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Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Cultural Brokers in Facilitating the School Adaptation of Refugee Children

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Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Cultural Brokers in Facilitating the School Adaptation of Refugee Children

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Canadian schools are utilizing services previously provided by settlement and community-based agencies to ensure the successful school adaptation of refugee children and families. This study examined the role of educational cultural brokers during the adaptation. Research queries addressed include strategies that cultural brokers use to facilitate the adaptation of refugee children in school settings, and opportunities and barriers to cultural brokering that exist in educational settings. A qualitative case study of eight educational cultural brokers was employed, using focus groups, critical incidents, document review, and semi-structured interviews. Results suggest brokers engage in micro- and macro-level activities through six brokering roles, with each role encompassing challenges and opportunities at the school, agency, and community level. This paper discusses aspects of these roles that have relevance for practice and policy, for both cultural brokers and other providers of school- based services to refugee families.

Collaboration between families and schools is vital when addressing the school needs of children and particularly for newcomer families confronted with cultural and language differences, and limited exposure to Canadian school systems. Schools and families are able to enlist third-party cultural brokers to assist and ensure appropriate service provision and successful school adaptation. Such service is particularly relevant when considering the educational needs of children with pre-migration histories of conflict and refugee experiences. Exposure to trauma and loss can increase the risk for academic and psychosocial difficulties (Lustig et. al., 2004), and limited formal schooling can result in challenges beyond typical language and cultural barriers to include a lack of knowledge of school systems and pre-literacy in first language (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). Adaptation can be complicated further by school systems that are not equipped to meet the unique grade placement (Kapreilian-Churchill, 1996) and programs needs (Wilkinson, 2002) of refugee children. Some of the reasons for the school dropout rate of refugee children include lack of encouragement from teachers and of home support, and students' frustration in their inability to catch up (Alberta Education, 2006). Cultural brokers are individuals who take on the role as a bridge or advocate on behalf of individuals or groups (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001). Cultural brokers often assist with the transfer of cultural knowledge for improving communication, practice, or relationships. There is limited research that examines the role of community-based cultural brokers who work with refugee children within educational settings. As such, this study explored the role of educational culture brokers in facilitating the adaptation of refugee children and their families' to educational settings.

Literature Review: Cultural Brokers in Educational Settings

In educational settings, many different individuals may take on the role of cultural broker. Teachers commonly act as cultural brokers between schools and student families (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Goodwin, 2000; Lane, 1992; Major, 2006; Stairs, 1995), as do instructional aides (Brockett, 1998; Lewis, 2004; Rueda & Genzuk, 2007) and school counsellors (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Gentemann & Whitehead). School or parent liaisons also play a role in bridging cultural gaps (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007) as part of their larger role to encourage collaboration and communication between schools and families. More broadly, community members, including after-school program staff (Cooper et al.) and other paraprofessionals (Owen & English, 2005) may broker for schools and families without direct affiliations to the school. Students and siblings at times act as brokers in their daily contact between their schools and homes (Gentemann & Whitehead; Jones & Trickett, 2005; Tse, 1995).

Debate exists about the importance of educational brokers sharing a similar cultural heritage with the individuals with whom they work (Gentemann, 1978). Lewis (2004) notes that this may be a simplistic approach, stating “whether or not instructional aides have connections in the communities they work in, it is assumed that because they are ‘similar’ in race, ethnicity, or class with the students and families, they can bridge a cultural gap between home and school” (p. 94). In her research on relationships between instructional aides, teachers, and parents, Lewis concludes that it takes more than a common language and culture to form meaningful bridges with student families. Others researchers emphasize that brokers simply need to possess cultural sensitivity and understanding of the group’s cultural norms (Singh, McKay, & Singh, 1999). Regardless, brokers should act in a culturally sensitive and respectful way that promotes understanding between schools and families.

Cultural brokers engage in a number of activities to educate and assist multicultural families and schools. Bilingual or multilingual brokers can offer translation services to ensure that schools and families understand each other without the hindrance of language difficulties (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Singh et al., 1999). Brokers can also help parents and students to navigate and interpret the mainstream educational system (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). Alternatively, cultural brokers can educate school administrators and teachers about cultural practices and beliefs, as well as ways to work with these differences in positively focused and productive ways. Working with families, brokers can educate and promote skill development enabling parents to advocate for their children in the educational system (Howland et al.; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Finally, brokers can offer practical assistance with social skills, English-language skills and finding employment, both for students (Gentemann & Whitehead) and parents (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone).

