

The Role of the Principal in Facilitating the Inclusion of Elementary Refugee Students

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Abstract

As political and economic instability coupled with natural disasters continue to displace people around the world, migration and resettlement remain necessary. Hosting countries and communities grapple with how to meet the diverse needs of the refugees. Given that over a half of the refugees are under the age of 18 years (i.e., school-age children and youth), schools play a major role in the process of integration in to the new homeland. The purpose of this article is report on the principal's leadership efforts to include refugee students and their families at Northstar Elementary School. The descriptive reporting of the principal's efforts is organized by three themes: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between schools and communities.

Keywords

Refugees, inclusion, integrate, schools, leadership, principal

Introduction

The ongoing political and economic instability and natural disasters continue to displace many people around the globe. Consequently, there are millions of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, and stateless people seeking resettlement in other countries for safety and a better life. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are about 66 million people displaced from their homes worldwide; of these, 23 million considered to be refugees with over half under the age of 18 years, which means they are school-age children and youth needing to be educated (UNHCR, 2018). This continuous migration and resettling of people also “transports cultural material and knowledge across national boundaries” (Goddard, 2015, p.

3), which some anthropologists such as Appadurai (1990, p. 296) have called a “global cultural flow.” With this cultural flow come the tensions that we see even today, as nation-states and local communities grapple with potential solutions to the migration trends. Schools are always at the center of this cultural intersectionality.

The school-age refugee population is of interest to educational systems of resettling countries. Refugees and other migrant children add to an increasingly ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse student population in today's classrooms and schools across the globe (Spring, 2018). However, there is evidence to

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suggest that diversity in schools, particularly in the United States, is not a new phenomenon; yet schools continually struggle with meeting the diverse needs of students (Kaestle, 1973; Montalto, 1981; Racine, 1990; Spring, 2018; Tyack, 1974). Specific to refugee students, the destabilizing events in their home countries necessitating resettlement (e.g., war), cause these students to arrive in the United States with an array of challenges such as psychosocial, cultural, socioeconomic, and academic. Schools are one of the major hubs that introduce and potentially facilitate a level of integration of these students and their families to their new homeland as they embark on the resettlement process. The purpose of this article is to report on the principal's leadership efforts to include refugee students and their families at Northstar Elementary School (Northstar ES) (the name of the school and individuals in this manuscript are pseudonyms). For this article, a priori themes drawn from Riehl (2000) are used to describe principal's inclusion efforts: Fostering new meanings about diversity, creating an inclusive environment, and building relationships with the school community. First, I present the review of the literature consistent with the theoretical constructions of inclusive schools guided by Riehl's (2000) principal tasks for school inclusion followed by the methodology section, findings, and finally the discussion and conclusion sections.

Literature Review

Theoretical Constructs

The increasing diversity in school children's abilities, social class, culture, language, race/ethnicity, and nativity present challenges to schools that have typically served a homogenous student body or used mainstream philosophy of teaching and learning (Goddard, 2015). Efforts to re-envision these practices require the

leadership of the principal to foster innovative and inclusive educational environment (Magno & Schiff, 2010; Theoharis, & Causton-Theoharis, 2010; Ryan, 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2003). Research indicates that successful school leaders in these diverse environments demonstrate a common set of understandings, dispositions, and practices (Howard, 2007; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2003, 2006). For instance, Howard (2007) suggested effective principals in diverse contexts adhere to five phases namely building trust, engaging personal culture, confronting issues of social dominance and social justice, transforming instructional practices, and engaging the entire school community. On aggregate, successful leaders in diverse settings are critically self-reflective, cognizant of the internal and external school contexts, and centered on improving student educational experience. For the purpose of this article, I utilize Riehl's (2000) three critical administrator tasks or practices she identified after conducting a vast analysis of scholarship about the principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between schools and communities. In the following sections, I discuss each of these practices in concert with other literature in terms of how the principal can influence the overall school culture for a better socio-educational experience of refugee students.

