Refugee Families Living in Oregon:

Creating a Culturally Competent Program

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**Introduction**

This school-based advocacy program will target students living in Oregon who are refugees and their families. This plan will specifically target those refugees not living in the Portland tri-county area, because there are resources already there. A refugee is an individual who was forced to leave his/her country of origin because of violence, persecution, war, or natural disaster. According to the American Immigration Council (2014), the two most common countries of origin for refugees entering Oregon in 2014 were Somalia (21%) and Iraq (28%) (Refugee Counsel USA). There are also large populations of refugees from Bhutan, and Burma in Oregon (Refugee Council USA, 2013). Children under 18 represent 46% of the overall refugee population (American Immigration Council, 2014), making schools a great access point to connect with refugee families.

**Rationale for Program**

**Lack of Resources.** Data is not readily available for refugee population dispersion by county in Oregon. Most refugee families seeking asylum move to Portland first (Pathways to Wellness, 2013). However, some eventually move to different areas of Oregon. Because refugees are concentrated in the Portland area, most of the resources are there as well, leaving those not living in the area with limited resources. This advocacy plan is for this lacking area.

**Common Experiences of Oppression.** Individuals coming to the United States as a refugee have often not only experienced oppression in their countries of origin, but they also experience difficulties in the United States, starting when the family first seeks asylum. When reviewing the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), one notices a theme of skepticism when determining admittance. For example, the burden of proof lies on the shoulders of the asylum seekers, and they are subjected to intense questioning, and lengthy paperwork (Allard, 2013). The INA specifically dictates that only those in who are sufficiently determined to be in dire need of asylum will be admitted. In addition, refugees may be excluded for health-related reasons, moral reasons (for example, if an individual has a criminal record), or even for their value systems, for example polygamists have been denied asylum (American Immigration Council, 2014). The US enforces a limit of 70,000 refugees admitted into the country; currently the numbers are reaching the limit, indicating that we are unable to let everyone in (American Immigration Council, 2014). These lengthy admittance procedures are not only unwelcoming, but they also separate families and set the tone for the American perception of refugees as helpless and dependent (Allard, 2013).

The refugees granted asylum in Oregon usually begin their journey in Portland, where the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) provides case management to new arrivals. Although IRCO provides many needed services, refugees still struggle to adapt to mainstream American culture. Many have lost their sense social belonging, group affiliation, and associative identity (Allard, 2013). In addition, many do not speak English and have to cope with dramatically different cultural norms from their countries of origin.

“Refugees who reside outside Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas Counties are served at their local Department of Human Services (DHS)… These programs ensure that refugees have food, cash and medical benefits” (Pathways to Wellness, 2013, p. 1). Although refugees outside Portland may receive assistance in these limited areas, there is a lack of resources around connecting with the community, access to mental health, finding employment, and language resources.

**Why Are They Oppressed?**

Refugees are largely viewed as helpless victims in need of charity, instead of survivors acting the moral obligation of self-preservation (Allard, 2013). Refugees are left voiceless and invisible, because they have only limited citizenship (Allard, 2013). This invisibility is highlighted by the lack of data on refugees across different counties in Oregon. Perhaps the lack of data and the invisibility for this group is at least partially responsible for the oversight of resources.

“Non-whites” in general face oppression in the United States. For example, the US tends to oversimplify racial identities as black or white. Currently, Middle Eastern individuals are categorized as “white” on the census information (United States Census Bureau). This lack of information makes it difficult for refugees of Middle Eastern decent to find a place where they can connect with others from their country of origin. It also invalidates the diverse perspectives and experiences among different races and cultures.

One year after admission, a refugee may apply for Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status. If they are adjusted to LPR status, they may petition for naturalization five years after arrival in the United States (American Immigration Council, 2014). This means that the family must live with uncertainty for at least five years before applying for residence. The lack of resources could also be the result of the perception that they are not American citizens and that they will leave eventually. In my personal conversations with others on the topic, people have stated that they do not believe that Americans should be held responsible for meeting the needs of refugees. This denial of responsibility comes from a limited ‘us’ and ‘them’ perspective, instead of seeing the moral obligation to help others (Allard, 2013).

**Barriers to Success.**

Refugee youth are at higher risk of developing mental health problems, particularly depression and PTSD. Their families are also less likely to seek help for many reasons, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with the health care system, and stigma. In addition, the impact of trauma on the family system as a whole can be detrimental, leaving refugee individuals feeling even more isolated (Weine, Muzurovic, Yasmina, Besic, Lezic, Mujagic, Pavkovic, 2004). Schools can be an excellent way to reach out to refugee families (Fazel, Doll, & Stein, 2009).

It can be a struggle for schools to meet the needs of refugee students. Perhaps most obviously, language can be a significant barrier to serving these students. Although schools have English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms, it is very unlikely that school staff speaks their language of origin. In Oregon, most refugee families come from Iraq, and Somalia (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2014). Translation services for Somali, Arabic, and Kurdish are difficult to access, except via a phone service. In addition, language transmits culture and ideas. Speaking a different language can be isolating and difficult.

Students have to adapt to a dramatically different approach to education when they attend school in the United States. When providing education for culturally diverse students, it is important to consider the educational environment of the origin country. Students coming from countries with limited educational opportunity will need additional educational resources to ensure equity (Spring, 2014). Ioga (1995) posits the following considerations when educating students from a different culture than the school: (1)Were they schooled prior to immigration? (2)Was their education fragmented? (3) Do the children have school and learning skills? (4) Did they learn English? (5) How did they learn their own language: orally, in writing, etc.? (6) What is educational attainment of parents?

