

Anthro Notes

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REFUGEE CHILDREN IN SCHOOL: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

INTRODUCTION

For an adult refugee, successful adaptation to the US sociocultural system is usually measured in economic terms, such as obtaining and holding a job. An equally objective measurement for refugee children is how well they are adapting to their school environment, measured in terms of grades achieved, and ability to pass through the school system to receive a high school diploma.

The last fifteen years has witnessed a massive influx of refugees coming to the United States, particularly from Asia and Latin America. In the 1960's, the United States admitted 200,000 to 300,000 immigrants a year. Last year the ceiling was raised to 700,000, a number that does not include illegal immigrants who are entering at an estimated rate of 200,000 a year. (Roberta Weiner, "New Faces At

School: How Demographics are Reshaping American Education," *Education Daily*, March 22, 1991, p.5). These newcomers are often fleeing situations that involve the traumas of war, ravaged economies, and religious and political persecution. For schools and teachers across this nation, refugee students challenge anew the educational system's ability to perform its traditional role: providing support, democratic opportunity, and educational advancement to a culturally diverse school population. The last decade's immigration explosion and the increased cultural diversity in the classroom are reflected in a new Census Bureau Report. That report shows the number of Hispanics nationwide rose 50 percent since 1980, from 14.6 million to 22.4 million in 1990; and the nation's Asian American population doubled, from about 3.5 million in 1980 to 7.3 million in 1990 (*Education Daily* March 13, 1991: p.1).

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Anthropologists have much to offer teachers and other school professionals struggling to understand and work with refugee students from culturally diverse backgrounds. One of the most important contributions anthropology brings to the understanding of students' ethnic background is a compact package of facts, figures, concepts, and insights reflecting a wide variety of cultural variables. Anthropologists also can work with trained educational or social work personnel to develop an individual student's profile of factors influencing that student's experience in the school environment.

THE MULTIFACETED APPROACH

It is important to stress first that each individual refugee student comes with a complex cultural heritage. Many teachers are aware of the need to understand something about their students' cultural background but nevertheless are not trained to sort through the wide number of variables that can affect an individual refugee student's performance.

The following multifaceted set of factors was developed to help service providers within school settings (teachers, counselors, case workers) come to know their refugee students/clients better and to help guide the selection of intervention strategies for low achieving refugee students. It is often not until there is difficulty within the school environment that a given student will come to the attention of school personnel as needing assistance. Hence, if a student is "at risk" (i.e. may not complete high school due to excessive absences or inappropriate behavior in the school environment), a range of factors needs to be assessed before the teacher or other professional is in the best position to help the student. These factors are grouped into seven categories discussed below.

Cultural Background

Ethnic socio-cultural traditions; religious persuasion (not only at the level of the Great Traditions of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic beliefs, but also at the level of the more localized, popular beliefs found in oral traditions); patterns of interaction and linguistic communication; level of techno-economic environment.

Students' Gender

Expectations concerning the role of males and females in his or her homeland; which gender is considered more essential to the continuation of the family: i.e., matrilineal or patrilineal; economic involvement of each gender (marketing; farming; land, animal, property ownership) in the homeland. This is an area often overlooked by American service providers who unconsciously draw heavily on their own male-oriented society for standards and expectations of others.

Trauma

The level of trauma involved in the initial refugee experience is often difficult to ascertain; however, it can be critical to understanding the daily behavior of a student. Conditions under which the person and his/her family left the country of origin; amount of time spent in refugee camps, which family members made it out, which did not; did any parents or siblings die or become permanently disabled due to their escape; how old was the student when he/she left his/her country and how old was the student when he/she settled in the US?

Conditions in the U.S.

National and local ethos concerning accepting foreigners; cultural similarity or disparity within a refugee's ethnic community in the U.S.; economic opportunities; religious affiliation.

Family Environment

Socioeconomic background of the family; education level of the parents; age of parents when they left home country as well as how long they have resided in the US; current status of family (chronically ill parents, unemployment...)

Educational Background

What, if any, schooling did the student receive in his/her own language; expectation level the parents have for their children in American schools; expectations by parents and students of teacher's role in the education of a student, and of students' role in the classroom (passive, active).

Psychological Factors

Coping mechanisms, level of mental health, but individual variation is very important to consider; otherwise, we might take all of the above factors into account and still not be able to understand the individual student we are concerned with at the moment.

How does one find answers for all the above questions? For some information, personal interviews with the student and his/her parents and other family members may be the most useful avenue, but in other cases, anthropologists at a local college or university can help locate appropriate information and literature describing the cultural background of individual students. Files at the school or from the student's resettlement agency can be helpful. Finally, other social agencies or religious organizations involved in resettlement efforts can be consulted.

