Serving the Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Adolescents

Young adolescence is a dynamic period of growth and development, and it can be an especially difficult time for immigrant and refugee students who are learning to speak and read English while they are simultaneously expected to learn social studies, math, and science content, and to demonstrate progress on state assessments.

In addition, immigrant and refugee students must also learn how to be American middle school students, and school-based interventions can make a difference. In the foreword to Hosting Newcomers: Structuring Educational Opportunities for Immigrant Children, José Llanes writes, “The school 'tells' the newcomer how he or she is perceived by the host society, mainly through its hidden curriculum, which begins at matriculation and continues through graduation.” The images that schools impress upon these students through the hidden curriculum are often negative and damaging.

How can school leaders help foster welcoming, supportive environments where immigrant and refugee students can thrive? Positive, productive middle school experiences for these students must involve much more than English-language acquisition. These experiences also must address their social and psychological development while affirming and respecting their cultural background.

A Look at the Research

Anthropological studies of immigrant and refugee middle school students yield three essential understandings that can help practitioners improve the educational experiences of these unique students:

**Immigrant and refugee student groups are not monolithic.** Studies have revealed great variations within the broad categories of commonly used ethnic identifiers (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander) as well as variance among individuals within subcategories. Teachers need to carefully consider the uniqueness and individuality of each group of immigrant and refugee students in order to best meet their needs.

How can educators effectively address the wide-ranging needs of all students, especially in communities characterized by great cultural and linguistic diversity? In Turning Points 2000, Anthony W. Jackson and his colleagues recommend that middle school leadership teams form inquiry groups to solve problems and address school-wide issues collaboratively. By taking an ethnographic approach, middle school inquiry groups can transcend borders of language and culture and tap into the funds of knowledge in the homes and communities of the youths they serve. These funds include intellectual, cultural, and social knowledge and skills that individuals draw upon in their day-to-day lives within families, local communities, and social networks.

In Effective Programs for Latino Students, Gilbert Narro Garcia recommends four steps that can help middle school inquiry groups make well-informed decisions about immigrant and refugee students of any background:

- Identify the full complement of factors that define these students, especially those who are at risk of educational failure;
- Understand how the factors bundle within individual students and across groups of students so as not to overgeneralize across particular student subgroups;
- Determine what the factors imply for the typical array of educational and related social and health services provided, and for professional development; and
- Design appropriate educational and management responses for students that stem from the identification of these factors.

Middle school organization and culture shape the school experiences of immigrant and refugee students. School leaders need to be aware of the ways in which the school’s cultural norms and instructional programs impact student identity development and how they might isolate and marginalize immigrant students. ESL programs, for example, can limit opportunities to practice conversational English with English-speaking peers.

The education of immigrant and refugee students must be a schoolwide effort, not the responsibility of a single ESL instructor who cannot be expected to know everything about the psychology of acculturation or the cultural background of every youngster and every family. Successful work with young adolescents, especially immigrant and refugee students, requires a community approach that facilitates connections among all school professionals, including teachers, psychologists, school social workers, and counselors.

**Interpersonal relationships matter.** Many ethnographic studies illustrate the centrality of interpersonal relationships among students, school personnel, and parents to the success of immigrant students. Ideally, middle school counselors are positioned to establish such relationships. Unfortunately, typical caseloads of 100 or more students make it very difficult for these relationships to occur. The fact remains, however, that immigrant students need to establish strong, positive relationships with adults. It’s when they feel valued by the adults in the school that they can become more invested in their education.

Advisory programs in which a teacher
works closely with 10 to 15 students during the year hold some promise. With regard to Latino students, Rebecca Benjamin, author of “Middle Schools for Latinos: A Framework for Success,” suggests that advisers must learn about their students’ cultures and communities. Also, the teachers must understand their students’ need for developing an ethnic identity and the difficulties their students can face in this process, particularly with existing racist attitudes. This often can be a difficult issue for teachers, especially when they have not resolved these issues for themselves,” Benjamin writes. Implied in her recommendation is the need for focused, high-quality staff development for teachers, administrators, and other personnel who work with immigrant and refugee students.

Middle-level educators should strive to extend the web of relationships beyond school and into immigrant communities. Pointing out the importance of parent and family involvement in Latino children’s education, particularly during the middle school years, Benjamin cautions that school staff should look beyond traditional notions of involvement and seek to access the funds of knowledge embedded in immigrant communities.

In “Culturally Responsive Instructional Processes,” Dave Brown advises middle-level educators to consider instructional strategies, such as small-group instruction, that can help to promote interaction between native English speakers and English language-learners. The social support that these strategies offer can help mediate transition stress, although teachers should note that the quality of relationships is more important than the frequency of the interactions. Ultimately, having friends who can help one cope with problems is more important than superficial contact and interaction with peers, no matter how frequent it might be.

Implications and Recommendations
To better serve immigrant and refugee students, school leaders need to consider the social and cultural dimensions of their school experience, and not focus solely on English-language programs. School leaders need to embrace the tremendous diversity that exists across and within immigrant and refugee student groups, they need to understand how school organizational structures and cultural characteristics impact the processes of acculturation and identity development, and they need to provide opportunities for strong interpersonal relationships to form and flourish among immigrant students, their families, and their teachers.

David C. Virtue is an associate professor in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. His e-mail address is virtue@mailbox.sc.edu.

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