

Chapter 19

Refugee Parents' Perceptions of Bullying Practices of Their Children in Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the chapter is to examine how parents from refugee backgrounds understand and perceive school bullying and anti-bullying policies. Given that bullying continues to be a serious problem in schools, and that immigrant and refugee-background students are particularly severely impacted, it is imperative that perspectives from different stakeholders, including refugee background parents, be incorporated in anti-bullying policies and interventions. Data were collected using the focus group method, with parents drawn from the refugee community in a town in upstate New York. Focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 27 parents from refugee backgrounds. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed and organized thematically. Findings showed that parents (1) experience secondary stress from bullying of their children, (2) advocate for their children, (3) often feel unheard and diminished by school teachers and administrators, and (4) have an interest in meeting and working with teachers and other school officials to address bullying. Findings provide implications for bullying policies and practices for school personnel.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that over 68 million people in the world have been forcibly displaced, 25.4 million of whom are refugees (UNHCR, 2018). The United States has resettled over 3 million refugees since 1975, with 53,716 resettled in 2017 (Refugee Processing Center, 2018). This relocation of people engenders complexities and challenges for schools and educational practitioners in host countries. Moreover, relocation of people from refugee backgrounds may

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cause psychologically complex and challenging situations for young people in host country schools. The Bridging Refugees Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS, 2010) indicates that students from refugee backgrounds endure high-levels of bullying in schools. Bullying is defined as behaviour by an individual or group, usually repeated over time, but can occur once, that hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally (NYSED, 2012).

Research on students from refugee backgrounds reveals that refugee students get bullied for various reasons including speaking with a foreign accent, religion, race and for just being different from the mainstream children (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010; Mosselson, 2002; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). However, minimal research attention has been paid on how parents from refugee backgrounds handle bullying of their children. There are studies that deal with refugee parents' engagement in schools (Githembe, 2009; Han & Love, 2015; Tadasse, 2014). Githembe (2009) reports various ways parents from refugee backgrounds interact with school administrators and teachers. Similarly, Han and Love (2015) reveal that there are four stages of refugee parental involvement depending on the refugees' status and date of arrival. They contend that new refugee arrivals are likely not to be engaged in school because they are concerned with survival needs whereas people who have been in the U.S. for a long time are valuable to schools as they can serve as a bridge between school culture and the refugee community. Tadasse's study (2014) shows that there are cultural and linguistic impediments to school involvement and participation for parents of refugee students. But there are no studies that examine how parents from refugee backgrounds deal with bullying of their children. This chapter fills that gap in the literature. Parental voice on anti-bullying policies and practices is salient considering that most students from refugee backgrounds who are victims of bullying can be severely traumatized, some to the point of considering suicide and other forms of self-harm as methods of escape because they do not want to overburden their parents (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). This chapter also broadens the understanding of socio-emotional well-being of families from refugee backgrounds as they adjust and adapt in the US as a host and new home country.

BACKGROUND

Parents of students from refugee backgrounds are often presented from a deficit perspective. They are usually presented as passive and even ineffective participants in their children's schooling. This study challenges the deficit model by centering voices of parents of students from refugee backgrounds. It asserts that it is important to reconsider, rethink and expand the concept of parental engagement vis-a-vis bullying and anti-bullying measures. The study re-positions parents as active and engaged participants in their children's lives and schooling (Barton, et al., 2004). The following is a discussion of the theory of acculturation which provides the context of how schools can be spaces that allow all parents to be heard and can capitalize on cultural and linguistic resources of parents from refugee backgrounds.

Theory of Acculturation

McBrien (2016) defines acculturation as the change in one's culture due to contact with another culture. In other words, cultures are permeable in such a way that two cultures in close existence will result in the phenomena of acculturation. In many ways, the vast majority of people in this world who have come

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