to use, either for the classroom or as a professional development material that can be shared among school staff, including ESL teachers, classroom teachers, and school administrators.

In the brochures, I covered some background information on refugee students, explained what childhood trauma is and how teachers can successfully work with the students and their families. The first section is basic information, which provides resources that help teachers to understand the culture and the community of the students they serve. The second section provides an overview of recommendations on how educators can create a classroom environment that addresses refugee students' emotional and education needs and resources.

### **Project Description**

In this project, although the brochures focus on how trauma affects refugee children, the background information covers the most recent refugee groups, including those from East Africa and the Middle East. Dynamics of the refugee situation continue to change as the turmoil of conflict around the world continues to spread across continents.

The brochures also include research-based recommendations for teachers to successfully serve the needs of children who have been or are being exposed to traumatic events. Resources advocate for programs that support the psychological needs of their students both at school and in their communities. Recommendations of educational videos and resources that provide visual aid for educators to better understand the struggles refugee students and their families face due to the trauma they have experienced.

### **Setting and Audience**

Brochure materials were developed from wide range of resources on the adverse childhood trauma, its effect on the developing brain and best teaching methods to support traumatized students. The materials were developed for the use by the teachers, and as a tool to support students exposed to trauma. The materials in these brochures can be used by any school personnel who work closely with students affected by trauma.

In addition to the resources in the brochures, I recommend teachers and any school personnel to connect with school social workers, counselors or therapist who are more knowledgeable with adverse childhood trauma and are resourceful.

The brochures will be distributed at my school building; I will share the resource material during our weekly staff meeting. I will present the resources by a PowerPoint presentation and distribute the brochures to the staff in the meeting. I will also share the brochures with the social worker, nurse and support staff within our school building.

### **Project Timeline**

The capstone timeline started with formulating a research question, an initial draft of three chapters: Introduction, the Literature Review and the Project Description. During the Capstone Project course, spring 2018, the first three chapters were revised and edited, the brochures were created and the final chapter, Conclusions was written.

To create the brochures I researched different brochure styles that could work to fit all the information on one or two brochures such as tri-fold, gate-fold, and map-fold. However, I found it was hard to fit it all onto one or two brochures without separating the contact information; therefore, I decided to combine two brochures into a bigger booklet. To create and print the brochures was very costly; they range from \$20 to \$100 depending on how fancy they are, and which printing company is used. After finding how expensive it would be to create and print one copy with one company, I decided to use Microsoft Word booklet/brochure template. I tried to get help from a friend who knows more about creating website and online brochures, however, he was out of the country and was not much of help. I worked on my own to create this brochure/booklet with numerous edits and thorough experimenting with various methods.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Three I described my capstone project: creating brochures that include that includes accessible resources for teachers and school administrators to use as references. In the brochures, I included information on refugee students background, exposure to traumatic events, the effect of the traumatic event on the development of the brain, and some methods teachers who work closely with traumatized refugee students can do to best meet their needs. The brochures include helpful links for further resources on the topic. Chapter Four describes how

the brochures will serve as guidelines for educators who work with refugee and immigrant students.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Chapter Reflection**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of my capstone project was to provide accessible resources for the classroom teachers and other school personnel on refugee students who potentially have been exposed to traumatic events and offer recommendations for educators on how to best serve them. One of the struggles I faced was finding techniques to consolidate all the rich resources on my topic into two brochures. Throughout my research, I learned that there was an abundance of information to be shared; however, for educators it not easy to obtain all these resources since the information is dispersed. It was frustrating condensing so many resources into brochures without overwhelming the readers. I worried if I could achieve my goal of providing easily accessible resources for



educators to use as an informational tool and better serve their refugee and immigrant students who have been potentially exposed to traumatic events.

For the sake of the capstone project, I had to summarize all the content information. The process of creating brochures was not an easy task; my goal was to construct brochures that included some factual information about the refugee students' background, possible exposure to traumatic events, how trauma affects the brain development, and finally, suggestions.

### **Project Development**

The process of developing the brochures started with online research and connecting with a friend who is knowledgeable in creating brochures. Unfortunately, because my friend was out of the country, I was unable to get tangible support for my brochures. However, I obtained a free brochure template from my online navigation. I used the template to create my brochures, as I added different sections I realized how complicated it can be using a template without background information on the sizing or other basic formation. As I worked through each section, I would lose some information because of template fixed sizing. I also realized that I was not that knowledgeable about technology, such as formatting and creating documents like brochures. Eventually, through trial and error, I learned to adjust things within some sections. I started making several copies of the same template to assure I didn't lose any content. I also wanted to include some visuals with the content, and I found it hard to manage adding some pictures without taking so much space from the content.

