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.

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Project Description

The technique I chose was to collect information on my research question *What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students who endure trauma?* and to create informational brochures for educators who work closely with traumatized refugee students and their families from that research. Having the brochures in classroom, office and in the school buildings where it will be accessible for anyone who needs to obtain and support their students. According to GI Supply blog (2014), using brochures as a tool to educate your target population has many benefits to communicate the message, make it accessible and relay knowledge of the topic.

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 are included 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.
Plan to distribute the brochures and evaluate the brochures

Brochures materials were developed from various 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 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.

I will invite the classroom teachers to apply at least one to two of the best teaching practices to support their traumatized students for a minimum of two weeks. I will follow up with the teachers with a short survey to collect feedbacks on the brochures. I will also suggest any additional resources on a trauma and its effect on the brain development.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Don’t ‘Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brochure shows evidence of effective research and understanding of concepts relevant to adverse childhood trauma.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brochure reflects accurate, specific, purposeful information that is expanded to explain the adverse childhood trauma and its effects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brochure reflects accurate, specific, focused information that is extended to explain the best teaching practices to support traumatized students.</td>
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<td>Pictures, diagrams, and other visuals are help to accomplish the purpose of the brochure.</td>
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<td>The brochure is well organized and formatted.</td>
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<td>Excellent references have been found and cited correctly on the back of the brochure.</td>
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<td>The best teaching practices in the brochures was helpful and I was able to apply into my teaching practice.</td>
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**Additional Comments:**

Adapted by Baltimore County Public Schools, 2004, from materials developed by Pomperaug Regional School District, Middlebury
The number of refugee displaced across the world by 2016: The UN Refugee agency

- An estimate of 65.6 million people were displaced from their homes
- About less than 0.1% got a chance to start a new life
- Approximately every minute an estimate of 20 people were displaced
- About 75,000 children were separated from their families.
- Around 51% were children under the age of 18
- About 84% resettle in Western countries
- An estimate of 552,200 return to their home countries.

Resources

Refugee children
http://refugees.org
https://iimn.org/programs/refugee-services/refugee-resettlement/
http://www.lssmn.org/refugeeservices/

Childhood Trauma:
https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/culture-and-trauma
https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime
How a child’s brain develops through early experiences:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMyDFY57ZSU
Trauma and the brain:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XasCFJEHoMA

Strategies for educators:
https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u57/2013/child-trauma-toolkit.pdf
Strategies for teachers: supporting traumatized children:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYZjPbc0ig

Mindful schools:
https://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/research/#mindfulness-changes-the-brain

References


Who are Our Refugee Students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th># of Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>1,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data from Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016 Annual Report

The majority of Minnesota refugees come from war-torn homelands (and countries that have experienced natural disasters) across the world and have escaped chaotic and life-threatening circumstances. They have experienced extreme violence, hunger, homelessness, emotional distress and loss of family – including parents and siblings.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Pinpointing the degree, a refugee child experiences trauma can be difficult as each child’s experience is unique. However, the ACE method categorizes traumatic childhood experiences into three categories:

1. Exposure to physical violence such as physical abuse, neglect and/or lack of daily living essentials. This can occur directly or as a result of living with a family member who has experienced violence.
2. Exposure through community and/or family – this can include multigenerational trauma.
3. Exposure to daily trauma as a result of home displacement, and lack of resources to meet daily needs. When adults and caretakers are dealing with daily stressors, it has a direct impact on a child’s emotional well-being and brain development.

* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Trauma and Brain Development

Trauma impacts brain development by altering the development process. For instance, brain development shifts to “stress response” instead of “developing” as chemicals are released into the body that help one to survive in a heightened stress situation. However, when these chemicals are released in high levels, it becomes toxic to the mind and body as it alters memory processing, mood and relational skills. The ACE Pyramid illustrates the ACE Study framework.

* Graph from The center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html
How You Can Help a Traumatized Student

Though it is difficult to determine the type of trauma your student has been exposed to or how much it has impacted their life, there are best practices you can apply in your teaching practice:

**Be consistent.** Be honest, consistent and firm during student interactions. Because of the inconsistencies in their lives as refugees, these attributes are important to them.

**Create a supportive environment.** Create a classroom environment where your student feels safe and part of the classroom. Their voice and feelings need to be validated.

**Self-reflection.** It is important to be self-aware of your own biases.

**Build a positive relationship.** A key role you can play in any students’ life is to be present and supportive. When it comes to traumatized students, creating a positive relationship and accepting the student even when said 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.

**Ask for support.** Ask for help when you need it. Use any resources, family, and community members that might be able to support you. Educate yourself about your students’ culture, language, and experiences and encourage them to share with their peers.

**Support the parents.** Many of your students’ parents have limited knowledge about the education system in the U.S. As an educator, you have the opportunity to support in informing them about the U.S. education system.
Behaviors Associated with Trauma

Each student’s experience is unique so expect each student to exhibit various behaviors; however, there are common behaviors to look for.