Often, the rules in a system are implicit and not clearly articulated (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). Usually, these rules are learned over time by taking part in the system. Students born and raised in the mainstream culture may begin learning these implicit rules in the home and continue throughout their schooling. For example, students learn that they are expected to sit in their seats and raise their hands to ask questions in the classroom. Bourdieu (1986) refers to this knowledge, experience, and social connection that enables certain individuals to succeed over less experienced individuals as *cultural capital*. Lack of cultural capital places students from cultural minorities at a disadvantage as they navigate the mainstream educational system. The cultural capital that parents possess as they enter the educational system may vary according to race and socioeconomic status (SES) (Lareau & Weininger, 2003), with higher SES parents typically needing less assistance to

navigate the system. However, for many multicultural parents, educational cultural brokers offer practical assistance and support to acquire cultural capital.

Educational cultural brokers can “translate” academic subculture to students and student subculture to schools (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007; Rueda & Genzuk, 2007). For students from diverse cultural groups, understanding one’s first culture often introduces errors in interpreting a new culture (Lynch, 2004). This may cause multicultural students to perceive school expectations as countering the cultural teaching they receive at home or as simply bewildering. Gorman (1999) offers several poignant examples from interviews with Canadian Aboriginal students about their schooling experiences. Gorman, and others (Stairs, 1995), note that teaching styles may differ between cultural groups. For example, Gorman characterizes the European model of teaching as a process of shaping children with mandatory obedience and prescribed knowledge to meet adult expectations. Alternatively, he describes the Aboriginal model of education favouring a process of guidance that encourages observation of elders, and nurturing students’ skills and interests to fulfill their destiny. Just as language translation facilitates dialogue between speakers of different languages, cultural translation eases communication between schools and students from different cultural groups. Educational cultural brokers can make these issues explicit, allowing schools, students, and families to discuss their differences and similarities as they learn from one another.

Cultural barriers and unwelcoming school environments for families, either real or perceived, can act as barriers to school-home collaborations (Ballen & Moles, 1998). Strengthening relationships between families and schools is especially important, as a growing number of studies link parental involvement in schools with children’s academic achievement and social and emotional development (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Jeynes, 2005). This literature review suggests that educational cultural brokers can potentially address some of these barriers to strengthen connections between students, families and schools. However, little attention has been paid to the activities of educational cultural brokers who work with refugee children and families. As such, the goal of this study is to develop an increased understanding of the role of brokering in schools in relation to the adaptation of refugee children and families.

Methodology

Case Study Method

I employed a qualitative case study that focussed on obtaining both contextual (Stake, 1995) and interactive features (Merriam, 1988) of an issue, event, or group of people. Representing purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), the participants in this study included a group of eight educational cultural brokers—four men and four women. These participants worked in an immigrant settlement agency in Edmonton, Alberta; six offered direct brokering services to school age children (grades 1 to 12) in Catholic and Public Schools in Edmonton, while two served as coordinators. The six brokers offered services to families with school age children from ethno-cultural communities in Edmonton from Uganda, Congo, Somalia, Kyrgstan, Dijbouti, Iraq, Kurdish, Afghanistan, Palestine, Sudan, Turkey, India, Colombia, Mexico, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. For the purpose of this paper, these participants and their work comprise the Cultural Brokers’ Program (CBP).