Fostering New Meanings or Definitions of Diversity

Riehl noted that sense-making or meaning-making inside and outside the school community about any form of change is constructed around peoples' beliefs about the school. Importantly, "real organizational change

occurs not simply when technical changes in structure and process are undertaken, but when persons inside and outside of the school construct new understandings about what the change means” (Riehl, p.60). All the while, the current school demographic changes sometimes elicit educator and community resistance, in part, due to the fear of the unknown, or in some cases, it could be motivated by stereotypical or racist dispositions (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Lopez, 2003). For example, Howard (2007) recounted a conversation with a teacher who raised questions such as “Why are they sending these kids to our school?” Also, Howard’s account reported that a principal in a district outside New York City expressed a stereotypical perception of changing student population: “These kids don’t value education, and their parents aren’t helping either. They don’t seem to care about their children’s future” (p. 16). The principal’s reaction was in response to a predominantly Caribbean and Latin American student population that was also 90 percent low-income – a school that was once predominantly rich, white, and Jewish. Howard further reported, in a school district with a rapidly increasing black population, a white parent decried the increase in discipline cases as a result of students’ lack of respect: “Students who are coming here now don’t have much respect for authority. That’s why we have so many discipline problems” (p. 16). Research indicates similar deficit perceptions frame the narrative about refugee students enrolled in neighborhood schools (Roy & Roxas, 2011). The deficit narrative is often defined by refugees’ unique cultural and religious practices and expressions, language acquisition, and past interrupted schooling experiences (Thorstensson, 2013). Unfortunately, these sentiments are commonplace and reflective of the attitudes and tensions within school

communities with changing student demographics. For instance, non-refugee parents make schooling decisions for their children based on these perceptions. Similarly, stereotypical and deficit-driven attitudes guide the pedagogical and curricular decisions schools make. In other words, schools (e.g., teachers and administrators) have the potential to perpetuate inequalities that exist in society (Blanchard, & Muller, 2015; Cherng, & Liu, 2017). However, principals are uniquely positioned to facilitate an understanding and appreciation of diversity and its contribution to preparing all students to navigate an increasingly diverse society (Anderson, 1990; Cooper et al., 2010). Specifically, Anderson (1990) suggested that principals can influence meaning-making through a variety of common school activities/events. For instance, principals can engage different stakeholders in fostering new meanings about diversity by seizing opportunities such as official school ceremonies, school meetings (e.g., Parent Teacher Student Association), and public school-community relations events (Strike, 1993). Also, principals could restructure or re-organize or redesign school procedures and practices that acknowledge and are sensitive to diversity (Ryan, 2003). For the different school constituents to embrace new meanings, it requires a collective discursive process that engages everyone in co-creating the new meaning. The deliberative process has to be “characterized by free exploration, honest exchange, and non-manipulative discussion in light of critical questions such as ‘who benefits from what goes on here?’” (Riehl, p. 61).

Promoting Inclusive School Cultures and Instructional Programs

Principals are considered instructional leaders who indirectly influence classroom instruction

through “high expectations for student achievement, high visibility and frequent visits to classes, high support for staff, and strong goal and task orientation” (Riehl, p. 62). Advancing inclusivity is a concept that has been around educational circles for a while, particularly with a focus on including students with special needs in the general classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2005). With student diversity extending beyond ability differences, the call for inclusion recognizes the exclusion of other students because of age, race, language, culture, class, gender, and sexuality (Cooper et al., 2010). Particularly for refugees, who bring unique cultural practices and beliefs, languages, socioemotional needs, traumatic experiences, and educational backgrounds, it calls for thoughtful consideration toward inclusion (McBrien, 2005). For this population of students, the practice of inclusion should truly serve a social justice purpose or function, that is, meaningfully including them in institutional practices and processes (Bogotch, 2002; Ryan, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). For instance, Principal Bolls (Magno & Schiff, 2010), responded in support of immigrant students by making the necessary institutional adjustments that integrated immigrant students by creating a diversity office, encouraging formation of a variety of cultural clubs, hosting a diversity leadership conference, and organizing school assemblies, films, and lectures by foreign educators on themes of cultural diversity. These activities have the potential to nurture and sustain dialogue within the school community and develop critical consciousness (Ryan, 2003). Additionally, leaders who demonstrate effectiveness in diverse school settings tend to emphasize high expectations for student academic achievement, an ethic of care (or empowerment through care), and a commitment

to the larger community (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Dillard, 1995; Reitzug & Patterson, 1998).

Building Relationships Between Schools and Communities

Building relationships between schools and communities acknowledges that educating the whole child cannot be accomplished by schools singlehandedly. With student diversity come diverse and complex needs that schools are not quite equipped with the capacity to fully address. Refugee students, in particular, present a number of challenging factors: Many have endured traumatic experiences (they carry the scars of post-traumatic stress disorders, PTSD), due to the exposure to violence and torture, experiences in refugee camps, being displaced from their homes and, and disconnected from family members; lack of formal education – for some students they could be enrolling in public education for the first time; language barriers; and the struggles with acculturation in their newly adopted homeland (McBrien, 2005; Taylor, 2008). Multi-agency partnerships is perhaps the appropriate approach and response in the face of multi-faceted student needs and finite resources accessible to schools in today’s economy. School-community partnerships create collaborative opportunities to meet student needs and in the process strengthening working relationships between schools and community organizations (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016). For instance, agencies engaged in settling refugees across the United States include Church World Services (CWS), Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and World Relief Corporation (WR)

(Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2018). Therefore, schools need to establish a framework to collaborate with these agencies in addition to other local organizations to serve refugee students and their families. Most importantly, partnerships should serve to facilitate positive educational experiences and life outcomes for refugee students. Indeed, establishing mutual relationships and partnerships with families and communities is associated with a number of positive student educational outcomes to include “improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work” (Epstein, 1995, p. 701). Khalifa (2012) gives accounts of a principal who was intentional and agentic in establishing a positive relationship with the community. Khalifa found that “when principals show concern and advocate for community causes, skeptical, distant parents begin to trust and support the principal...advocacy lends credibility to the principal, and thus allows him to lead the school with parental support, involvement, and trust” (p.448). The principal in Khalifa’s study engaged the community by conducting weekly home visits, accepting speaking engagements in community churches, supporting community advocacy, attending student defense hearings, spending significant time discussing “non-education” issues with parents, and encouraging mutual advising and information sharing.

In conclusion, it would be simplistic to elevate certain principal attributes and practices as the magic wand that makes diverse schools successful without acknowledging the interplay between a web of factors that create schools as complex social and learning institutions. There is a preponderance of scholarship singling out an array of educational factors that need to be

collectively addressed such as education policy, school finance, the social organization of schools and classrooms, relationships between schools and students’ families and communities, teacher education and professional development, curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment processes (Apple & Buras, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000; 2010; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Most of the variables noted here may be beyond the purview of school leaders. Therefore, in this article I choose to focus on those responsibilities within the jurisdiction of the school leader: Fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive practices within schools, and building connections between schools and communities as outlined in Riehl (2000).

Study Design and Methods

The purpose of this qualitative article reports on the principal’s leadership efforts for the inclusion of refugee students and their families in the school. The analysis for this article is drawn mainly from the interview conducted with the principal of Northstar Elementary School (Northstar ES) in Central ISD. While this study focuses on the principal’s leadership efforts to include refugee students and their families, it is part of a broader study that examined the overall school efforts to support the educational experiences of refugees at Northstar. The broader study included interviews/focus groups with the administrative team (the principal, assistant principal, and two counselors), five *Newcomer teachers* (i.e., teachers designated for the Newcomer program), five general /English as a Second Language (ESL) educators, and parents as well as classroom observations.

The Principal

Ms. Connolly is a white female who earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education with an emphasis in mathematics and a master's degree in educational administration. She started teaching in 1991 as a general education teacher in a major urban city in Texas, where she taught 4th grade for two years. In 1993, she moved to her current city and school district, Central ISD, as a 5th grade teacher. She taught 5th grade for five years before transitioning to a math specialist position for kindergarten through the 5th grade at NES, in 1998. During her time as the math specialist at NES, the campus was designated as bilingual; however, there were no refugee students enrolled at that time. After eight years as a math specialist, Connolly was promoted to the position of vice principal (VP) in 2006. During her tenure as VP, refugee students started enrolling at NES. Five years later, in 2011, Connolly advanced to the role of school principal. At the time of this study (2014-2015), she was in her 5th year as the principal.

Site

The study site for this article was purposefully selected because it was the district designated elementary school (at the time) to enroll and serve refugee students. In 2006, Northstar was designated as the English as a second language (ESL) cluster campus, providing ESL services in an effort to consolidate resources to better serve the students. When refugee students began to arrive in 2007, the district sent them to Northstar to accommodate their English language acquisition needs and their transition into US schools. Table 1 shows some basic demographic information about Northstar for the 2014-2015 school year. According to Northstar school records, in the 2014/15 school year, students spoke a total of 30 languages including English, Arabic, French, Kiswahili, Burmese, among others. About 20 percent of students listed as ESL came to the United States as refugees.

Table 1

Northstar Elementary School Demographic Information for 2014/15

Basic Demographic Information for School Year, 2014/15	
Campus size	736
Grade Span	EC-5
% Economically Disadvantaged	68
% ELL	30
Mobility Rate (%)	27
# of Refugee Students	144
# of Languages	30
# of Teachers	52
# of Newcomer Teachers	5
# of Language Support Teachers (LST)	2
Administrative Team (Principal, VP, 2 Counselors)	5

Data Collection & Data Analysis

The study went through two separate Institutional Review Boards (IRB), the author's institution and the Central ISD, before interviews were conducted. Participant interviews (administrative team, teachers, and parents) were conducted in the school setting (except for one parent focus group that was conducted in the community center where those families live) and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The principal was asked questions about how the school, particularly her leadership, has supported refugee students (for specific principal interview questions, see Appendix). The interview was audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Theme analysis (Saldaña, 2013) of the interview transcripts was guided by a priori themes adopted from Riehl's (2000) synthesis of the literature about the principal's tasks or practices in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: Fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between schools and communities. In the following findings section, each of the themes (practices) are explained using excerpts from the principal interview.