Armed with information about the multifaceted variables of culture, gender, post-traumatic stress disorders, new country conditions, family environment, educational background and psychological characteristics of an individual refugee student, the teacher or staff member can begin to understand the student. However, there is even one more condition essential to this mix: change. Nothing is written in stone, all variables may and will change. Resettlement is a dynamic situation for the young refugee, and teachers must be sensitive to the potential for change.

PREVENTING STEREOTYPING

The multi-faceted approach to working with refugee students is particularly important as a strategy to prevent stereotyping among school personnel. Stereotyping easily develops when only one or two variables are used to define an entire ethnic group.

For example, in the mass media, as well as in the educational literature, there has been an emphasis on the disproportionate amount of educational success by Asian refugees.

A disconcerting element in much of this research is the tendency to refer to Asians in the US as a homogenous group (Hsia, J., *Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work*, 1988). Further, much of the Asian

population referred to consists largely of people of Japanese descent, and sometimes of Vietnamese descent. The Japanese obviously are not refugees, and may not even be first generation migrants. So, what we have is a discussion of a diverse Asian population as if they are all quite homogenous, or at most dichotomous; and perhaps, a confusion of those Asians who migrated to the US versus those Asians who came as refugees.

While both of these errors are understandable, they also impede our comprehension of the situation. It is a common and understandable human approach to lump similar ethnic groups under one heading: for example, Hispanic usually refers to those of Mexican, Cuban, Honduran, Peruvian, etc. descent; Black usually refers to those of African-American, African-Puerto Rican, Garifina (Black Carib), Zulu, Nigerian, etc. descent; White usually refers to those of English, Italian, Canadian, Euro-American, Spanish, Russian, etc. descent. The reason this situation impedes our comprehension is obvious. In most normal classroom situations we work hard to differentiate within groups as well as between groups. Regardless of good intentions, however, many teachers work from the perspective that multiethnic groups can be lumped into single understandable categories, such as Asians or ESL/foreign students.

Among those teachers and researchers who recognize the need to consider individual ethnic factors, we find a slightly refined version of the above tendency to "lump" people under a single ethnic category. That is, they look at one factor and over-simplify that factor's impact to explain what is happening to their young refugees. When considering the population from a cultural perspective, that one factor is often religious, for example, Buddhism. When considering the population from an educational perspective (as many ESL teachers and other language teachers might), the impact of literacy in their own language becomes a dominant theme. When considering the population from a socio-psychological perspective (as many social workers and medical case workers do), the trauma of the process of being torn from your family and homeland becomes the critical factor to consider.

Certainly, any one of the above approaches is essential to understanding the young refugee, but none of them in itself explains enough to allow a teacher or case worker to really help the individual.

ST. LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

The St. Louis Public School System (SLPS) is a large urban school system with a sizable refugee student population. An English as a Second Language Program (ESL) was established in 1981 to serve 135 refugee students (83 Vietnamese and 52 Lao). By the late 1980's, the ESL Program served an average of 500 students per year, and included students from 34 countries, including 38% Vietnamese and 12% Laotian. From interviewing the ESL social worker and other SLPS staff, it became clear that various ethnic groups are viewed within the schools as having certain characteristics, and that these group characterizations obscure some of the complex reasons behind refugee performance.

For example, Afgani boys are often seen as surly and having a chip on their shoulder, yet they manage to achieve. The parents encourage these boys to make the best of their school situation. On the other hand, according to school personnel, the girls are not encouraged at all. The parents even come up with reasons to keep them home. The social worker summed up the parental attitude about girls and school: the parents are "so old-fashioned, they don't think girls need to go to school at all." Undoubtedly, when these girls turn 16, the parents will no longer send them. Thus, the male students stay in school and are not considered at risk of dropping out; however, the girls are often chronically absent and in danger of dropping out before completing high school.

Among the few Ethiopian children attending school, however, the picture is different. While the mother is considered second to her husband, and, as school personnel put it, "at the mercy of the father," this lower female status within the family is not translated into poor school performance for the girls who both attend class and do well in their school work. This difference between Afgani and Ethiopian girls highlights the need to consider individual variation involved in

resettlement's dynamic process. In the Ethiopian example, one mother very much wants her children to have more than she herself had, and she believes education will help her children achieve more.

The Vietnamese, the group so often heralded in the national mass media as the "successful" Asians, are the largest group represented in the St. Louis School System. As with any large group there are successes and failures. Apparently, school personnel do not see an obvious difference between male and female Vietnamese students who are doing well or at least all right in their studies. However, a larger number of male Vietnamese students are at risk of dropping out of high school without graduating than are female Vietnamese students. More males than females tend to fall out at the bottom, largely due to their aggressive behavior toward other American students who harass them.