Initially a community-based program, the CBP began working directly with schools in 2001 to address the needs of newcomer children. Although the term *Educational Cultural Broker* has been

recently changed to *Settlement Practitioner*, the participants chose to use the former term for the purpose of this study because their activities had not changed and brokering remained central to their work and mandate. The CBP objective is to liaise with immigrant families, refugee students and schools to bridge cultural gaps and reduce potential communication problems, thereby enhancing the home and school environment. Post-secondary education in social work, community development or a related field, and additional language(s) were considered important qualifications for this role. The CBP shares some similarities with the In-School Settlement (ISS) program developed by the Calgary Bridge Foundation, which is modelled after the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) programs in Ontario and British Columbia. Like the SWIS and ISS programs, the mandate of the CBP is to connect families to community and school resources, but with the additional focus on bridging gaps brought about by cultural and communication differences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted of institutional facts including project reports and program materials, three focus groups (on topics that included schools, families, and personal experiences of the cultural brokers), and individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. Cultural brokers were asked to collect and described critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) in order to generate detailed and thick descriptions of specific aspects of their roles as brokers in facilitating refugee schoolchildren's adaptation to school. Finally, interviews were conducted with the ISS and SWIS programs that offer similar bridging services to newcomer families in school settings. Information from these interviews was used as negative cases to clarify and reflect on the activities and roles of brokers in the present study. After taping and transcribing all interviews, Colaizzi's (1978) method was used to guide a thematic analysis, which was compared with observations, institutional data, external agency information, and literature. Methods used to ensure trustworthiness and representation of participants' experiences included delineation and attention to personal perceptions through memos and member checks. Member checks occurred with individual participants and as a group after each data collection activity and once the preliminary themes were identified. As a result, participants in this study were involved in all aspects of the analysis and generation of results. Six main themes that encompass the roles that brokers currently engage in were identified. Each role consisted of challenges and opportunities that existed at the community, school, and agency level.

Results and Discussion

For the purpose of this working paper, the following section integrates the research findings with literature to discuss various challenges and opportunities identified for the role of educational cultural brokers as they assist refugee children and families in school settings. The first section describes the working definition of educational cultural brokering that emerged from this study. The second section provides a discussion of the key issues; the third section, which appears of as Appendix, is a table of the six brokering roles.

Working Definition: Educational Cultural Brokers

1. Educational cultural brokers identified as community representatives who are present in the school system and provide a welcoming environment for newcomer children and their families.
2. By holding the middle ground, brokers assist schools and newcomer children and families adapt to one another through:

- a) Micro-level: Day-to-day bridging, support, settlement, and educational activities that assist children's adaptation through direct contact with families, school personnel, and community.
Roles: Facilitating school adaptation programs; bridging families and children to services; supportive counselling and prevention; mediation and conflict resolution.
 - b) Macro-level: Slow process of transforming system to be more open and flexible to cultural diversity through activities that are not obvious but whose outcome is seen over time.
Roles: Cultural interpretation and awareness raising; advocacy.
3. Brokers in this study use their personal life and professional experience to assist refugee children and families. They are mindful of the refugee experience and intentionally act as role models for the children.

School-Community Partnerships: Clarifying Roles and Expectations

The main objective of the brokers' involvement in the schools is to create a positive and welcoming environment for newcomer children by bridging cultural and service gaps between schools and families. Brokers in this study acknowledged that achieving this goal has entailed a slow process of building relationships and legitimizing their role since the inception of the CBP in 2001. Difficulty establishing partnerships with teachers and school administration during the early years of their program were echoed in the brokering literature. For example, instructional aides working as cultural brokers report difficulties working as a team with teachers (Lewis, 2004); an example would be power sharing between brokers and teachers or decision-making (Martinez-Cosio & Iannaccone, 2007). Partnerships with the school boards were identified as a critical factor in the success of the ISS program in Calgary and SWIS in Vancouver. Although the school boards do not employ ISS workers, the workers maintain an active role in several of the schools within Calgary because of their partnerships with the Calgary Board of Education and the Catholic Separate School District. In Vancouver, the SWIS program has a partnership with the ministry of education and as a result gained greater acceptance from the schools. Further, a number of SWIS practitioners are school employees. In the present study, partnerships with the public school board significantly increased brokers' ability to engage in day-to-day activities during and after school hours. The school board's decision to fund aspects of the brokers' work and designate office space in a number of schools emerged from this partnership, and in turn increased refugee students' access to the brokers' services. While the general sense was that increased presence in the school greatly facilitated the goals and objectives of brokering, a number of challenges were identified.