Findings

The themes discussed in this article are organized around Riehl's (2000) three principal's tasks or practices that are critical in diverse school settings: Fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between schools and communities.

Fostering New Meanings About Diversity

As the demographics of communities and school change, members within these settings grapple

with what the changes mean to them individually as well as the community within and outside the school. The process of grappling with and meaning making about diversity emerged in the Northstar community when an influx of refugee students began in 2007.

Internally

Northstar leadership was forced to rethink how to best accommodate and serve the new refugee students and their families. As Ms. Connolly suggested to us, they were not quite prepared for refugee students: "Well, back in 2007 when it [refugee student enrolment] first started, we weren't prepared. And, I don't think the district was quite completely prepared [either]...So, we weren't prepared because that was the first year we became the ESL cluster." However, Connolly acknowledged, in a sense, they were prepared given the number of teachers with English as a Second Language (ESL) and Bilingual certification: "So prepared – we had ESL certified teachers that were also bilingual certified so we were prepared in that sense. We had certified teachers to teach them" said Connolly. Consequently, depending on the number of incoming refugee students, there was a continuous assessment of need for the purposes of hiring, assignment, and reassignment of teachers. Connolly noted:

I'm not sure what the year is but we grew from having one teacher to eventually having four teachers that were working with those newcomer refugee students. Those positions were funded through the district with Title III money...we had teachers on our campus that were ESL and Bilingual certified that volunteered to work with the population. So, if I remember correctly, we had about four teachers... our numbers kind of went up and down. It went up to four teachers and then went down to one teacher.

She further added:

...when I became principal in 2011...I think we had two teachers that were teaching the refugee population. We had a primary teacher and an intermediate teacher. At the end of the year one got cut because the numbers were small. I only had seven kids that were going to be staying. So the following year, I started with one teacher but the families started coming again so I hired in October the second teacher. In March, I had to hire a third teacher. Then last year I started off hiring another one during the summer so started off with four teachers last year – four newcomer teachers. In February our numbers had gotten high again and I hired a fifth teacher. That's where I am today.

In addition to the lead classroom teachers, Ms. Connolly advocated for language support teachers (LSTs) as added resources to support the learning needs of refugee students. Similar to the hiring of classroom teachers, there was continuous juggling of LSTs as well. Connolly explained,

we have the language support teachers, so at one time, I only had a half LST that moved to a full time LST that moved to one and a half LST's. Then it got cut in 2010 to one. And, so that was something I fought for again and asked if I could please have a second one because our population was growing. So this is the second year we've had two full time LST teachers. They are strictly doing all day pull outs. They pull out small groups of students – refugees and regular ESL students – who need that support.

In these accounts, Connolly described an ever fluid situation with student enrollment and personnel needs. As a leader and a campus, the continuous hiring, assignment, and

reassignment of teachers can be expensive, time consuming, and destabilizing to the overall culture of the school.

Conversation with Ms. Connolly revealed an ongoing sense-making or meaning making regarding the best instructional model that would best meet the diverse needs of refugee students. Two other elementary schools in the district which had served refugee students previously had different instructional approaches. Connolly spoke about her preferred instructional model compared to others, underscoring a lack of a common district model:

...each campus did something different. [Median Elementary] had them [refugee students] one year in the Newcomer [classroom] and the principal retained them. Goaks [Elementary] put them in the Newcomer [classroom] for three years. Northstar would keep them for two years so it wasn't consistent among the schools. My opinion is the district didn't know the right answer. There wasn't a wrong or right answer. But, the previous principal and I thought two years because there are such high expectations. We can't keep them sheltered too long. It's like you have to get them out there.

In essence, the three elementary schools offered a sheltered instructional classroom environment (i.e., Newcomer classroom) for refugee students with varying lengths of time before students were transitioned in to the general/ESL classrooms.

