

F.A.C.E. Time (Families and Communities Educating)

Accommodating Newcomers in Elementary School

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“The lunch lady figured he was foreign, so she gave him a Spanish application to take home,” the ESL teacher sighed as she shook her head, talking about the incident. The child in question was from Burundi, and the parents did not speak Spanish, needless to say. This is just one small example of some of the many issues refugee and Latino migrant children are facing in smaller and rural school districts throughout the United States.

Introduction

In American public schools refugees from overseas and Latino migrant children typically find themselves in English learning programs,¹ usually designated as English as a Second Language (ESL), Limited English Proficiency (LEP), or English Language Learners (ELL) programs (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2004). Often, these children have received little, interrupted, or no prior education.

In addition, many of these children have experienced traumatic events that may have included violence, torture, refugee settlement, war atrocities, and persecution, as well as many other direct and indirect unsettling experiences. The backgrounds and experiences of these children are not homogenous and each can span a wide

range, but one thing they all have in common is loss of family, home, and identity.

Furthermore, their families experience an extraordinary amount of stress when adjusting to a new country and community. All of these factors can have significant emotional impact on these children who are already trying to cope with their own stressors while adapting in general to school and life in America. Subsequently, this particular ESL population has specific needs beyond language and academic adjustment (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000; Hannah, 2007; Platt & Cranston-Gingras, 1991).

In this article we will highlight a program called F.A.C.E. Time, which stands for Families and Communities Educating, which has been implemented in Lexington, Kentucky elementary schools since 2008. F.A.C.E. Time is a support program for refugee and Latino immigrant children and their families that was developed in collaboration with the Fayette County School System and the University of Kentucky.

Background

In Lexington, African refugee and Latino migrant students are relatively new to the school system. African refugee populations have been in this school system in significant numbers only since about 2005. Latino migrant children have been a part of the school setting since the early 1990s. Other refugee populations that were present prior to the newer African refugees included Eastern Europeans and refugees from Cuba, whose numbers were small, making it easier for them to be well received and supported by the community when they arrived. The experience for African refugees, however, is different as their ethnicity and appearance causes them stand out in this predominately White community.

These populations have previously

been represented in schools in major urban areas or agricultural districts, and are now arriving in the U.S. Southeast and Midwest in larger numbers (Zehr, 2005). Many of the host cities and communities are inexperienced in dealing with a new face of diversity and are ill-prepared to address cultural differences (Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Factors such as a currently struggling economy, a national focus on Islamic terrorism, and national policy debates about legal and illegal immigration also contribute to a suspicious, if not hostile anti-immigrant climate. Unfortunately, but inevitably, at the local level this context contributes to the school climate that impacts the lives of these new ESL students and their families.

ESL literature typically addresses this population under the nomenclature of *Newcomer*. The term newcomer specifically refers to an immigrant population which in addition to language and academic assistance is in need of assistance with cultural and social adjustment (Friedlander, 1991; Valios, 2007). American literature addressing newcomer programming is limited in quantity, as the majority of such available literature comes from Europe, Australia, and Canada (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Pinson & Arnot, 2007).

Literature that does exist about American newcomers tends to be specific to geographic areas, mostly focusing on urban-metropolitan areas with high concentrations of internationals. This literature also focuses on newcomer programming at the middle and high school levels. In addition, while mental well-being issues are mentioned, they are never fully explored (García & Bartlett, 2007; Genesee, 1999; Munoz and Clavijo, 2000; NOTE, 2007; Short et al., 2003).

While this literature does emphasize

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language and academic adaptation, it generally fails to address cultural adaptation. If cultural adaptation is mentioned, it is merely noted in reference to newcomers needing to learn and adapt to American culture. The real and obvious difficulties in this kind of adaptation are not explored, nor are the cultural adaptation needs and abilities of the host culture.

The Setting

This article considers these concerns by specifically highlighting the program development for newcomer populations in the Fayette County School District in Lexington, Kentucky. There are numerous factors that have contributed to a call for specialized attention that addresses the needs of newcomers in that school district. As these populations have made their way into ESL programs and schools in Lexington, the program staff have not been trained to deal with the particular needs of these populations, nor are resources readily available.

