

Elevating English Learners (ELs)



Social and Emotional Supports for Newcomer Students

This paper, Social and Emotional Supports for Newcomer Students, is one of a series of three papers that focus on newcomers. The other papers in the series include Academic Supports for Newcomer Students and Programs for Newcomer Students.

Overview

Students who arrive in the United States from other countries (newcomers) represent a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds and different social and emotional needs. In recent years, the majority of newcomers are unaccompanied youth from Central America. Reports from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that 58 percent of unaccompanied youth come to the United States due to safety concerns (UNHCR, 2013). Regardless of their particular backgrounds, the majority of newcomers will struggle with social and cultural adjustments in the United States. Schools may serve a pivotal role by providing newcomers social and emotional supports that may help them transition to schools and communities in the United States (Adelman & Taylor, 2008). Easing students' transition may include understanding how to meet their social and emotional needs by affirming their experiences and cultural background.

There are two general areas of consideration that this paper will address: (1) acclimating students to their new environment, and (2) addressing the impact of trauma and emotional stress, particularly in the case of unaccompanied youth. Within each area, this paper addresses four strategies for working with newcomers in the school environment:

- Get to know the students and their needs.
- Educate and engage the school community.
- Work with families, guardians, and sponsors.
- Seek community resources.

Below are suggestions of how to implement these considerations followed by resources for further information.

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Acclimating Students to their New Environment

Many districts provide both social and emotional support for newcomers through newcomer programs. Newcomer programs offer “specialized academic environments that serve newly arrived, immigrant English language learners for a limited period of time” (Short & Boyson, 2012). In general, the goals of newcomer programs are to (1) help students acquire beginning English skills, (2) provide some instruction in core content areas, (3) guide students’ acculturation to the school system in the United States, and (4) develop or strengthen students’ native language literacy skills. For districts that do not have newcomer programs, it may still be useful to become familiar with approaches used in these programs for easing newcomer’s transitions. More information can be found in another paper in this series, *Programs for Newcomer Students*.

Get to Know the Students and Their Needs. There are many things to learn about newcomers as they enter a new country and school system. The first order of business for schools is finding out what language the student speaks. Districts or schools will give the families, guardians, or sponsors of a home language survey (HLS), a questionnaire that helps schools/districts identify which students are potential English learners (ELs) and who will require additional assessment of their English language proficiency (ELP) to



determine whether they will require language support services. The HLS includes questions about what language(s) the student first learned, understands, uses, and hears, and in what contexts. All information regarding school policies that would be given to a new student at the time of enrollment—e.g., information about late openings and early closings, attendance policies, etc.—should be offered in the student’s native language.

Making assumptions about cultures, language, and family history may result in misconceptions about a student and his or her family’s cultural background.

When possible, take time to visit where immigrant families gather—ethnic groceries, places of worship, and ethnic organizations. Build relationships with the “experts” who work regularly with these populations.

It is important for the school or classroom teacher to begin forming a relationship with newcomers by learning about the individual newcomer’s cultural and religious traditions, hobbies, personality, family circumstances, and background, and about each student’s home community or native country. Inviting the sharing of this information, while respecting boundaries of privacy, may help increase the student’s confidence. This may also help the school develop strategies to capitalize on the student’s strengths and successes. This will help facilitate the student’s acclimation to a new environment, culture, and school.

It is also critical to gain the student’s trust. To continue relationship building, teachers should look for opportunities to ask students to share information about themselves or to discuss how their previous environments were different from their current one. Teachers can use stories or language arts assignments to help all students, including newcomers, to talk about their family, pets, favorite sports, and what they do after school and on weekends. For newcomers, teachers can create a graphic organizer to help them express and share the differences between their life in their native country and their new environment.

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Teachers can provide opportunities through social studies, science, and math classes for similar sharing through academic work. For example, students could document their experiences through tape recordings, pictures, and journals or autobiographical assignments.

Educate and Engage the School Community. To help promote cultural awareness, teachers may foster a feeling of emotional safety in the classroom by respecting every student’s opinion and encouraging all students to be respectful of one another. By participating in various learning activities, students may appreciate the positive contributions of their peers, regardless of ethnicity. Students could learn about the languages and cultures of the newcomer.

Schools may consider implementing welcoming strategies such as assigning peer buddies to help orient new students. Instructional groupings can also foster small-group interaction with newcomers and help them develop friendships with students who attended the school in previous years. Friendships may help the newcomer cope with stress associated with culture shock and adjustment.

Another important source of support includes school community members—and particularly professional staff—who reflect the student’s culture. Teachers, guidance counselors, paraprofessionals, parent liaisons, or other bilingual staff members can welcome the student and begin conversations that may help ease the transition to this country. Staff can help connect academic and school learning with students’ experiences and interests, and help to connect the student’s current experiences to their lives as students, building on different ways of understanding. These staff can also help the student question their previous and current social situations or help them develop a ‘critical consciousness’ (Kea & Trent, 2013).

Other schools may offer extended day programs such as before and after care that may help students acclimate. These programs will help demonstrate that schools are a safe and welcoming environment. Students may receive additional academic support and participate in enrichment activities such as art, drama, and sports. With the smaller student-teacher ratios in such programs, students can receive individual help and attention, which will help increase their skills, ELP, and self-confidence. Extended day programs also help the student meet other students their age and/or work in a multi-age setting.

All this support from staff will create a reassuring atmosphere for the youth. Additionally, decorations, posters, books, games, and other items in the youths’ native language may increase their sense of acculturation and decrease their sense of alienation. Everyone in school, including cafeteria and maintenance staff, bus drivers, health aides, and office assistants, can support the new students, by acknowledging the diversity and conducting activities that highlight the contributions of all students.