Externally

Northstar community was engaged in sense making or meaning making as well. Weary of what the demographic shift meant for non-refugee children's learning opportunities, some parents expressed resistance. With an increase in general ESL and refugee students, some

parents of native English speakers raised concerns particularly with regard to student ratios (i.e., native English speakers to ESL students) in the general/ESL classrooms. As Connolly noted:

it ended up a whole ESL class – maybe two or four English speakers. Well, then how does the English child feel? They are the true minority in that classroom which some parents are ok with but some parents are not. So then I had parents coming to me not wanting their child in ESL classroom. Well, I wouldn't move their child – they're still getting a quality teacher – this teacher might be even better qualified because they've had more training. So, I wouldn't move them.

Some parents were seeking a balanced classroom or a class with no ESL students altogether. Parents tried to make meaning of what the emerging student diversity meant for educational experiences and outcomes for their own children. Ms. Connolly acknowledged parent concerns: "I reflected upon it and I understand. You know, do you want to be the complete minority in that classroom?" However, she constantly reassured parents of uncompromised quality educational experience for their children and the need to be patient: "I told them they needed to give it six weeks. Wait and see – it's going to be a great experience – and it worked out."

Quality educational experiences was not only directed at native English speakers but for incoming general ESL and refugee students. She said there were "high expectations" for refugee students and over and over again reiterated the need to be guided by "what is best for the kids." The purposeful hiring of her own vice principal and teachers, to be further discussed in the next section, reinforced the belief that each child, regardless of his/her background, deserved a

quality school experience. Ms. Connolly encapsulated her position this way:

All children basically are the same. They've [refugees] had different life experiences and that's the biggest thing. The refugees are coming to you with different life experiences. But, we can still relate to them and we can still teach them and still can nurture them.

Additionally, she believed refugee students' presence on the campus was additive to the overall Northstar culture:

Their love of learning, their cultures, their acceptance – they seem to have acceptance of other people...They don't really have discipline issues and it's like the kids can run the class. They figure out procedures and they're not going to let anyone slide. So they can be very responsible. They just have a different love for learning. They're not lazy. They're motivated. I think they're just so happy to be here.

Ms. Connolly came to full appreciation of the contribution of refugees to the diversity of Northstar: "Obviously, the diversity they [refugees] bring to the school has a benefit for all of the American students in learning about the other cultures." Connolly had the task of communicating the new reality across Northstar community.

Promoting Inclusive School Cultures and Instructional Programming

Evidence from the data show that school personnel were fully invested in creating a positive, welcoming, and inclusive environment for refugee students and their parents to actively participate in the learning process. Principals are tasked with creating conditions for inclusive school environment where all members feel a sense of belonging. In acknowledging the benefit

of the cultures from across the world that converge at Northstar, the Annual Parade of Nations is one event that presents a united and inclusive image. Ms. Connolly described it as “wonderful.” She highlighted the most recent Parade of Nations held in fall 2014:

We had 31 different countries represented. So, we had their flags and then the teachers helped them pick facts about their countries. So one student was at the microphone reading the facts about their country to kind of teach everybody about it while their national anthem is being played in the background like the Olympics. And then, a group of students is walking with their flag – parading. We went through all 31 countries and at the end was the United States flag. Then, they sing a beautiful song “Together We Can Change The World.” Everyone’s crying. But we had a good turnout. We had parents here and I finally invited my supervisor from Central Office. We do it every year but I’m not a person to brag necessarily. But we talked about it last year and decided we needed to let people know what we’re doing at the school. This is unique and special so don’t keep it a secret. It needs to be known. This year we’re telling the [superintendent], the school board and whoever could come. There were a couple of people that could.

The Parade of Nations became an annual signature event at Northstar. The show of community and appreciation of diversity is encouraging. As one who has personally attended a number of these events, it is always exhilarating to see the convergence of the world at this one school.

Ms. Connolly fully understood she could not singlehandedly create an inclusive school environment without eliciting the support of other school personnel. She used purposeful

hiring as one means to build capacity in order to achieve the vision for inclusivity. For instance, she talked about the qualities and qualifications she considered when hiring her vice principal (VP):

I did hire a vice principal, purposely. When looking for qualifications, he is bilingual and is ESL certified. He taught bilingual. He’s had more training in that field and he, himself, is English as a second language. Spanish is his first language. So, he’s gone through it as a child learning. That was one of the things when I chose him for our campus, that’s one of the things I liked about him. He’s qualified and knows what he’s talking about and has experienced it.