Teachers feel that low-achieving girls are trying, that they are not a behavior problem. One explanation for their poor grades is that they are too "country." A large group of the underachieving boys, on the other hand, stand out in the school setting: they do not seem to be able to focus on their schoolwork; they show little respect for authority and school, and they are often in trouble at school. These boys elicit little sympathy or tolerance from their teachers.

Among the Khmer, who make up about 8% of the ESL population, the boys and girls seem to receive the same parental treatment concerning their schooling. That is, the parents believe that the teacher should take care of all aspects of their child's life concerned with schooling. The parents are not inclined to push their children to succeed. And, once the children start to fail, the parents feel that it is beyond their control to force their children to turn their school work around and become successful. Some of this attitude toward the inability of parents to mold their children is seen to come from their perception of Buddhist tenets such as: "Don't push the river, it floats on its own." By the time the child is over 17, the parents feel helpless in getting their children to attend school. The threat of juvenile court will scare the parents, but

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("Refugee Children" continued from p. 4)

take control of their children, and their certainty that such control is beyond their capabilities.

The Lao, another Buddhist oriented cultural group, react to the school situation somewhat differently. The girls seem to work despite difficult odds. Within the context of school, the Lao female students do better and are more consistent as students, compared to their male counterparts, who tend to be chronically tardy and somewhat aggressive. These girls can be considered successes, in that they are not considered to be at risk of dropping out before graduating from high school. On the other hand, even among the educated Lao, many of the sons exhibit problematic behavior: cutting classes, skipping school, losing their tempers and getting into fights (particularly over anything that strikes them as being an affront to their manhood.)

When looking at this particular population of ESL students, most of whom are refugees, we find that there is a definite pattern of difference by gender. However, as we have seen, this pattern is not consistent for all females or all males across ethnic lines. Nor can we say that those influenced by the same Great Tradition religion such as Buddhism will react to schooling in the same way. Individual variation is apparent within every ethnic group.

Overall, the reactions of St. Louis classroom teachers to the ESL students are two-pronged. On the one hand, the teachers often praise their Asian students (most of whom are ESL) and express pleasure at having such well-motivated, well-behaved, high achievers in their classrooms. On the other hand, there is little sympathy for the underachieving, problematic misfits. In the latter case, the ESL students are perceived as a group (i.e. foreigners) and are not broken down by ethnicity. The sense among some teachers is that these foreigners should be doing better, that they are now in America, and that it is up to them to embrace this educational opportunity. In either reaction--to high or low achievers--there is little or no recognition of cultural variation, much less the impact of the dual forces of culture and gender. It is often gender that is overlooked as a significant

variation, much less the impact of the dual forces of culture and gender. It is often gender that is overlooked as a significant variable, which school personnel must assess, if they are to help their individual students.

CONCLUSION

The complexity surrounding refugee students demands that teachers and school personnel search out new ways of understanding the many factors influencing the school experience of refugee students. Many teachers are well aware of the need to understand their students' cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, sometimes gleaned a little cultural information can lead to increased stereotypic thinking. For example, teachers who believe that all Vietnamese feel education is important, often also believe that Vietnamese students will do well even with minimal teacher/school assistance. On the other hand, those teachers who believe that because Lao or Khmer students are Buddhist, their parents will not encourage or push them to work hard in school or try to overcome initial poor performance. This assessment can lead to teachers feeling it is futile to encourage these students. However, since Vietnamese students are also Buddhist, these two stereotypes prove to be contradictory as well as unhelpful in understanding individual students. Such stereotyping can easily cloud the issue of a student's success in the school environment. The multifaceted approach described in this article is one possible tool that can prevent stereotyping individual students.

As more and more of our schools become culturally diverse, anthropologists can do much to assist teachers in utilizing a multifaceted, anthropological approach to understanding the cultural backgrounds of their individual students. Teachers should be encouraged to study anthropology during their years of pre-service training, and school systems should be encouraged to employ anthropologists for the in-service training of teachers. Cultural Diversity is not a "fad" that will disappear in the future and an anthropological perspective on culture is an indispensable tool for teachers working with culturally diverse classrooms.

America's shifting demographic profile, brought about by immigration and

differential birth rates, is inexorably changing the face of American schools and colleges, altering their mission, their student bodies, and their curriculum. "If birth and immigration rates hold, by the year 2000, the nation's school-age populace will be one third minority: black children, who now comprise 15% of the school-age population, will constitute 17%, and Hispanic children, now 10%, will climb to 13%" (Weiner, p. 7).

As our country's classrooms become increasingly diverse, the anthropological perspective becomes ever more helpful, not only in working with refugee students, but with all individual students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

[This article, edited by Ruth Selig, is based on a longer, heavily documented paper presented at the American Anthropological Association's 1990 Annual Meeting in New Orleans. The original paper can be obtained by writing the author at 11829 Claychester Drive, Des Peres, MO 63131.]

For Further Reading

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