**Advocacy Plan: Families and Schools Together (FAST)**

Because this group is so culturally diverse, it is difficult to provide services for them as a whole. It is especially important to be mindful of the potential to impose values when working with culturally diverse populations. Ensuring that the advocacy plan is adaptable for a variety of cultural backgrounds is essential.

FAST is a program in which groups of families meet once per week for eight weeks at a school and engage in structured interaction and curriculum (see below for more detail). It is empirically driven and evidence-based and has been proven to enhance parent-child interactions, increase student’s grades and academic success, and enhance student’s interactions with peers (McDonald et. al., 2012). It can also connect the family to the community and resources. As a result, families and students will be better able to navigate the education system and the community as a whole.

Additionally, this program is flexible and can be adapted to groups coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, by enlisting help from individuals within the targeted culture to ensure that incongruent values are not being imposed (McDonald, 2012). McDonald et. al. (2012), for example tailored this program to support Hmong refugees and found very encouraging results. This flexibility will also allow for a flexibility in the goals of the group. For example, the group could add an advocacy component.

**Organization:**

**Funding.** Organizing a FAST program will entail taking several steps, beginning with seeking funding for the program. It is estimated that the start-up cost for the program will be approximately $5,000 (Tools for Schools, 1998). FAST has historically been funded by Title 1 monies, federal grants, or local sources that fund programs which help poor and low performing students find academic success (Tools for Schools, 1998). According to the Refugee Council USA (2012), there is approximately $280,000 worth of discretionary grants available for school impact. The program could also seek this funding.

**Building a Team.** Next, the program will have to develop a team. From the beginning, it would be important to ensure that the FAST team is culturally representative of the families being served (Ackley & Cullen, 2010). As such, the team would need to enlist a refugee from the targeted country of origin as a leader. This individual will be both a group facilitator for the FAST meetings and a consultant for the FAST team, to ensure cultural congruence (McDonald, 2012). In addition, the team will need a school partner, preferably the school counselor or a classroom teacher (this person will likely be the individual to initiate the plan). The program will need two community members who have a good grasp on the resources in the area. Perhaps the team could find representatives from a local multicultural center and a mental health resource center to fill these roles. Lastly, the team will need one recreation coordinator, to implement the children’s activities (Ackley & Cullen, 2010).

**Creating a Vision and Preparing.** After attending a FAST training, the team will create a vision and goals, as a group. Although every FAST group has the primary goal of enhancing family connections and student performance, there is room for the group to be flexible and focus on additional goals (Acklye, & Cullen, 2010). In developing goals, the team will largely rely on the parent facilitator and surveying potential family participants in determining the primary needs of the group. For example, the group might focus on fostering connections with the larger community, or within the school. Alternatively, the group might focus on empowering group members to become advocates at the school and the community, by dispersing information about their culture and needs.

The team will need to recruit family participants. To enlist participants, the team will reach out to families in the area from the targeted country of origin, through the school, multicultural centers, and possibly places of worship. In reaching out to potential participants, it will be important to not make the families feel singled out. Ensuring that the program is presented effectively as a collaborative project in which they will contribute would be essential.

**Implementing the Program.** The FAST program typically lasts eight weeks, meeting for two and a half hours weekly. Each meeting is comprised of a meal, family communication games, a parent support group, student-specific activities that take place during the parent support group, and families spending structured time together (Ackley & Cullen, 2010). FAST is highly structured, however, our program will be tailored to the cultural norms and goals of the group being served. After the eight meetings, the group will reconvene monthly, in follow up meetings called FASTWORKS (Ackley & Cullen, 2010). In addition, it will be important to implement a pre- and post-assessment, focusing on the group’s goals and visions, to measure effectiveness.

**Challenges**

**Danger Zones**

As discussed earlier, refugees are subject to systemic oppression. Although some view refugees as an asset to the community, refugees are largely viewed as helpless victims. Many hold the viewpoint that the United States is providing enough to these families by providing them with asylum and financial assistance (Allard, 2013), so it may be difficult to find funding for the program.

Although this program has been shown to be effective in a variety of ways, it still does not change the bigger picture of oppression. Schools, for example, are tailored to the dominant culture of white, middle class Americans. Although this program may help students achieve higher and enable families to advocate for educational opportunity, students will still face difficulty at school. The families will still experience racism and culturism. As such, it is important that the school partner to become an advocate for these students at the school, and that the team disseminates information to the larger community, to break down barriers and humanize experiences.

**Limitations**

The FAST program could not reach out to families of a culture that is not concentrated in the area. So, this program would be difficult to implement in rural areas. In this situation, a multicultural FAST group could be formed, however it would become more difficult to ensure cultural congruency. In addition, this program will have limited impact on the greater picture of oppression, even with an advocacy goal. It is also important to keep in mind that many refugee families are fragmented.

**Conclusion**

Agencies and resources tailored specifically to refugees are hard to come by outside of the Portland tri-county area. It is important that services be provided, given their increased likelihood of experiencing mental health difficulties, family disconnect, and lack of community connection. Because this group is culturally diverse, it is difficult to implement a program to fit the needs of every family. FAST is a program that can be tailored specifically to the culture of the families being served, while enhancing family connections, community connections, and student achievement.

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