For example, in reference to equity, achievement gaps, and minority categories, the Kentucky Department of Education website presents most data regarding African-American students and a limited amount for Latino populations. The Kentucky Department of Education program and its research on Migrant Education addresses migrant populations without any reference to foreign-born students. In fact, the only categories represented are Anglo, Hispanic, African American, or other; hence the needs, indeed even the existence, of immigrant and refugee populations have not been addressed.

Similarly the local school district's website's reference to migrant education only refers to information packets that can be requested and makes no mention of international children at all. In comparison, the neighboring state of Indiana, on its statewide educational website, has a web page for migrant education with specific information and referral sources on immigrant children for both parents and teachers.

The Fayette County School District ESL handbook (2006) does dutifully reflect federal legislation as put forth in Section iii of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Thus, language acquisition and academic achievement are thoroughly addressed, but the mental well-being needs of the ESL population and cultural implications of those needs are not.

Basically, these populations are still

so relatively new to the school system that there is no data about them and no information provided for them. Since these populations were initially concentrated at certain schools due to housing placement by the refugee resettlement agency, there were only a few schools that were seeking to address the needs of these students. Now that families are starting to resettle throughout the city, these populations are becoming more dispersed throughout the school district, and thus the lack of appropriate skills, resources, and services available to these communities has become a far more pressing and widespread concern.

Methods

In the city of Lexington, Fayette County Public School personnel, University of Kentucky faculty and staff, college students, and community members have come together to address these needs of these students. In 2008 we developed three programs: F.A.C.E. Time (Families and Communities Educating), F.A.C.E. Time Summer, and Prime Time Family Reading.² The Prime Time Family Reading program was an already existing program, willing to work with us by allowing us to adapt the program specifically to serve the refugee and Latino migrant populations.

The F.A.C.E. Time program was developed in collaboration between Diane Sumney, an ESL teacher, and Jill Blackman, a Family Resource Centre Coordinator, both with the Fayette County School District, and Aminata Cairo, a university research professor. Professor Rosalind Harris from the Department of Community and Leadership Development of the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky served as academic advisor for the program. The goals of the program included language and academic adaptation support, cultural and social emotional support, family support, and community support.

After initial research into the status and needs of refugee and Latino migrant children in the school system by Cairo, findings were presented to the school superintendent. Subsequent meetings with administrative staff provided full support for the development of F.A.C.E. Time.

F.A.C.E. Time

F.A.C.E. Time consisted of an after school program dedicated to academic skills as well as social/behavioral adaptation and cultural expression for children from the third through fifth grade. On

Mondays children received music lessons at a music school in town. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday children received one hour of academic instruction and or tutoring, followed by an hour of either social/behavioral exploration or cultural expression.

F.A.C.E. Time was staffed with student volunteers from the University of Kentucky as well as a local high school. A service learning class was developed at the University that accompanied this project. Three students participated in this course. They recruited additional student volunteers for program staffing, and contributed in the program development by interviewing and collecting participatory observation data.

One of the service learning students developed a photography/literacy project and worked with a select group of students—those needing extra attention. In addition, community volunteers came and gave special presentations such as story telling by a librarian and African drumming by a musician. The program was offered for 11 weeks from February through May 2008. During the second semester Katie Joyner, one of the service learning students, served as a research assistant and volunteer coordinator for the program. We then organized parental support groups and closed the program out with a family/community picnic.

F.A.C.E. Time Summer

F.A.C.E. Time summer consisted of a five-week summer school program. The program lasted through June and met on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. This summer program included collaboration with a local learning center which provided hands-on science and mathematics lessons and a music school which provided either one-on-one or one-on-two private music lessons. Additional staffing was provided by a second ESL teacher as well as university and high school student volunteers.

The F.A.C.E. Time Summer Program provided instruction in writing, music, mathematics, social studies, art, physical education, and cultural expression, and organized educational field trips. The social studies instruction focused specifically on each of the countries represented among the children.

Prime Time Family Reading

The Prime Time Family Reading program was offered through a collaboration

with the University, the state Humanities Council, the school district, and the local public library. The program was located in the library of a nearby high school. This site was chosen for the program because it allowed the families who live in the area to walk over together. This program lasted for six consecutive Mondays in June and July from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. A total of 150 participants participated in the program. It was the largest number ever in the history of the Prime Time Family Reading Program anywhere in Kentucky.