Work with Families, Guardians, and Sponsors. Educators should remember that families, guardians, and sponsors of newcomers may need time and help to learn about school life in the United States, school programs and services, and school assignments. Translate all materials in the native language and perhaps learn a few phrases of the language and use them when meeting the families.

Visiting homes may help to establish a relationship with families, guardians, or sponsors who work during school and after-school hours or who may feel intimidated by the school setting. When organizing home and community visits, try to do the following:

- Arrange for an interpreter to be present.
- Respect the family’s time constraints and choice of location—whether in the home, church, or community center.
- Point out ways they can help with their student’s language development, reading skills, and homework.
- Use visuals whenever possible, such as translated forms and other information.

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Make efforts to find a qualified adult interpreter for interactions with family members, guardians, or sponsors when language is a hurdle. Relying on a student as the translator can make families feel inferior and disempowered.

Seek Community Resources. Collaboration with community groups may supplement supports that are not readily available in schools, particularly when it comes to (1) understanding newcomers' backgrounds more fully, and (2) accessing necessary resources. Such resources could include immigrant or ethnic community or youth centers, or social service agencies such as job centers, food banks, housing assistance groups, and refugee resettlement organizations that may help the student and their families obtain transition support.

Building relationships with community-based organizations that work with EL communities and immigrant populations can provide different experiences for the students. These organizations may help to locate trained interpreters for school events or conferences and to translate important documents for family members or sponsors. The interpreters also may help with print translations.

School districts may reach out directly to agencies to increase their awareness of the newcomers in the school and identify the students' specific needs. Schools may find that it is helpful to organize a meeting of representatives from community groups to foster collaboration across organizations. Indirect contact with community organizations such as writing letters, making phone calls, creating fliers, or writing emails are effective outreach tools, making them aware of how they may support newcomers and that you hold newcomers' interests in common.

Addressing the Impact of Trauma and Emotional Stress

Many newcomers will face different types of trauma and emotional stress during their acclimation period in a new school environment (Bankston & Zhou, 1998; Orfield & Yun, 1999). They may feel a lack of family presence or support, segregated from friends who speak their native language, and find it difficult to adjust to unfamiliar living situations. In addition, many have experienced trauma and emotional stress in their home countries, and in their journey, which they may carry with them into their new situation.

Get to Know the Students and Their Needs. The importance of building relationships with newcomer students, as outlined above, cannot be overstated. Through the connections the students forge with teachers, other students, staff, etc., and the sharing of their stories, they implicitly receive some degree of emotional support, but also are more likely to indicate when there may be a need for greater intervention.

Educate and Engage the Whole School Community. Connecting teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and others can help school staff members collaborate on strategies for providing emotional support for students during their transition period. One activity to raise school-wide consciousness of the experience of the newcomer students, and to provide an opportunity for them to see their experiences mirrored, may be to show videos of other immigrants talking about their experiences in the United States. One such video is *I Learn America*¹, an award-winning documentary that chronicles how five students master English, adapt to families they have not seen in years, and create a future of their own in the United States.

Work with Families, Guardians, and Sponsors. Building trusting relationships with not only newcomers but with the other people in their home, enlarges the team of people who are looking out for the needs of these students. This is particularly useful in the case of students who have experienced, and may still be experiencing, trauma and emotional stress.

¹ For more information about the documentary see: <http://ilearnamerica.com>.

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Seek Community Resources. Among the community groups that can help serve the needs of newcomers and their families, guardians, and sponsors are counseling centers; medical and dental clinics; and providers of mental health services. It is important to build relationships with such community resources in order to create a network of support for newcomers' needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, schools play a critical role in helping newcomers succeed personally and academically. The approaches identified above may help schools meet students' social-emotional needs and build students' potential to achieve academic success. Below are resources that educators may use to help ease the transition experienced by the newcomers.

Resources about Newcomers

- Administration for Children and Families. (n.d.). About Unaccompanied Children's Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ucs/about>
- Arams, D. (2010). *On their way: An orientation curriculum for unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs)*. Retrieved from <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/on-their-way-curriculum>
- Colorín Colorado (2012). How to reach out to parents of ELLs. Retrieved from Colorín Colorado website: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/reachingout/outreach/>
- National Association for Educational of Homeless Children and Youth. (2014). *Protocol for enrolling unaccompanied youth in school*. Retrieved from http://naehcy.org/dl/tk/hs/2_enroll.doc
- National Association of School Principals (NASP). (2009). School-based services for traumatized refugee children. Retrieved from NASP website: <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/39/5/ServiceRefugeeChildren.aspx>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2014). Educational services for immigrant children and those recently arrived to the United States. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/unaccompanied-children.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *FACT SHEET: Educational services for immigrant children and those recently arrived to the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/unaccompanied-children.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2014). *Fact Sheet from the Unaccompanied Alien Children Program*. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/unaccompanied_childrens_services_fact_sheet.pdf

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- Bankston, C. L., & Zhou, M. (1998). The social adjustment of Vietnamese American adolescents: Evidence for a segmented assimilation approach. *Social Science Quarterly* 78(2), 508–523.
- Kea, C. D., & Trent, S. C. (2013) Providing culturally responsive teaching in field-based and student teaching experience: A case study. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3, 82-101.
- Orfield, G., & Yun, J. T. (1999). *Resegregation in American schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved from <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/resegregation-in-american-schools/orfiled-resegregation-in-american-schools-1999.pdf>
- Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). *Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/helping-newcomer-students>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) . (2013). *Children on the run: Unaccompanied children leaving Central America and Mexico and the need for international protection*. Washington, DC: UNHCR Regional Office for the U.S. and the Caribbean. Retrieved from http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/1_UAC_Children%20on%20the%20Run_Full%20Report.pdf

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