

Tools to Foster Resilience for Burmese Students

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Abstract

Buffalo is an important refugee resettlement area that has attracted people fleeing from many adversities across the globe. The Burmese are one of these groups who are in the midst of political and military turmoil in Myanmar. They have come to the Buffalo area in hopes of a better life for themselves. The Burmese people have become my neighbors and their children will be my students as I plan to teach in the city of Buffalo. It is of utmost importance that I educate myself on their history and struggles to learn how I can best serve the needs of those who have experienced trauma. My goals for this project were to (1) learn more about the Burmese immigrant experience in Buffalo and (2) develop a toolkit of resources to address the specific trauma that children from this group have experienced. My study began with a literature review of the impact of trauma on children and ways to build resilience. I then interviewed local experts from the Burmese community and teachers who work with Burmese children. My poster will share findings and a toolkit of effective practices.

Background

In the summer of 2018, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Myanmar as part of the study away program sponsored by the SUNY Buffalo State Creative Studies Department. This experience led to my current interest in the experiences of Burmese immigrants in Buffalo. My research project explored both the theories associated with trauma and the tools that teachers can use to help students deal with trauma and develop resilience.

Based on my observations as a student and teacher, I believe the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum, and children must meet with social success before they can achieve high levels of academic success. I think educators play a vital role in helping children grow into healthy self-sufficient adults, and I wanted to develop an evidence-based toolkit to meet this goal.

Literature Review

Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom (2016) by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall explores the growing problem of childhood trauma as it affects learning and teaching. The authors explain concepts like trauma, trauma-sensitive learning environment and adverse childhood experiences before giving readers several strategies in implementing a positive learning environment. *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity* (2018) written by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris centers around childhood adverse experiences or ACEs. Dr. Harris's book was both eye-opening and inspiring. Her work as a physician brought her on a journey to discover the relationship between toxic stress and lifelong illnesses. She focuses on ACEs and how they can have lasting effects on our biological system. Unfortunate events in a child's life like physical or sexual abuse, neglect, parental addiction, mental illness and parental divorce can lead to health factors such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease and more. *Bamboo People* (2012) by Mitali Perkins is a historical fiction book that gives the account of two adolescent boys, very differently affected by the trouble in Myanmar. Chicko, a Burmese boy is tricked into war where he meets Te Reh, a Karenni who joins the army to seek revenge after watching his village being burned down. This book portrayed very strong and believable characters. It helped me attain a well-rounded understanding by reading about the impact of trauma on the humans who experience it.

The Importance of Resilience

"When you have resilience, you harness inner strength that helps you rebound from a setback or challenge, such as a job loss, an illness, a disaster or the death of a loved one. If you lack resilience, you might dwell on problems, feel victimized, become overwhelmed or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse. Resilience won't make your problems go away — but resilience can give you the ability to see past them, find enjoyment in life and better handle stress. If you aren't as resilient as you'd like to be, you can develop skills to become more resilient." - Mayo Clinic staff (Souers & Hall, 2016, pg. 179)

Method

I used a multitude of resources in order to prepare myself to carry out my research project effectively. This included the three books mentioned above. I also read articles from the *Buffalo News* about local Burmese refugees and how they have come to adjust to life in America and especially Western New York. I also watched a documentary, *Resilience: The Biology of Stress & the Science of Hope* (2017). Like the book, *The Deepest Well*, the film explores adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and so Dr. Harris and others from the book make appearances. I was also invited to participate as a fellow in the 2019 SUNY Buffalo State Social Justice Fellowship: Sophia's Legacy. After reviewing the literature, I conducted interviews of educators and community leaders in order to get their input on Burmese refugees living in Buffalo. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Results

"There's a correlation between the number of ACEs and individuals struggling with school and health. The more ACEs a student experiences, the more likely they are to experience serious school and health issues." (Souers & Hall, 2016, 21)

"These children aren't seeking attention (even though they will settle for it). They are looking for a safe and trustworthy relationship." (Souers & Hall, 2016, 93)

Twenty years of medical research has shown that childhood adversity literally gets under our skin, changing people in ways that can endure in their bodies for decades. It can tip a child's developmental trajectory and affect physiology." (Harris, 2018, xv)

"For instance, a person with four or more ACEs was twice as likely to develop heart disease and cancer and three and a half times as likely to develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease as a person with zero ACEs" (Harris, 2018, 38)

"Slowly but surely, we were building our toolkit of clinical interventions to combat the effects of toxic stress. Sleep, mental health, healthy relationships, exercise, nutrition and mindfulness—we saw in our patients that these six things were critical for healing." (Harris, 2018, 114)

Toolkit

1. Strengthen teacher-student relationships:
 - individual conferences
 - eating lunch with students
 - creating a relationship with students off school grounds through involvement with community/ school events
 - joining playground fun
2. "Sea of forgetfulness" - theme or concept to start each day in the classroom with a fresh start. This also holds teachers accountable as to not bring up students' misbehaviors from a previous day.
3. Raising mindfulness and awareness- teaching students to breathe deeply. Myanmar's culture is heavily rooted in yoga, yoga can be an integral part of a classrooms' daily routines.
4. Promoting a safe classroom environment. This can include, but is not limited to assigned seating, posting pictures of students in the classroom, and or positive notes/ phone call home
5. Side to side talk vs. face to face talk- great for students whose cultural norms make eye contact disapproving.
6. Approach students from an assets-framework. Educators make an effort to get to know children culture/heritage and integrates that into the curriculum.
7. Diversified books



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