Similarly, Ms. Connolly looked for certain experiences in the Newcomer teachers that would likely translate into effective teaching and positive learning in the Newcomer classrooms:

The five teachers I have, and I purposely selected them, were not moved from within my school. They were posted positions and I looked specifically for people who had something in their background related to ESL, which all of them they have. There was something about them. They’re all passionate teachers and love their jobs. They’re enthusiastic and they study the art of education – the philosophy of it – and then just develop their art. Walking into their classrooms I just wish every class was a Newcomer. When I walk in the kids are all engaged. There is learning going on. It’s just that we can’t learn quickly enough for the state of Texas. But, amazing things are going on and I give them much credit.

These teachers provided an engaging environment for the students. Our classroom observations during the study attested to a classroom setting that activated the love of

learning that Ms. Connolly referenced. Indeed, the selective qualities of these teachers translated into their positive interaction with the students.

Building Relationships Between Schools and Communities

Building relationships is the mortar that holds the various stakeholders engaged and supportive of the vision and mission of the school. The principal is expected to lead the charge of navigating shrewdly, the different interests and personalities to establish healthy relationships that ultimately benefit the students. Ms. Connolly believed in the power of building relationships: “The key is everybody developing those relationships and that’s throughout the whole school – the teachers developing relationships with their kids and getting to know them and understanding their needs.” This core belief guided her efforts which included reaching out to community organizations, conducting home visits and family nights in residential communities, and providing literacy programming.

Ms. Connolly lamented the limited time on her hands, in addition to lack of funding, to explore the different relationships and potential partnerships. She noted, “That’s the whole thing – I can’t do it all so you have other people communicating for you and if the message isn’t clear then that’s a struggle.” She wished she had an individual in charge of partnership such as communities in schools’ position, like other schools do. The partnership with Catholic Charities (CC) was significantly important to Northstar and refugee families. CC is in charge of placing refugees in apartment complexes on arrival and notifying schools about school age children expected to enroll, as Connolly noted, “Catholic Charities [finds] apartment complexes that would take larger families. So everything – I’ve been communicating with Catholic Charities

– I get spread sheets [with student names].” Therefore, Connolly and the teachers were in constant communication with CC: “It’s me, it’s the LSTs, it’s the teachers talking to Catholic Charities...getting them to support...and they have been very supportive.” Connolly appreciated the support: “Catholic Charities gets transportation if that’s needed and helps us. If we didn’t have that connection, I don’t know what we would do. Because the district doesn’t – unfortunately.” However, it is important to mention that Connolly cited other partners that support their work with refugees: “University Methodist helps out. St. Matthews is involved. House of Prayer is involved. The Baptist Church is involved.” In addition, other partners include a teacher education program at the local university and a local chain grocery store. CC stood out as the leading partner that provided a host of services to include translation and interpretation, cash, food, and clothing assistance, cultural orientation, school registration, English classes, tutoring, and health screenings. For instance, during parent conferences CC provided the needed support:

We need translators. I don’t have the money for it, but Catholic Charities has the grant money. So we just had parent conferences last Wednesday. Catholic Charities helped transport the parents to our school so we could have parent conferences with them. Now, we’ve also done home visits. And that’s what the teachers said – not everyone was able to come so we need to go back to home visits.

Ms. Connolly recognized the difficulty with transportation for refugee parents to attend events on campus, (e.g., parent conferences, family nights, student registration, etc.), she in turn took some events to the parents. That is, they held these events at the apartment

complexes where the families lived. Connolly led by example with this initiative:

I had to do it [home visits] for Grade Placement Committee – all the 5th graders who failed the STAAR test. All my LEP kids – I had 30 kids fail. Out of 30, eleven were English [speakers]. The others were all ESL. Well, it wasn't an appropriate test, but I had to have 30 grace placement committee meetings. Were they here [school]? No, I went to their apartment complex had the middle school principals meet me at the apartment complex. But, with the Catholic Charities support, though, helped to have translators. I didn't have to do it just once I had to do it twice. I had to do it after the second administration and after the third administration.

Ms. Connolly described a family night conducted at school and one of the apartment complex where most of the refugee families live:

We have family nights here like we had our family literacy and math night – sports theme – tailgating... But then we also go to the apartment complexes. We started that last year. We went to A-Creek and had a family night and we went to I-Ranch. It was awesome – absolutely wonderful. The parents appreciated it. Last year we got more parents. This year we did it again. So my teachers do it here and then we go do it two more nights. So this year I told them I loved their dedication but let's not do it two separate nights – let's divide and conquer. So we asked for other ESL teachers, or whoever on the campus wanted to help, and would do it the same night. So my Vice Principal and I went to A-Creek. That's the bigger group. And then my admin intern went to I-Ranch. We split teachers. So we did both on the same night. We had a great turn out, but not as many parents.