Interpretation of roles and differing views regarding school policy and practice created confusion. For example, at times in-class roles taken by brokers can compromise the trust and relationship the broker has developed with a child through their involvement in the after-school programs. This is especially the case when school administrators request the broker to take on a school personnel role such supervising a child's in-school suspension. Brokers also noted conflict within the school system, because of their own differing perspectives on school policy. Similarly, challenges were noted in the literature where those called to act as educational cultural brokers may feel constrained by institutional policies (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). For example, school policies may prohibit staff from visiting family homes or allocating time during the school day for family meetings. When cultural brokers are employed by the school, they may feel conflicted when the school's goals and interests conflict with the family's goals and interests, especially when brokers advocate for families (Martinez-Cosio & Iannaccone, 2007). While brokers may be expected to act as a neutral parties negotiating between families and schools, this can be a challenging task if institutional policies promote inequality for multicultural students (Martinez-Cosio & Iannaccone).

One of the focus groups raised the importance of drafting a written agreement between the schools and the brokers to ensure clarity of roles and prevent ambiguous expectations between schools and brokers. One school implemented such an agreement during the time of this study.

Academic Extensions Provided by Bi-Cultural Role Models

Cultural brokering literature defends the importance of providing additional support that extends beyond the classroom (Anisef & Kilbride, 2000). In this study, the educational cultural brokers facilitated activities and clubs after school. Through this, brokers facilitate refugee youths' school adaptation by discussing important decisions regarding post-secondary school, providing general information about the institutions, and escorting youth to post-secondary open houses. A unique program facilitated by the cultural brokers in one of the high schools is a culture club. The importance of providing a space in which newcomer children learn about Canadian norms, attitudes, and values within the school system has been noted in the literature (Baffoe, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002) and perhaps is the hallmark role for a cultural broker. While research has indicated there is a scarcity of positive role models for refugee children (Baffoe; Cooper et al., 1999), brokers who had personal experiences of navigating the Canadian culture, while retaining their own cultural traditions, facilitated the culture club. Furthermore, research on cultural brokering found that brokers could serve as role models by engaging in appropriate behaviours and exposing students to mainstream activities (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). This was congruent with the objectives of the culture club where students were supported to gain confidence, improve their social networks, and increase their ability to make positive choices. One broker shared how talking about refugee experiences occurred during social and recreational field trips:

So in these social and recreational opportunities they are able to talk freely about these [refugee experiences] and some of the students will tell about how they ran at night, or how they, you know, passed dead bodies and so on. I think that talking is good because when you talk and then at least you get it out of your mind so mentally you don't have to sit in class and think about people being shot or dead bodies.

Several of the participants in the study shared stories of children's successful school adaptation because of the after-school support. All brokers explained that one of the rewarding aspects of their work was the opportunity to witness the children's academic and social successes.

Evolving Roles of Bridging Refugee School Families to Settlement Services

Consistent with the brokering literature, all of the participants actively engaged in core settlement activities such as setting up appointments, accompanying newcomers to their meetings, helping them complete registration forms, and providing translation services (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007; Raval, 2005). Another function of the CBP is educating parents about housing, employment, and education. Brokers involved from the inception of the program indicated that the act of bridging cultural differences remained central to their role amidst settlement activities. However, this study revealed that the roles of educational cultural brokers have evolved since the program began eight years ago, and linking families and children to services beyond the schools has become more pronounced and perhaps most recognized in recent years. The formalization of this aspect of their work is partly driven by government recognition of the settlement needs of refugee families and associated funding for school-based settlement practice. Given their long-term presence in schools, a number of the brokers worked primarily on settlement-related activities during the period of this study through a joint in-school settlement

project modelled after the SWIS and ISS programs. Interestingly, Weine (2008) found that most community-based service providers typically familiarize newcomers to their new city and help find employment and other settlement needs regardless of their designated role. The main difference here is that bridging to settlement services has become a significant part of educational cultural brokers' roles due to the recognition of school-based settlement programs. Further, each program appears to have developed unique processes to achieve this. For example, in some of the Vancouver school districts each SWIS worker is assigned a specific topic (such as housing) for which they are responsible for conducting research and attending workshops. ISS workers in Calgary assess the settlement needs of newcomer families during an initial meeting and in some cases, identify and address basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter prior to assessing school placement.

