

Being culturally and therapeutically savvy when delivering services to communities with a refugee experience.

Culturally and Therapeutically Savvy Engagement with Learners and their Families with Refugee Experience

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16 October 2020

How do we make education engage with the life-worlds of learners and families with refugee experience?

One of the primary challenges of our educational systems is related to how we can best connect schools with the communities that access education and include the rich 'life worlds' that communities bring into the learning environment so we can all be enriched by each individual's capacity to uniquely participate.

This is not a goal that can be easily legislated or achieved through simple 'policy' and practice directives. It requires critical reflection on action practices centred around the needs of learners and an understanding of how our own perceptions are shaped by our life worlds.

Limits of policy and practice: educators who are cognisant, courageous and adaptive.

Although Policy is useful in making explicit the primary drivers and goals of a set of objectives driving educational outcomes, it needs cognisant, courageous and adaptive educators to breathe life into how this is achieved on the ground.

Policy is limited in what it can see, what it can prescribe, and what it can achieve, so although policy is fundamental to making goals explicit and useful in offering a blueprint for action, it must be adaptively applied, when enacted in practice.

A Policy blueprint cannot completely account for the multitude of lived experiences and life worlds in our communities. Service delivery can only be successful if the special needs of learners with refugee experience drive how we deliver services because their lived experiences do not sit within the normative bounds of what's imagined in policy development.

The educator needs to be able to be cognisant of the policy objectives and also know how to organically interact with realities on the ground and the life worlds of different learning communities. This allows educators to produce educational strategies, experiences and materials that achieve policy goals that are also cognisant of the life worlds and experiences of communities accessing education. This achieves the spirit of policy because it is applied adaptively around the needs of learners, their families and communities. The goal of any good social policy has at its heart the aim of facilitating the capacity of each individual, family and community to participate in healthy functioning and interactions in our society.

Affinity bias

One of the challenges that face all of us is that we are programmed to identify and understand experiences that reflect our own. In a positive sense this allows us to empathise with others, understand the challenges they face and the opportunities that we might share. We are most able to perceive and understand the realities of others to the extent that they reflect our own experiences and realities. For example, as an individual with educational training and teaching experience, I can relate to the experiences and pressures on teachers such as the challenges of behaviour management, marking and assessment, curriculum and resource development and time pressures. This natural proclivity towards familiar cognitive schemas and experiences allows me to relate to, sympathise and share

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perspectives with my colleagues in schools and can become a challenge when we engage with experiences and realities that are markedly different to our own.

Building tolerance for emotional discomfort when listening to lived experiences unlike my own

For example, as a hetero mostly able Brown man, I have rarely been subjected to harassment because there is a gendered societal perception amongst some, that my clothes are too revealing. This is however something I have heard from young women in counselling sessions. One young woman described being harassed by a student support worker at a school (who was from the same cultural background) for wearing mufti that other Australian girls wear. The student support worker believed this was inappropriate for a girl and chided her for being 'loose'. Similarly, travelling alone at night on public transport when I was young, was not a major source of anxiety or potential threat. I did not have fears that I might possibly be assaulted or raped by another man however again, as I listen to women talk, I realise ordinary life experiences I take for granted are not shared by them.

Similarly, I recall when teaching an adult education class at TAFE being told by a male student about the mental anguish he experiences every morning before leaving home as he chose what he would wear for the day and as he worried if his clothing would give him away as a Gay man, and whether this would expose him to potential verbal or physical violence on the train. Listening to this young man share his perspective helped me understand how my own interactions with society result in very different experiences to his. I have learned that my behaviour, cognitions and emotions have been shaped uniquely by structural privileges attached to my presentation as a hetero man and in order to grow beyond my affinity bias, I must position myself as an open, curious and respectful listener when women or gay men describe their lived experiences and how it has shaped their behaviours.

It is natural for me to possibly feel defensive or uncomfortable when I'm exposed to these different narratives and as I build tolerance for my own emotional discomfort, I cultivate a capacity to listen and grow new neural pathways that reflect an understanding of lived experiences in life worlds beyond my own.

What is normal and ordinary after the refugee experience?

When working with learners and their families with refugee experience, it is very important that we recognise that people with refugee experience have been exposed to extraordinary events that many educators may not be familiar with.

Even if we recognise that refugees have been exposed to horrific sensory experiences through war or fear of persecution, through deprivation and upheaval, and through a range of psychological injuries including abandonment, betrayal, assault, it is still hard for us to appreciate how these experiences impact on how people make sense of the world, their beliefs about right and wrong, their feelings towards other people, their engagement with the mundane and routine, and their altered sense of what is normal and ordinary.

These events have a unique impact at the community level, the family level and at the level of the individual who must find ways to adapt and continue living with the impact of this experience on their nervous system and all their relational engagements with other people.

Trauma and its impact on relationships

Most of us are aware of how trauma (i.e. the subjective sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming stress or threat to self or others), impacts on the nervous system. One of the most significant impacts of trauma is the re-

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calibration of the threat threshold. The traumatised nervous system responds to what might be considered as a minor stressor as if it is the re-occurrence of a mortal threat, activating the bodies reactive defence systems and minimising the capacity of complex problem-solving faculties.