Families received two reading books weekly that included translations. For five Mondays the families came together in the school library. The books were read by a story teller, and were then discussed with the help of a scholar as facilitator. Adults as well as children participated actively in the discussions and were eager to receive and read the books.

There were three translators present who interpreted the collective reading and the discussion as necessary in Spanish, Kirundi, Swahili, French, and Arabic. Community volunteers helped with activities such as setting up, serving food, child care, book distribution, and other tasks as necessary. On the sixth and last night of the program families received free transportation to the Central Public Library for the final meeting. At the conclusion of that meeting all families were given a library card and a tour of the library.

Discussion

F.A.C.E. Time and Prime Time have been successful in creating positive change for this newcomer population of refugee and migrant students. We owe the success first and foremost to a school superintendent who was willing to listen and support something new, as well as to a supportive school principal who welcomed the additional presence and this particular kind of support in her school. Furthermore, the success of F.A.C.E. Time and Prime Time can be ascribed to the efficient collaboration between the four coordinators.

A significant focus was placed on the importance of building community. We first spent extensive time building community within the group, which directly contributed to the children's sense of safety and belonging. As a result the children did not differentiate among each other based on ethnicity. Friendships were formed and for some these were the only friendships they developed in the school. After building community within the group we focused

on building community outside the group. Community members contributed through their participation in the programs. Relationships were built with the parents of the children. The Prime time Family Reading Program proved to be especially successful in building community.

We learned that locality and proximity are extremely important and conducive to community building. Local proximity was also important in building connections with European-American school parents. Some of our children found host families within walking distance from their homes who could support them in things ranging from rides to soccer practice to assistance in science projects. European-American school parents, who initially expressed concerns about the presence of this other population in the school, were included in and ultimately enjoyed community activities such as soccer and school activities like the end of the year Family Fun Festival where children presented their photography projects. Sharing cultural expression in front of the school at an assembly also encouraged the other children in the school and the staff to embrace this new population.

The building of community and the sense of belonging have directly contributed to tangible behavioral outcomes. We have observed a general improvement in social behavior on the part of nearly all of the children. They seem more comfortable and self-confident. This sentiment has been echoed informally by their classroom teachers. Teachers have commented that the refugee and migrant children seemed more outgoing and confident since participating in F.A.C.E. Time.

While some of these children struggle with ongoing emotional and behavioral issues, the group as a whole appears to address these types of problems better. Rather than what would have most likely involved a reactionary response previously, students have learned now to avoid children who might be acting out, to give them space, to ask an adult for advice, and to be more amenable to redirection if engaged in confrontation.

The school, quite importantly, has also changed and has become a more open community itself. Listening to teachers and other personnel, and validating their experiences and frustrations, were very important steps in reaching this point. Seeing and acknowledging teachers as experts in their field, while simultaneously making commitments to collaborative partnerships such as this program, has made the difference between an open-minded or closed-

minded atmosphere. Every single person we interviewed expressed frustration with the previous lack of resources, training, communication, and support.

F.A.C.E. Time Today

Many changes have occurred since the initial F.A.C.E. Time in 2008. All three programs are still continuing and each has expanded. Whereas the first program originally served only grades three through five, the program now serves children from kindergarten through grade eight. Academic scores for these children have improved and they need to stay in ESL for shorter periods of time. Subsequent FACE Time sessions have included more interactive activities with the European-American students in the school.

In addition, teachers in the school have now received special training on working with the refugee and migrant populations. Further teacher resources and training are being developed. The F.A.C.E. Time initiative continues to be an example of how an expanded school community can come together to produce something positive.

Notes

¹ English learning programs are usually designated as English as a Second Language (ESL), Limited English Proficiency (LEP), or English Language Learners (ELL) programs. In the Fayette County Public School System the acronym ESL is used.

² The Prime Time Family Reading Program is a certified reading program that was developed in Louisiana in 1991. The program is sponsored by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Library Association. The program promotes family reading, library membership, and offers multi-lingual programming. The program has been offered in Kentucky public libraries since 2002. The Prime Time Family Reading Program at Henry Clay High School in Lexington, Kentucky was the first time it was offered at a school site, and used three translators speaking five different languages.

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