One of the findings that emerged was the overlapping of some of these micro-level activities employed by brokers with other agencies and school personnel. This was evident across all three programs, with each identifying the need for further clarification in roles to avoid duplication of services. A clear procedure to identify overlapping work and clarify roles in school settings is warranted.

New Roles in Response to Refugee Mental Health: Prevention and Bridging Services

In addition to referring refugee families and children to settlement services, the cultural brokers were instrumental in identifying and facilitating the need for mental health services. The brokers reported that although school staff members were capable of identifying mental concerns such as behavioural problems, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and depression it was more difficult for them to identify or contextualize concerns that were related to pre-migration refugee experiences. For example, several of the brokers identified refugee girls as a population at risk of being overlooked because they often internalize their distress. Likewise, Davis and Webb (2000) also found that authorities were not apprised of the difficulties experienced by refugee girls because they are more compliant than refugee boys.

The CBP brokers also found that children and families are more inclined to discuss their problems with them because of the trusting relationship and shared understanding they had developed through engagement in various activities. One broker stated:

I felt that she need[ed] psychological support and I mentioned it to her and she said "oh I'm okay," but I knew that she was getting a lot of migraines and headaches and then I said "well it's not normal to have headaches and you know all those migraines," and she said "oh isn't it?" I mentioned it when her mother was there, and her mother said "if she wants to see the psychologist that's fine," and then I think it clicked for her that "oh it's not normal to have these headaches."

Brokers provide newcomers with an orientation to the mental health services, consult with mental health practitioners on culturally accepted interventions, and provide translation services. The importance of involving community members in the referral process has been previously observed within the literature. For example, Davis and Webb (2000) found that Somali health advocates established links between the refugee community and mental health service providers and were also instrumental in providing information about the child's pre- and post-migration life context to the professional.

This study shows that brokers offer supportive counselling and suggestions of preventative measures for refugee students who are struggling emotionally. According to Davis and Webb

(2000), an important task for refugee children is to develop a coherent life story that makes sense of their experiences. In the present study, one of the primary supportive counselling activities consisted of the broker providing a safe space for children to discuss their experiences and begin to heal. This process was observed to be a shared experience between the student and the broker because both individuals came to Canada with experiences of war and conflict; brokers with backgrounds similar to the students were able to validate the realities of the children's pre-migration experiences—something that some of the teachers and school staff members are unable to do.

The brokers also reported a supportive counselling and mediation role when they addressed parent-child conflict. It was noted that this type of conflict in the home often intensified the challenges within the school setting. For example, the brokers observed that the children would often cope with conflict by running away, which would then correlate with lower attendance rates. In comparison to the ISS and SWIS programs, the mediation role was a unique component of the brokers' role. SWIS, in fact, mandated conflict mediation and long-term intensive work with families and students on behavioural and academic issues as service limitations, in order to prevent the duplication of services already available in the school, and to ensure that the SWIS workers focussed on settlement issues. In the present study, the mediation role also extended to conflicts between schools and families. According to the participants, the core activities of the mediation consisted of bringing all parties together, helping them understand the other persons' perspectives, and involving everyone in the final decision making. This finding is consistent with Martinez-Cosio and Iannaccone's (2007) study where cultural brokers facilitated positive interactions and communication between schools and families.

Cultural Brokers in the Slow Transformation of Systems

CBP brokers defined their role in helping schools, families, and children understand one another as the raising of cultural interpretation and awareness. Implemented primarily through day-to-day activities such as facilitating meetings and providing presentations, CBP has observed resultant system level changes over its eight-year period. The first area of transformational change was observed through school level changes. Several of the brokers observed new teachers to have a gap between their training and exposure to different cultures. In the present study, the brokers were instrumental in interpreting the cultural and historical context of a child's experiences exhibiting academic or behavioural problems. In some schools, the participants noted an increase in consultations with school staff members for cases perceived to involve a cultural component. This finding was consistent with opportunities reported by both the SWIS and ISS programs. For example, the ISS workers would provide teachers with a student's background information and then would continue to monitor whether the child's needs were being met. In the case of the SWIS program, it was noted that on many occasions ESL teachers were connecting newcomers to the SWIS workers. The overall importance of hiring minority teachers to create cultural bridges has been observed in the literature (Lewis, 2004).