As the brochures came together my goal was to keep it simple with enough information with visual aids. For a frame of reference, I used some online resources on trauma on refugee

families, resources such as: the U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants, which had some great factual information about being a refugee; UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency; Refugee Resettlement in the United States brochures; and Trauma-Informed Care of Immigrant and Refugee Children by Pediatric New American Clinic University of Vermont Children's Hospital. These online resources were helpful in developing my brochures, and what information to include in the brochure to achieve the main purpose of the project, which is to inform educators.

### **Reflection on the Researcher, as Writer and Learner**

The research topic provided a wide range of information on traumatized children but I had to narrow it down to refugee children and their experiences. Although, most of the information was about traumatized children in general, they were similar to resources specifically on refugee children. I focused on relevant information about how traumatic events influence refugee children and learning.

As I worked on the project, I learned that it was hard for me not to add my opinion in my writing and to keep it just research based. As a former refugee student who had been exposed to traumatic events at young age, it was emotional for me to read about the experiences of the refugee and immigrant children. How it affects the developing brain and learning process was eye opening for me. Being an English language teacher, I also feel that I play many roles in my school such as: a liaison between English learners and school staff, an advocate, and guidance resource for both students and families. Because of my connection with the traumatic experience of refugee students, and their families it was critical for me to be mindful of my writing. As I worked on creating the brochures I learned that it required some skills in collecting and

developing fact-based resources that highlight key facts on refugee experiences, traumatic events and recommendations.

The literature review permitted in-depth reading on how traumatic events influence the developing brain and how this transfers into the classroom. The literacy for the project consisted of resources based on facts on refugee population statistics from various websites like the UN Refugees Agency <http://www.unhcr.org> which provided general worldwide numbers of refugees and immigrants that are displaced. The Helping Traumatized Children Learn (2017) video on why we need trauma-sensitive schools put into perspective how classroom teachers can create a trauma-sensitive classroom to meet the needs of traumatized students and better understand trauma and the developing brain.

The issue with trauma and children is not just limited to better understanding trauma and the developing brain. Souers and Hall (2016) expressed that the brain development process shifts its course to stress response instead of development, which can have long-term effect on the child's brain development. Souers and Hall (2016) also emphasized some strategies that the classroom teacher can do to prevent triggers for the traumatized students. With my research, I have learned that educators' understanding of the effect of trauma on the developing brain and learning would help meet the needs of all students who are experiencing currently or have been exposed to trauma. The difference between non-refugee and refugee students is they most likely have other barriers such as language and culture along with their struggles with a trauma.

### **Future Implications and Limitations**

My main aim in this research was to address the needs for information on refugee children in our classroom, and the impact that trauma has on their learning. I am exploring what it means to have resources available for those who work closely with these children. It seems in the public school sector there is a need to educate or train the staff to have a better understanding of how trauma influences the developing brain and student learning.

Limitations of my capstone project included narrowing down the resources on trauma and the developing brain. There were also limited research studies that focused on particular groups of refugee and immigrant children and the effect of trauma in relation to schools. Another limitation was to create a brochure that entailed information on refugee and immigrant children background, the influences of trauma on the developing brain and learning. I would like to connect with different schools to create a broader and/or more specified brochures that are geared toward particular groups of refugee students, to meet the needs of the refugee and immigrant students in the school and provide easy accessible resources for the classroom teachers.

### **Further Research & Communicate**

My goal is to start with sharing information with my school building, then, move to other schools within the district. I would share my finding and recommendation with the staff at my school during professional development. I would also like to connect and work with other mental health professionals who work closely with refugee families in developing educational resources and recommendations for educators and school personnel. I also would like to do further reading on the topic to better inform and educate myself along the way. I learned that as an educator I

had limited knowledge on the effect of trauma on the developing brain and how it also affects students' outlook in life and in school, how it showcases itself in the classroom. I want to communicate with other educators like myself how important it is for us to educate ourselves on trauma as it affects the children in front of us and how we can support them in the classroom with their trauma.

### **Conclusion**

My goal for the capstone project was to support the needs of refugee and immigrant students and educators. It is important for other educators like myself to have better understanding of our refugee and immigrant students in our classroom who have been exposed to traumatic events in their lives, and how we can support them to succeed in their learning environment by creating trauma-sensitive classrooms. I find that creating a booklet will provide educators and school personnel information on students' background, how trauma affects the developing brain and suggestions that will guide them as they work closely with refugee students. My long-term goal is for this project to start a dialogue about providing resources and training for teachers and other school personnel who work with students that are potentially exposed to traumatic events in their life.

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