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Burundian Refugee Mothers' Experiences of Their Children's School Readiness, and the Role of Supported Playgroups

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Introduction



Previous research has found:

- Parenting issues are some of the most challenging problems facing refugees in Australia (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).
- Challenges in relation to their child's schooling, such as language barriers and differences in cultural expectations (Lewig et al., 2010).
- Limited research on refugee parents' experiences of their children's school readiness, or their preparedness for starting kindergarten. This is despite increasing government interest in school readiness and the transition into early education (Dockett et al., 2010).
- Supported playgroups = effective means of assisting refugee families navigate parenting issues (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011). However, research has not explored how these programs can support refugees in relation to their children's transition to kindergarten, and contribute to their psychological well-being during these processes.

Introduction



Additional limitations across existing literature:

- Assumed homogeneity of culture across ethnically diverse samples. Minimal consideration of between and within group differences.
- Lack of research on the parenting experiences specifically of refugee populations. Assumption of homogeneity in the experiences of migrants and refugees.
- Available research has failed to provide in-depth analysis of the subjective meaning of refugee parents' experiences.
- Therefore, the primary aim of the study is to investigate the meaning Burundian refugee mothers in supported playgroups ascribe to their experiences of children's school readiness and transition to kindergarten.

Research Design



Methodology:

- Interpretive phenomenology methodology.

Approach is an interpretive act in understanding the meaning attributed (what and how) to women's experiences of children's school readiness and their transition to kindergarten.

Participants:

The present study involved a sample of 9 participants:

- 6 Burundian refugee mothers (attendees of 'It Takes a Village playgroup')
- 2 playgroup staff
- 1 kindergarten teacher (allied stakeholder)

Research Design



Procedures:

- Visited 'It Takes a Village' playgroup to build rapport with the refugee women.
- Participants recruited with assistance of playgroup staff. The program's cultural worker assisted with translating throughout data collection.
- Focus group was conducted with 5 Burundian women.
- Individual, in-depth interviews were then conducted with 4 of these women, plus two additional mothers, and 2 playgroup staff.
- Additional interview conducted with a kindergarten teacher who had had previous contact with Burundian families attending the playgroup.
- Transcriptions analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings



Main themes:

1. Concept of school readiness

1. Influence of playgroup experiences

2. Preparing child for school

1. Helplessness
2. Importance of helping prepare children for school

3. Transition to kindergarten

1. Isolation in school community
2. Cultural expectations
3. Impact on wellbeing

4. Benefits of playgroup

1. Advocacy
2. Social support
3. Sense of community
4. Increased well-being

Concept of School Readiness



- In reflecting on whether their children were ready for school or not, there were mixed responses from the women. The mothers' awareness of what it means to be ready for school was mostly shaped by experiences at playgroup. Whether a child was considered ready or not was heavily influenced by whether they had attended playgroup. Those children who had attended the program were considered ready, and mothers emphasised the role of playgroup in facilitating this. Those children who had not participated in playgroup were perceived as being 'unready'.

For example:

"The difference [in readiness] is, because my daughter, since she was 1 year, she comes to the playgroup, and whatever she does at the playgroup, she takes it home and does it at home. And that's why it's different. Because with [son's name], he hasn't had chance to go to playgroup, because I was new and I didn't know there was any playgroup or anything. So that's the difference. She has the chance to be with other children, and practice at the playgroup, where [son's name] didn't have that."

Preparing Child for School



- Many of the mothers expressed that they felt unable to personally help prepare their children for school, due to their lack of education experiences and poor English skills. This impacted on their psychological wellbeing, as they conveyed a strong sense of helplessness. For example:

“Well there’s no way I can help him and teach him be ready for school...”
- The importance of being able to help prepare their children for school was evident for most of the mothers. For example, in discussing what it would mean to be able to prepare her child for school, one mother responded:

“I would be happy. I would be over the moon! Because I could help my child. I never went to school in Burundi, so it’s very hard.”
- Apparent conflict for the women: importance of preparing children for school and desiring personal involvement in this process, and feeling unable to do so.

Transition to Kindergarten



- The period in which children began kindergarten = highly stressful and difficult for most of the mothers and their children. Most mothers reported minimal involvement in school communities. They reported low interaction with teachers and parents, and poor attendance for school events, due to language and cultural barriers and feelings of isolation. For example:
“I wasn’t used to other people – I don’t know their culture, I don’t know their language, so it was very hard. I just take my child and leave at the class and I come and pick him up in the afternoon. So maybe the other parent talk – I see they talk and smiling, but not me, because I can’t ask anything, so that was very difficult for me.”
- Some mothers also struggled in negotiating different cultural norms, and feared being reprimanded by extended family for not raising child according to values and traditions of original culture.
- In terms of psychological well-being, the parents conveyed feelings of guilt for not supporting their child at school events; anxiety surrounding interactions with teachers and other parents in foreign situations; helplessness; and loneliness.

Benefits of Playgroup



- All participants spoke about many benefits of the playgroup. They were grateful for the assistance of staff with the practical and emotional challenges associated with their child's transition to kindergarten. Staff were portrayed as available, approachable and trustworthy, and acted as advocates for the women, in helping them deal with various issues at the school.
- The playgroup was found to be a great source of social support for the women, and offer a sense of community. For example:
“For me, it helps because I can meet other people and talk to other mums who are from the same country, or others who are experiencing the same difficulty, and so I don't feel alone, and I can see what all they do to solve problems with the child at school.”
- The playgroup seemed to empower the women to feel as if they were helping their children prepare for school. It further increased their psychological wellbeing by alleviating loneliness and stress, and providing them with positive social connections.
“It used to be hard and think about it alot and have stress about it. But through coming to the playgroup and talking to other mums, and meeting other people who have the same problems as me, it helps me go through, because I thought, “oh, it's not just me.” Everyone is facing these difficulties.”

Conclusions



Overall conclusions:

- Mothers' experiences of their children's school readiness and transition to kindergarten were generally found to be difficult, and impact negatively on their psychological well-being. There were many perceived benefits of supported playgroups in assisting these women through these processes.
- Implications –better understanding of refugees' experiences of specific parenting issues relating to children's school readiness and transition to kindergarten, and highlights the importance of supported playgroups for these families.

Possible limitations include:

In using an interpreter, the meaning of some questions may have been lost in translation. Social context of the translator may also have impacted on knowledge production.

Future research should consider parents' experiences of children's school readiness within other specific cultural groups of refugees. Additional studies could also consider the experiences of refugee fathers in relation to their children's transition to kindergarten.

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