Evening literacy program for parents and students sponsored by a Bush Literacy Grant was an important initiative to once again connect with refugee families and equip them with much needed literacy skills. Ms. Connolly reflected:

We had a grant – [the] Bush Literacy Grant for three years. The first year was wonderful. We were able to get parents to come. The way it was set up was I had a couple of teachers who taught it after school from 3:00 – 5:00. From 3:00 – 4:00 they would work with the parents on different activities for literacy. Then from 4:00 – 5:00 they worked on computers and different things like that. We were able to transport them here [on campus]. And so from 3 – 4 we had teachers with the parents and we had teachers with the kids. They were separate. From 4-5 they were brought together and practiced what they had learned together. It was a great idea and then it fell apart. The reason it fell apart was due to transportation. Our school buses will not allow us to transport children under 4. Well, a lot of the refugee families have babies. We tried to problem solve – [public] bus – but who's going to get the ticket to ride the [public] bus?

When novel initiatives such as the literacy program failed due to logistical issues, partnerships with organizations such as CC become especially important. CC was able to step in and offer those classes. Ms. Connolly noted:

Catholic Charities is very involved in that. So, they along with the district and House of Prayer are setting up classes for parents. They talk to us about what do we need for parents to learn about. So we talked about hygiene, how to help the child with homework, discipline and accountability. Catholic Charities has a room at A-Creek

[apartment complex]. They use the little center there. They do tutoring every week. So they tutor a lot of our kids.

In summary, drawing from our interview with Ms. Connolly, it is quite evident that she cared about including refugee students and their families in the Northstar experience. Navigating the diversity landscape required shrewd leadership to maintain cohesion in the school culture. The analysis presented here show how Connolly fostered new meanings about diversity, promoted inclusive school cultures and instructional programs, and built relationships between schools and communities. In the following section, I discuss how these findings align with the existing literature.

Discussion

Leading diverse schools presents both opportunities and challenges (Andersen & Ottesen, 2011; Walker, 2005). Schools leaders are positioned to influence the tenor of school climate and culture whereby the different constituencies learn to understand, value, and appreciate diversity (Ryan, 2003). In her extensive review of the literature on the role of the principal in creating inclusive schools for diverse students, Riehl (2000) highlighted the three tasks: fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting inclusive cultures and instructional programs, and building relationships between school and communities.

First, during the time of demographic change at Northstar, Ms. Connolly's leadership was critical in fostering new meanings internally (with herself, staff, and students) and externally (parents and community). The arrival of refugee students challenged NES community. Particularly, some parents perceived the student demographic shift as a potential threat to the quality of education offered to Northstar children. Worth highlighting, is Connolly's long

tenure at Northstar; eighteen years of service at the time of this study (math specialist, vice principal, and then principal), may have worked in her favor during the critical time of change. The institutional and contextual knowledge and understanding, not specifically teased out in this study, had great capital in facilitating new meanings among the stakeholders. She had established the trust with the staff and the community and was able to constructively shepherd the dialogue during the pivotal period of demographic change (Lane & Bachman, 1998). This premise is consistent with most change management models which indicate that it takes five to seven years for principals to build a foundation of trust with teachers and community members to ensure changes are consolidated and become part of the culture (Gabarro, 1987).

Ms. Connolly acknowledged Northstar and the school district were not prepared for the wave of immigrants which demanded reorganizing and restructuring Northstar in order to make sense of and accommodate the diversity (Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005). Connolly established Newcomer classrooms, purposely hired Newcomer teachers, and encourage general educators to seek new certifications. These internal efforts encapsulate some of the initiatives Connolly undertook to serve the needs of refugee students. Importantly, Connolly stayed at Northstar long enough to see the initiatives enacted and allowed to work, which is not often the case in most school settings that require change. Principal turnover interrupts the momentum of change and principals never see the impact of their initiatives. Therefore, Connolly's longevity at Northstar was important because evidence shows that it takes five to seven years for principals to build a foundation of trust with teachers and community members to ensure changes are consolidated and become part of the school culture (Gabarro, 1987). Additionally, in some cases, district level priorities do not align with

specific school needs creating a disconnect in addressing needs in a timely manner. For instance, Ms. Connolly and the Newcomer teachers pointed out how the district was not completely supportive in the school's efforts toward addressing refugee student needs. This misalignment of priorities is problematic in advancing the causes of refugee students.