- Unacceptable behaviors such as inability to control anger, withdrawal, inability to show compassion/empathy, or overreacting to events around them.
- Impulsively reacting to situation in a defensive way (verbally or physically) without processing the entire situation.
- Hyper-focused on their feeling at a specific moment of stress; difficulty seeing the situation as non-threatening.
- Difficulty or inability to see or understand another person’s point-of-view.

The brain process sensory input information

Amygdala – controls emotional reactions from the sensory input (threatening or nonthreatening)
Prefrontal cortex – examines the sensory input information & response

Response in Fight, Flight or Freeze

When a student views or feels a threat from the sensory input, students’ amygdala blocks their prefrontal cortex process and immediately reacts in fight, flight or freeze response.

Understanding Childhood Trauma in Refugees

Ayan Mohamed
Research Question

What are some best practices to implement in the classroom to support refugee students that endured trauma?
I picked this topic...

Background

- Former refugee student
- Exposed to traumatic events
- Worked with refugee students over 15 years
- Visited refugee camps in East Africa in 2014
- Share with other educators like myself
Objective

To create an informational brochure for educators to have as a resource in the classroom.

The number of refugee displaced across the world by 2016: The UN Refugee agency

- An estimate of 52.8 million people were displaced from their homes.
- About 3.7% of those displaced people were forced to leave their country.
- Approximately 22% of the people displaced were children younger than 18.
- About 68% of the refugees were women and children.
- An estimated 332,000 refugees are expected to return home soon.

*Data from UNHCR (2018)OKCUN Populations Displaced by Violence in 2016*

References


Understanding Trauma in Refugee Students
**Brochure Format**

**Brochure # 1**

**Understanding trauma in Refugee children**

- Who are Our Refugee Students?
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
- Trauma and Brain Development

**Brochure # 2**

**How to Best Serve Refugee Students Suffering from Trauma**

- How You Can Help a Traumatized Student
- Behaviors Associated with Trauma
- The brain process sensory input information
Who are Our Refugee Students?

Refugees in Minnesota

- War-torn Countries
- Experienced natural disasters
- Witnessed extreme violence
- Endured Hunger/Suffering
- Subjected to Emotional Distress/Abuse
- Loss: Home, parents, sibling

2016 Refugee in state of Minnesota

- Country of Origin         # of Refugees
- Somalia                   1,410
- Burma                     651
- Ethiopia                  275
- Iraq                      175

*Data from Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2016 Annual Report
What is Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs)

Pinpointing the degree a refugee child experiences trauma can be difficult as each child’s experience is unique.

ACE categorizes traumatic childhood experiences into 3 categories

1. Exposure to physical violence

2. Exposure to traumatic events - community and/or family - direct or indirect

3. Daily trauma - displacement, lack of resources to meet daily needs

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Trauma & the Brain

Trauma impacts brain development:

• Shifts brain development to a "stress response" instead of "developing response"

• Releases high levels of chemicals into the body as a response at heightened stress situations

• When high levels of chemicals are released they can be:
  • Toxic to the mind & body
  • Alters memory processing, mood and relational skills.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Behaviors Associated with Trauma

Each student’s experience is unique, expect each student to exhibit various behaviors.

Behaviors Displayed

- Inability to control anger, withdrawal
  - inability to show compassion/empathy
  - overreacting to events around them.
- Impulsively reacting
  - verbally or physically
- Difficulty or inability
  - understand another person’s point-of-view
- Hyperactive and aggressive
- Difficulty trusting or connecting with adults.
The Brain, Sensory, Input & Response

The brain’s responses to stressful situations ignites a high emotional state of fight, flight or freeze response.

- **Amygdala** – controls emotional reactions from the sensory input (threatening or nonthreatening)
- **Prefrontal Cortex** – examines the sensory input information & response

For traumatized child the normal pathway to process stressful situations is hindered; therefore traumatized students will respond differently.

[Diagram of the brain's response to stress with labeled parts: Sensory Input, Amygdala, Prefrontal Cortex, Balanced Response, Fight, Flight, Or Freeze Response.

[Website]: http://blissfulkids.com
What happens during Fight, Flight Freeze

The brain responds and processes the threatening situation in an enhanced emotional state.

Graph from Pinsdaddy.com

Normal defensive responses to high threat can impact treatment and treatment adherence.
How You Can Help a Traumatized Student

It is difficult to determine the type of trauma a student has been exposed to & it’s impact on their life...

Best Practices:

- **Be consistent**—be honest, consistent and firm during student interactions.
- **Create a supportive environment**—where your student feels safe and part of the classroom.
- **Build a positive relationship**—a key role you can play in any students’ life is to be present and supportive.
- **Self-reflection**—it is important to be self-aware of your own biases.
- **Ask for support**—ask for help when you need it.
- **Support the parents**—many of your students’ parents have limited knowledge about the education system in the U.S.

Brochures

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lFguYGsy6BiJ3x-dhTFOzrfd07MtBegehatJcqRxiiU/edit#
What Now?

Apply at least one or two of the best teaching practices

- Support their traumatized students for a minimum of two weeks.
- Take notes
- Feedbacks on the brochures
- Survey
- Share with staff
Q & A

Thank you!
References


REFERENCES


doi:10.1017/S0954579401003030


http://www.mncompass.org/immigration/overview