Another area of transformation found in the present study was the increasing school involvement of refugee parents. Research has noted that teachers can hold negative views toward the family when parental involvement is absent; cultural brokers can play an important role in providing information on the family's experiences in order to counter these negative views (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Such barriers to participating in their child's education include their own illiteracy, lack of English-language proficiency, heavy workloads, lack of experience with school involvement, and perceiving their involvement as interfering and disrespectful (Weine, 2008). Furthermore, parents need to be able to ask appropriate questions and help their children understand their

homework. In the present study, the brokers facilitated the parents' involvement by explaining the processes and helping them make informed decisions regarding school placement and assessment. This finding was congruent with research on the influence of brokering activities on minority parents' role construction and self-efficacy (Howland et al., 2006). The ISS and SWIS programs also observed similar findings. For instance, both of the programs provided newcomers with appropriate information, and helped schools establish and maintain contact with families.

The Controversial Role of Advocacy

Of all the macro-level activities, advocacy was a role that emerged across the interviews with the educational cultural brokers. Although the participants acknowledged that this role could be very exhausting and at times make them "feel very small," the importance of advocacy cannot be underestimated. The roles involved both speaking on behalf of, and empowering refugee families and children to advocate for themselves. This is consistent with previous work that found that brokers could educate and promote skill development in parents so that they can further advocate for their own children in the educational system (Howland et al., 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Over the years, brokers have continued to advocate for school placement of refugee children based on emerging concerns from parents. According to the participants, refugee parents will consent to psycho-educational assessments without understanding the intent, process, and possible implications. CBP subsequently collaborated with Edmonton Public Schools to develop a booklet that provides parents with information on the role of assessments and placements.

Another area of advocacy reported by CBP was their involvement during expulsion hearings. Brokers attended the hearings, providing their interpretations and recommendations. Although a very tense and challenging activity, the brokers acknowledged that over the years they continue to be invited by both the refugee communities and the school system, which suggests that their involvement is valued. Upon further reflection, the brokers acknowledged that the schools they work in have gained greater awareness of their role and the schools have expressed more interest in learning about the concerns and barriers of refugees. As a result, they have developed strong relationships with school staff members that have benefitted children. As shared by one broker,

I worked with a refugee child who was assigned a younger age than what he actually was. Based on his documented age, he was placed in elementary. The child was very smart and he wanted to go to junior high. My involvement in the case involved advocating for a proper school placement. Generally, administrators require documentation but due to my existing rapport with the school they overlooked this requirement. They looked at him and believed his real age. The school put him in AP [Advanced Placement] and he is doing well in the program.

Brokers also reported that the administrators of one high school are exploring the use of in-school suspension over expulsions. The brokers also worked with other agencies toward systemic changes, an example being a public forum that enabled parents, agency representatives, and school board representatives to discuss relevant issues.

Participants in the present study reported several challenges associated with their ability to advocate. First, they were disheartened when their ability to help children was limited by existing policies. For example, the participants felt limited by Alberta Education's age-cap policy, which mandates that public funding of secondary education discontinue at the age of 19. While this research echoes literature that suggests in-school cultural brokers can feel constrained by school policies (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007), brokers in the present study reported greater

independence in their ability to advocate for families. The fact that the brokers were not school employees may have influenced this finding. Therefore, when considering the advocacy role, operating from the community appears to provide brokers with the autonomy to advocate on behalf of parents regarding potentially controversial issues.

Supporting Educational Cultural Brokers: Some Policy and Practice Recommendations

Several recommendations emerged from the themes above that would further enable the educational cultural brokers to act as intermediaries between the school system and refugee community.