Second, promoting inclusive cultures is in a sense, what Bank (2004) calls empowering school culture. That is, the process of restructuring the culture and the school organization so that minority students can experience educational and cultural empowerment. Minority students such as refugees are easily marginalized unless they have agentic leaders (administrators or teachers) that will advocate for their needs. Ms. Connolly's efforts to ensure Northstar acknowledges multiculturalism is exemplified in events such as Parade of Nations. I have personally attended several of these events; the excitement and pride of the children and parents is exhilarating to watch. However, this event can easily turn into an annual symbolic gesture of diversity which makes the daily treatment of the students and their families quite critical. Our observations in classrooms, particularly newcomer classrooms, suggested a warm and engaging learning environment. The unique qualities that Ms. Connolly looked for in the Newcomer teachers indeed translated into positive interactions with students. Given that of all school factors, teachers are the most influential on student outcomes because of their daily instructional interaction with students, principals should be thoughtful in their hiring practices (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Teachers are positioned to be cultural brokers for refugee students as these students try to navigate the realities of their new homeland. The teachers' effectiveness in being agentic for refugee students lies in their ability to

seek to understand the cultural milieu of the different student groups, previous first-hand experiences in classrooms and communities with different people groups and the ability to build a cross-cultural awareness that understands the needs of the students (Bassey, 1996). If teachers possess these attributes, they are likely to create a nurturing and safe school climate for refugee students and their families that humanizes refugees' transition into the new cultural environment (Xu, 2007).

Lastly, building school-community relations is imperative to maintaining the goodwill of the parents and community. Moore, Bagin, and Gallenger (2012) propose that paying attention to school-community relations is important because "Citizens in the community hold the status of part owners in the schools. They own stock, so to speak, in the schools by virtue of the fact that it is their taxes that support the schools" (p. 10). This perspective is a general call to school leaders to purposely engage the communities in which schools are embedded. Within these school communities are assets (e.g., residents, voluntary associations, local institutions, and businesses) that can supplement the resource-strapped schools to meet the diverse student needs. Ms. Connolly counted on a number of community partnerships such as Catholic Charities, churches, and businesses for support. Constantly engaging with the Northstar community availed the support of various community assets, which made serving the diverse needs of refugee students and families possible. Connolly was particularly complementary of Catholic Charities to the extent of acknowledging: "If we didn't have that connection, I don't know what we would do. Because the district doesn't – unfortunately."

Earlier scholarship (e.g., Katz, 1999; Parker & Shapiro, 1993) established that connecting with parents, particularly

marginalized parents such as refugees, require purposeful practices which may include meeting parents in their homes and work sites, establishing linguistic equity by providing translators whenever needed, and developing parent competencies in leadership and other areas. Similarly, Connolly engaged with Northstar refugee parents by taking school-related events (family academic nights, parent conferences, and home visits) to apartment complexes where the parents lived. This was in response to what she understood as barriers (e.g., transportation, language, financial) that potentially limited the parents' full participation in their children's educational experiences. Due to these efforts, parents were grateful: "It's that parent connection. The parents are so wonderful. They appreciate everything. They never have a complaint. When they do, they do come to talk to me to help them," Connolly noted.

Conclusion

School leaders in diverse contexts have to be intentional about engaging the various stakeholders in order to sustain a cohesive school culture. Especially, effectively integrating marginalized students and families such as refugees requires the administrator's time, commitment, and resources. Clearly, Ms. Connolly was resolute in her core belief of doing "what's best for the kids." That student centered approach was brought up many times in our conversations indicating the motivation behind her efforts.

Implications for Practice

Establishing a healthy relationship with staff is a key ingredient in achieving inclusion in a diverse context. Most of the initiatives rely on the goodwill and volunteerism of the staff. School leaders in similar diverse contexts can learn from practices that Ms. Connolly enacted such as

purposeful hiring, restructuring and reorganizing daily routines and procedures, taking events to parents residential areas (e.g., parent conferences, home visits, academic family nights), and identifying and establishing partnerships with community assets.

Implications for Research

These Northstar initiatives, practices, and efforts seem quite manageable at the elementary level. At the secondary level, the sheer school size and departmentalization structure present a certain set of challenges that should raise interesting questions worth pursuing.

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Appendix

Principal Interview Questions

1. Demographic Information: Gender, age, personal/educational/professional background, number of years in current position, total years as principal, leadership positions before becoming principal, and leadership training.
2. How is your school prepared to serve refugee students? Talk about strengths and weaknesses.
3. How prepared are you personally to serve refugee students and their families?
4. How do you support teachers of refugee students i.e., in newcomer classrooms?
5. How does the district support your school?
6. How do you involve parents of refugee students?
7. What supports (e.g., programs, special events, etc.) does the school provide for refugee students and their families?
8. What challenges do you face in serving refugee students and their families?
9. How do refugee students contribute to your school?
10. What else would you like to share that we have not covered?