

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Family Partnership: Practical Implications from a Case Study of a Refugee Family

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The attendance of children from refugee families at Head Start agencies provides the opportunity for Head Start staff to foster trusting family partnerships that are collaborative, respectful, and goal-oriented. The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the actions of the Head Start staff and a refugee family that could have potentially developed into a trusting partnership between them and determine what facilitated or impeded the formation of this partnership. The findings indicated that the relationship between the family and Head Start staff was positive but not the type of trusting partnership that the Head Start national standards advocate. Factors that facilitated and impeded the formation of trusting partnership in this case study as well as implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Head Start; family-professional partnership; family engagement; refugee families

Head Start strives to engage families in their children's preschool education in order to establish partnerships geared toward the long-term outcome of child and family success. Head Start's mission to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services in partnership with families is congruent with Office of Refugee Resettlement's mission, and a formal partnership has been recognized between the two agencies. A refugee is someone who:

“owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” (United Nations High Commission on Refugees, n.d.)

During 2011, the U.S. resettled 56,424 refugees (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Thirty-four percent of refugees admitted to the United States in 2011 were under 18 years of age (U.S. Department of State et al., 2012). Many refugee families are members of the Head Start community, and many of their educators, recognizing the importance of forming strong partnerships with families, grapple with forming strong partnerships with them due to cultural and linguistic differences.

Head Start recognizes the importance of promoting cultural responsiveness through strong partnerships with families with the Head Start Act (2007) and the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services et al., 2011). This framework concisely defines family partnership as: “Staff and families build ongoing, respectful, and goal-oriented relationships...[by] identifying and acting on family goals and aspirations and using program and community supports and resources to promote progress on family and child development goals” (p. 4). In addition, the code of federal regulations requires Head Start staff to:

“engage in a process of collaborative partnership-building with parents to establish mutual trust and to identify family goals, strengths, and necessary services and other supports... as early after enrollment as possible... [taking] into consideration each family's readiness and willingness to participate in the process.” (45 C.F.R. §1304.40(a)(1))

The federal regulation specifies that collaboration, trust, and building on family strengths are inherent to family-professional partnerships. It also states that Head Start agencies must ensure that “effective two-way comprehensive communications between staff and parents are carried out on a regular basis throughout the program year” (45 CFR §1304.51(c)(1)). With the overall goal of creating trusting, collaborative, respectful, and goal-oriented partnerships characterized by comprehensive two-way communication to support child and family outcomes, Head Start agencies are required to provide numerous activities that could help foster family partnerships.

Family involvement is generally conceptualized as what families contribute to school, what families do at home to contribute to their children’s education, and activities in which families and school personnel interact (McWayne, Campos, Owsianak, 2008). Numerous studies demonstrate that family involvement in Head Start is effective at increasing family and child outcomes (e.g., Henrich & Gadaire, 2008; Hindman, Miller, Froyen, & Skibbe, 2012).

These family involvement activities do not always draw families into Head Start, however, and they may not result in forming a trusting partnership. Specific to refugee families with young children in preschool in the U.S., researchers have found that (a) refugee families are often unfamiliar with the pedagogical techniques in U.S. schools and may find them to be inappropriate, which may result in their distance from the classroom (e.g., Tadesse et al., 2009); (b) although many refugee families have an interest in their children’s education, they do not always have the ability to be involved in their children’s education in ways educators expect due to numerous potential barriers (e.g., lack of understanding of involvement, financial and family responsibilities, lack of cultural and

linguistic knowledge) (e.g., McBrien, 2011); and (c) refugee families often have different expectations for their children's behavior than teachers, which might hinder their involvement in their children's schools (e.g., Hurley, Medici, Stewart, & Cohen, 2011).

OUR STUDY

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the relationship between Head Start staff and a refugee family and determine what factors helped or hindered the formation of the trusting partnership to which Head Start aspires. We found a Head Start on the outskirts of a medium-sized Midwestern city whose director and educators were willing to participate in this research. Then we found a refugee family whose child, Haaruun, was at risk for disability. We composed a case study of this family and Haaruun's educators by conducting interviews of family members and Head Start educators, observing in Haaruun's home and Head Start and analyzing program documents. Haaruun was a 4-year old boy born in the U.S. to Somali refugee parents. Haaruun's parents spoke English, but his father, Mahdi, had limited formal schooling, and his mother, Aamino, never attended school. Before enrolling in Head Start at the beginning of the year, Haaruun had never been without his mother or father. Haaruun's three Head Start educators had worked as early childhood educators for an average of 17.5 years and had a wealth of personal and professional experiences. The Head Start educators were concerned about Haaruun's development because he displayed unpredictable and often inappropriate behavior when over-stimulated or in new situations. For example, he impulsively ran from the classroom several times, and his parents saw similar behavior at home. Haaruun spoke little English, responded to teachers by repeating their words, and spoke sparingly in Somali. His teachers referred him for special education evaluation due to possible language and cognitive delays.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings indicate that Head Start educators offered multiple activities for family engagement, and Mahdi participated in the events that did not conflict with his work schedule. Communication was mostly from the educators to the parents, however, and the Head Start staff did not seek Aamino and Mahdi's perspectives on issues of concern. Throughout the 20-week duration of the study, Haaruun's family did not have high expectations for or knowledge of the partnership Head Start policy advocates.