Defining the Cultural Broker's Role within the School System

The cultural broker's role is broadly defined and has evolved over the eight years since the inception of the CBP. As the participants gained more recognition in the community and schools, they identified the benefits of more concrete job descriptions. This is congruent with Lewis' (2004) finding that further clarification is required regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers, instructional aides, parents, and other partners who have a stake in students' success. Furthermore, Owen and English (2005) indicated that loosely defined roles could lead brokers to undertake tasks for which they are not adequately trained. These findings are consistent with the experiences of the CBP and concerns raised by the SWIS and ISS programs. Participants of the CBP identified the need for the establishment of parameters and clear guidelines regarding responsibilities and duties. In this regard, the brokers would benefit from a written agreement with the school system. At the time of the study, the organization was in its transitional phase of clarifying the broker's role and a memorandum of understanding was drafted with one public school. Cultural brokering is a unique role that has relevance to the Canadian multicultural school milieu. Endorsing and delineating the role of brokering at the school level has potential to engage various individuals (whether formal brokers or teachers and principals) to actively understand ways in which they contribute to bridging cultural differences and increasing comprehension between school and multicultural families.

Engaging in Self-Reflection and Reflexive Praxis as Part of Ethical Practice

During their participation in the study, the brokers were provided with the opportunity to meet and reflect on their roles. As they all reported this experience as beneficial, ongoing opportunities for self-reflection and reflexivity regarding brokering activities is deemed crucial to this type of work. Specifically, through research activities the brokers were able to gain increased awareness of their roles, supports, and challenges. They also discussed the benefit of reflecting on the impact and appropriateness of their actions, particularly when working on complex cases. Raval (2005) recommends that professions employing bilingual workers provide formal support or supervision in order to address the personal distress that can stem from their work. In particular, contextualizing the emotional experiences felt by the bilingual workers is perceived as a beneficial means of managing the stress of working with refugee families who at times are in distress. Given these findings, creating opportunity for reflexivity and consultation on complex cases appears to be an important aspect for supporting the educational cultural brokers. On a similar note, opportunities to receive guidance for ethical decision-making also emerged across the interviews. Brokering requires careful and conscious decision-making and ongoing evaluation of one's actions. Each action can affect the ethnic community's relationship with the school or the broker's relationship with a family, youth, or school. This especially was observed in the area of advocacy. When making recommendations there are many factors a broker needs to consider (such as the

problem or issue, and its source). Brokers are often faced with challenging moral or ethical dilemmas due to their position of negotiating cultural differences. Literature on educational cultural brokering is in its infancy, and future research on developing a model of ethical decision-making for cultural brokers is warranted.

Ongoing Professional Development: At Agency and School-Level

In addition to providing brokers with mentoring and guidance, the need for ongoing professional development was identified throughout the interviews in this study. The first area of training is to provide additional or ongoing workshops regarding school board protocols and policies. When brokers are familiar with the school system they are in a better position to bridge refugee families and schools and to advocate when needed. With increased collaboration between schools and community-based school practitioners, the school district can take responsibility for providing this information and training to ensure their policies are properly conveyed to families. Second, mental health is a significant and ongoing consideration of brokers when assisting refugee families. Several of the brokers identified a need for ongoing training in conflict management and refugee mental wellbeing. Increasing brokers' capacity to identify and provide initial support to refugee families with mental health concerns has the potential to improve access to mental health services through referrals and collaborative practice with mental health practitioners. Finally, recognizing that cultural bridging is the hallmark of educational brokers work, the need for ongoing cultural competency training within the team is critical. Furthermore, this work needs to be extended into the school system whereby brokers and school staff work together to understand each other through professional development and team building workshops.

Stress Management and Self-Care Practices

Literature on occupational stress experienced by cultural brokers is absent. However, brokers in this study work with similar clients and issues such as facilitating the integration of newcomers, and improving the living conditions of vulnerable individuals, as social workers and counsellors. Vicarious trauma, secondary stress disorder, and burnout are common outcomes experienced by these helping professions as cited in the literature (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Bober, Regehr, & Zhou, 2006). Vicarious trauma is the personal impact experienced by the helper when they are working with trauma survivors (Richardson, 2001). Symptoms experienced by the helper may include intrusive imagery, difficulty focussing, emotional numbing, irritability, sense of hopelessness, and a change in worldview (Bober et al.). Secondary stress disorder is triggered by an individual's need to help a traumatized person, which then leads to the development of stress (Richardson). Finally, burnout refers to the emotional exhaustion (lack of energy), depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment experienced within an occupational setting (Ben-Zur & Michael). It is often caused by a high workload and reduced coping skills. The brokers in the present study recalled incidents of responding emotionally to the work they do. It was common for them to take their work home and reflect on whether they did the right thing. For this reason, this group of professionals is potentially vulnerable to high stress, and engage in self-blame when working on complex cases. Because of the increased awareness of the impact that brokering can have on health, several of the brokers and project managers in this study identified the need for ongoing training and workshops related to stress management and self-care.