This plays out especially in interpersonal relationships, and results in a nervous system that has a perceptual bias towards survival. Interpersonal congruence and maintaining harmony with others in relationships becomes a site of complex traumatic interactions. Bessel van der Kolk identified the need for 'getting on with others' as being the primary driver that brought ex-veterans to seek counselling and psychological assistance. Trauma within a sociological context has an impact on relationships at all levels of human ecology and because Education is an inter relational activity within the social ecology and we must factor in a strategy for facilitating safety, agency, and choice for learners and their communities with a refugee experience.

Learning from life worlds, acknowledging affinity bias in practice

Once we acknowledge that our own lived experiences do not offer us enough data to understand the life worlds of other individuals in our communities we have taken the first step to self-awareness and recognition that we need to move slowly when we work with people who have not shared our histories and phenomenological realities.

As a man experiencing multiple medical disabilities, my cognitions, behaviours, perceptions, have come to be shaped by an awareness of my own differences to those around me. I have a sense often that what is an ordinary expectation for some around me, is extraordinary when applied to me. The most ordinary assumptions that might be shared by friends in the gym, colleagues in the workplace, or people using amenities in public, are not assumptions that I can share, or expectations that I can meet. This has an impact on my participation and engagement in many contexts and depending on how flexible systems and individuals in systems are, will either facilitate or prevent my inclusion. This is true for many of us with different lived experiences and especially for those who have suffered and survived the refugee experience.

Acknowledging affinity bias in practice

What becomes most empowering for me is when an individual checks in with me, before they apply an assumption or expectation from their own lived experiences, to my experience. It is about cultivating a capacity to position oneself as a learner in each engagement with another individual especially when the relationship is underwritten by elements of power.

What I mean by this is, as an educator, I hold significant power over my learners and their families because I have specialist knowledge and training and institutional agency to pursue a set of tasks that may have direct or indirect impact on their capacity to engage or contribute to those tasks.

If I assume learners are capable and able to engage with what I expect of them, I may be disappointed when they are unable to reciprocate or participate in a way that meets my expectations. In these situations, we are faced with an opportunity to learn by re-examining our assumptions and expectations, and then re-purposing our objectives so they are aligned with the needs of the learners, their families and their communities. This is the first step of acknowledging affinity bias in practice.

Applying this to working with parents and families of learners with refugee experience

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If we wish to provide meaningful educational support to those receiving our services, we must position ourselves in a relationship of listening, understanding and consulting about how we proceed in the delivery of services. This relational positioning encourages us to be learners once again, testing our assumptions and testing our expectations in our relationships with our learners, their parents, their families and their communities.

We realise that what we hold as ordinary and natural and normal, may be not matched to what communities with refugee experiences now deem as normal and ordinary. We recognise that the refugee experience goes to the heart of what is ontologically accepted, beliefs and expectations about the purpose of life, trust, and relationships. The sense of the ordinary is altered. This necessarily means that people that have experienced the refugee experience may not share the same assumptions we have or the same expectations about the ordinary and mundane that we might have. There needs to be time for recovery and for the restitution of meaning and purpose.

This is not to say that we assume this experience is the case for each and every individual who has experienced refugee trauma, it may not be so. However' it does allow us to recognise that when learners or parents do not seem to cooperate or comply in ways that we assume are natural and ordinary, there may be very real adaptive reasons why this is so and why we need to respect the agency and choice of the learners and families we work with whilst creating a strategy that ensures they feel safe and is designed around their unique and special needs.

This means we must be able to facilitate a relationship with learners and their communities that enables their voices to be present and heard in our engagement and in the design of our services.

Some brief points to consider

if we reflect on the work we do in education we should be able to recognise that we hold invisible assumptions and beliefs about education, the role of families, the role of educators, the role of learners, and the role of the school. We also hold a set of invisible expectations related to these beliefs. For example, we must be explicit about assumptions and expectations regarding:

- the goal of education
- how it is organised
- the role of the educator
- the role of the parent/s or guardian/s
- the role of the learner
- our expectations of what a 'good' parent/guardian does to manage or support the relationship with the school
- our expectations of what a good parent/guardian does in their home to facilitate education
- our expectations of what a good learner does both at home and at school to participate in education

We hold invisible assumptions of what good educational practice looks like and what the role of a teacher is. All these beliefs or cognitive schemas are going to impact on the strategies we use to engage with learners and with parents. Unless we can position ourselves to cultivate self-awareness by acknowledging our affinity bias in practice, identifying and explicating our invisible assumptions and expectations, we are likely to be faced with complexities we are unable to navigate. Often these can be misdirected at those we service and can result in us finding fault or pathology in their culture, in their status or in their person.

Our engagement with the communities we work with begins with our self-awareness. We can then engage with learners and their families with a strong sense of what we believe and what our expectations are and begin to assess whether these are realistic and matched to the capacities or realities of the learners in the communities we work with.

In summary

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1. The refugee experience changes the threshold of ordinary life expectations
2. Our affinity bias impacts on the assumptions and expectations we have and these need to be re-examined and clarified if we are to engage with learners with refugee experiences
3. We hold embedded cultural assumptions about education, how it is delivered, the role of the teacher, the role of the parent and the role of the learner
4. There are practical ways we can counter affinity bias by developing a practice that is centred on the safety, agency, offering of choice and participation of learners and their families who have experience of being refugees.