What strengthened the relationship between the family and teachers? Haaruun's family was willing to participate in family engagement activities. In fact, Mahdi participated in every event he could attend without taking off work. In addition, the family had a lot of respect for the teachers. Both Aamino and Mahdi held the teachers and their suggestions in high esteem and were awed by their skill in working with their son. The Head Start staff focused on the wellbeing of the families they served, seeing each child, including Haaruun, as a member of a complex family. Another positive factor was that many Head Start staff members interacted with the family, providing the potential opportunity for Haaruun's parents to form a relationship with a variety of

people. The Head Start educators' genuine care for the students and their families motivated the staff to work hard to meet their children's families' needs.

What hindered the relationship from developing into a trusting partnership? One factor was the family's structure. Aamino was the primary caregiver, but she was not willing to leave her children with anybody other than Mahdi. This resulted in Mahdi attending the Head Start events without her, so she did not know what was happening at school even though she spent the most time with her children. In addition, the family's unfamiliarity with the school system and family partnerships resulted in limited expectations for partnership. The family sought guidance from the Head Start educators in how to work with and educate Haaruun, but they were not confident that they had valuable information to share with the educators.

Numerous factors limited the Head Start staff's actions towards partnership. First, strict accountability measures made differentiating interactions with families difficult. For example, following a checklist for parent-teacher conferences hindered family member input on setting the agenda, limited educator eye contact with Mahdi, and stilted the natural flow of conversation. Second, numerous responsibilities and low hourly pay for non-exempt Head Start staff squelched creating and implementing innovative family partnership activities that would take up unpaid time beyond their already-packed days. Haaruun's lead teacher, for example, worked at Head Start from 8 to 4 and then worked a second job to make ends meet for her family. Third, educators had limited knowledge of Haaruun's home context, which caused misunderstandings. For example, Head Start staff were very concerned about Haaruun's eating patterns (he refused to eat at Head Start), but they would not have been as concerned if they understood that he ate a robust meal before getting on the school bus every day. Fourth, the model of having multiple people working with Haaruun and his family had its benefits, but it also impeded forming a strong relationship between the family and any one staff member because communication was dispersed between all educators and staff. In addition, scarce time for collaborating and communicating resulted in some information being lost between the numerous educators who worked with them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Head Start presents an opportunity for launching families as partners in their children's education. Building trusting, collaborative, respectful, and goal-oriented partnerships with refugee families could increase teachers' knowledge of home environments and families' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). These partnerships could connect children's home and school environments, and families would learn from Head Start staff while understanding the value of their own knowledge (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011). While Head Start educators and families could both benefit from building these partnerships, children would benefit the most because their potentially parallel worlds would come together. This case study was qualitative in nature and focused solely on one child's family and Head Start educators; therefore, the ability to generalize the findings to other families and Head Start educators is limited. Although this research does not attempt to quantify the prevalence of these practices, we urge Head Start educators to consider the following implications for practice. To work

towards creating such partnerships, Head Start staff should have more authority and professional development in order to be responsive to the families they serve, options for family involvement should be accessible to all families, and families should understand the options for partnership.

Teacher Responsiveness

If Head Start staff were given authority, time, and professional development to be responsive to the families and children they serve, they could be in a position to learn about the home environment, families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and families' concepts of family involvement and partnership (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2008). Such professional development could enable Head Start staff to engage in reciprocal communication with families (as opposed to the lockstep adherence to checklists) to learn valuable information from families and develop an awareness of their own perspectives on families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). In addition, Head Start staff could increase their methods of communication from home to school to ensure access, and, in addition, they should make sure families understand these methods. A review of strategies to create culturally responsive partnerships is beyond the scope of this article; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak and Shogren (2015) and Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) provide recommended strategies.

Family Involvement Options

Understanding family preferences for involvement and ways families are already involved are paramount to successfully increasing family involvement options (BRYCS, 2007). Hurley, Saini, Warren, and Carberry (2013) report that inviting refugee families to plan menus and prepare ethnically diverse food resulted in more responsive partnerships. Planning activities that could involve younger siblings (BRYCS, 2007) could help alleviate the worry of families who do not want to leave their children in childcare. We encourage involving families in the process of creating more options for family involvement, but we caution that different understandings of involvement and partnership might inhibit families' generation of innovative solutions to their barriers (Ariza, 2000).

Family Awareness of Partnership

Starting during the cultural orientation activities typically provided by resettlement agencies, refugee families could be taught about family partnership expectations and opportunities in Head Start and the K-12 education system. Ideally, this education would be offered by Head Start and school officials in concert with other orientation programs offered by resettlement agencies.

SUMMARY

Children from refugee families' attendance at Head Start provides the opportunity for Head Start staff to foster trusting, collaborative, respectful, and goal-oriented partnership characterized by comprehensive two-way communication to support child and family outcomes. These partnerships could help launch refugee families as partners in their children's education in the U.S. and, ultimately, improve family and child outcomes over time. As this study indicates, due to a variety of reasons, these partnerships are not always formed. The Head Start community will greatly benefit from increased focus on building trusting, collaborative, respectful, and goal-oriented partnerships characterized by comprehensive two-way communication to support child and family outcomes for all families, especially refugee families new to the U.S. education system.

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