Conclusion

Addressing the specific adaptation challenges of refugee children is at the forefront of many school boards across the country today. This paper explored the role of educational cultural brokers as

one group of individuals who play a role in assisting school personnel and families with the academic and psychosocial adaptation of refugee children in school settings. Results from this study suggest that individuals such as brokers can play an important function, but there is a need for clarity regarding roles and activities that brokers engaged in. The role of a broker is evolving and ongoing reflection on what brokers do in relation to the changing needs of schools and families is important to ensure successful coordination of activities aimed at assisting the school adaptation or refugee children. Finally, the person of the broker has not received much attention in the cultural broker literature. This study shows that community-based educational cultural brokers are often from the same ethno-cultural community as their clients. While this can enhance commitment and relationship building with clients, this close proximity to the community challenges can place a broker at risk for stress-related conditions often found in individuals working in high stress situations. As such, close attention to the wellbeing of individuals in these roles is critical to ensure longevity in their career.

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Appendix

Role and Strategies of Cultural Brokers Working with Refugee Children and Families in School Settings

Roles	Challenges	Opportunities
<u>Facilitating School Adaptation Programs</u> Homework clubs Culture clubs (e.g., "Youth in two cultures" club) Short-term programs (e.g., Leadership & health program) In-class support	<u>Facilitating School Adaptation Programs</u> Role of facilitator can be challenged by requests from schools (e.g., assisting school with discipline measures)	<u>Facilitating School Adaptation Programs</u> Opportunities to facilitate new programs Opportunity to see refugee children and youth grow and succeed in school
<u>Bridging Families & Children to School and Community Services</u> Linking families to services (i.e., Settlement) Linking families to counselling services Identifying mental health issues Providing additional supports	<u>Bridging to Services</u> Children experiencing adversity and trauma Culture specific responses to mental health Overlapping roles with other agencies	<u>Bridging to Services</u> Helping families navigate the system Refugees with trauma histories feeling safe to approach brokers Youth are seeking additional supports
<u>Cultural Interpretation & Awareness Raising</u> Deciphering mainstream culture for parents Promoting multiculturalism & integration to children and youth Helping teachers understand families' cultural worldviews Helping teachers understand refugee experiences	<u>Cultural Interpretation & Awareness Raising</u> Encountering resistance to understanding cultural differences—from some schools and families	<u>Cultural Interpretation & Awareness Raising</u> Brokers are clarifying the norms and values of each cultural group Opportunities to provide workshops & presentations
<u>Supportive Counselling & Prevention</u> Supporting parenting in a new culture Family mediation & reunification Supporting children & youth	<u>Supportive Counselling</u> Dissatisfaction with one's inability to solve everything Brokers may require more training	<u>Supportive Counselling</u> Community members are approaching brokers Prevention by providing early support
<u>Advocacy</u> Helping parents know their rights Speaking on behalf of parents at meetings Empowering parents and	<u>Advocacy</u> Advocacy can put brokers in a place of tension Conflict can damage existing relationships with schools or community	<u>Advocacy</u> Parents are increasingly aware of their rights & are participating in school activities Collaborating with other

<p>children to have a voice in school system</p> <p><u>Mediation & Conflict Resolution</u></p> <p>Helping families address parent-child conflict Helping schools address school-family conflict Facilitating communication (e.g., translation and interpretation)</p>	<p><u>Mediation & Conflict Resolution</u></p> <p>Complex cases involving conflict between parents & children Disagreeing with school policies that do not consider refugee children's experiences (e.g., expulsions and out-of-school suspensions)</p>	<p>agencies to engage in political activities toward systemic changes School board willing to listen to concerns & barriers for refugees in schools</p> <p><u>Mediation & Conflict Resolution</u></p> <p>Parents & children are slowly taking control of their lives School board gaining more awareness of broker's role Opportunities to implement activities that assist children and families (e.g., alternative discipline strategies and psychological assessment handbook)</p>
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