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Social Change Essay

Immigrant Family Education

In the late 1990s, the first Somali woman walked into the Lincoln Community Center located in downtown Mankato looking to expand her education after emigrating to southern Minnesota (Dyslin). Since then, many immigrant families have joined the Mankato community because of its reputation as a welcoming community with resources to help families get settled in a new country. Education for themselves and their children is a goal for many immigrant or New American families that is not always easy to attain. Organizations and school districts within the Mankato Community have implemented programs and services to aid these new families in their pursuit of education in the United States and southern Minnesota that compare favorably to actions across the state.

Education in the United States becomes more valuable when looking for a job to support a family each day and immigrant families face more road blocks between them and education than most. Parents and children alike feel the effects of learning in a new culture. In a Mankato Free Press article, Amanda Dyslin explains that children must learn a new language in addition to the material their teachers are covering in class, whereas “[i]n the midst of learning a new language and culture, parents have to worry about paying rent, preparing meals, and raising children, among other things”. These situations imply that the children and parents are able to get to the school or community centers to learn in the first place, but that is not always the case. In addition to the struggles of learning a new language, YWCA outreach worker and Mankato school district liaison Lul Omar describes that half the battle between immigrant families and education is finding a way to get transportation from home to school or work in the first place. Educating oneself in a new culture and community is an uphill battle for many immigrants in the Mankato community.

Educating our New American families has become a challenge for the Mankato area due in part to the increase in our non-white population in the past ten years. “Since 2000, the non-white population in Blue Earth County and neighboring Nicollet County has increased nearly 50 percent, from 3,186 to 4,770” (Baier). This unprecedented growth of the student population needing English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum has schools scrambling to keep up. In Mankato, “…more than 17 percent of the district’s students…are non-white and many are immigrants or refugees”(Baier) that could benefit greatly from the ESL curriculum. Most programs with such curriculums have waiting lists and some have parents waiting up to a year to enroll their children (Dyslin). Schools and community education centers, such as the Lincoln Community Center, suffer from growing pains of trying to accommodate the increasing population of those that can benefit from their services.

In order to overcome these growing pains and educate the new members of our community, all members must address the societal and economic factors hindering their success. In the light of societal hindrances, Lul Omar stated that families need to feel tied to and supported by the community. She described an experience when she first came to Mankato and met another mother in the community who had never spoken to her before even though they had much in common. Lul went up and simply introduced herself to the astounded woman who had wrongly assumed Lul did not know English so had not introduced herself earlier. After the encounter, their children played together regularly and her son felt more accepted with a new playmate. This same sense of acceptance needs to be incorporated into the schools as well as the community. Blue Earth County refugee employment coordinator Jessica O’Brien stated that when “...you have people from different cultures, you’re going to have misunderstandings”(Baier) and it is up to both the New American families and current community members to combat those misunderstandings. Mankato has made great progress towards attaining a level of acceptance and finding understanding, but there are economic factors that limit the ability to progress and build upon the progress that has been made.

The economic situation of education centers and immigrant families can impede a family’s progress towards education. A family’s economic situation can hinder their ability to get their children to school, pay any fees to the education system, or possibly hire someone to teach them the language they are expected to learn in. Lul explained that many families come here either from large cities in the US or from a different country where they did not need to drive. In Lul’s words, “[w]hen they get here they need a license and a car…” but this is a process that takes time and “…in a small town like Mankato, they need a car to work and support their families.” This vicious cycle is one that is hard to break and is most challenging for families when they first arrive. Assuming the immigrant families can get their children to school, the economic situation within the education system hinders the amount of staff that can be hired to assist these families, such as liaisons, ESL instructors, tutors, etc. Class sizes are limited, hence the waiting lists as previously mentioned.

Despite these factors, the Mankato Community has made great progress in welcoming the new members of the community and implementing accommodations for them within the education centers, whether they be schools or community education centers. Mankato currently has ESL curriculum in all of their schools, as well as liaisons, and non-profit organizations that support the immigrant families. Non-profit organizations like the YWCA have volunteer-based programs that start teaching the children in immigrant families primarily in the age group of 0-5 years old. This program is meant to teach the children English and inform the family of how the education system works in the Mankato community. As for the parents and adults, the Lincoln Community Center offers adult basic education classes that teach English, job skills, how to get a GED, and other classes that help immigrants contribute to the community while also providing for their families. These services are all in addition to ESL teachers in all Mankato schools that are trained in teaching curriculum in a palatable way for English language learners. Mankato is not the only community that has implemented services to serve immigrants and English language learners.

The communities that most closely matches Mankato’s approach to supporting immigrant families through programming for parents and their children’s education are Austin and Worthington. In the both school districts, nearly half of the students are non-white(Hinrichs). Austin serves this population by appointing coordinators for integration and employing liaisons to connect with the families. Worthington addresses this situation “…through counselors or appropriate support mechanisms…”(Hinrichs). All three districts, Mankato, Worthington, and Austin, use one-on-one approaches to supporting immigrant families. In Northfield, Minnesota, the support is provided to groups with their services more closely related to providing food and money to those that need it when adjusting to life there (Hinrichs). Mar Valecantos, Northfield’s vice chair of Human Rights Commission, confirms that the school publicly supports their immigrant community, but there is very little mention of how the school assists each student in their pursuit of education.

Through my experience with the YWCA and the Mankato school district, I have seen the community’s actions at work. Through the YWCA, I have acted as a volunteer in their Ready 2 Learn program that conducts home visits to immigrant families for a 2-hour lesson each week to help children learn English and the skills they are expected to be competent in for preschool in Mankato schools. When speaking with other volunteers, we all see the progress each of our students make after each lesson. The volunteers not only teach the children and families about the education system, but we also learn about the new population in our community. Through my volunteering experience, I have worked around the family’s need to run their own business in Oldtown Mankato in order to support their family. I have met with my student’s mother and grandmother for my various home visits depending on who was running the store. I also hear about all the lessons and education opportunities that the parents search out for their son to help him adapt to the new culture such as programs at the Lincoln Community Center.

Between now and the end of the semester, I will continue to teach for the Ready 2 Learn and help prepare my 3-year-old for preschool. We have been working on the alphabet, colors, textures, animals, holidays, and other topics that each preschooler learns from their parents. In the case of immigrant families many are learning the language as well as the culture along with their children which put them at a disadvantage when teaching their children the content each school district expects children to know by the time they reach preschool.

When families relocate to a new country there are many differences between their previous home and their new environment. Education is the key to providing for their loved ones and being successful in their new home. The Mankato community has implemented many support mechanisms for these families in their pursuit of education that I have witnessed and been a part of in the community throughout the semester. The community, as a whole, still faces its challenges, but we have made good progress in the past ten years accommodating the unprecedented growth of immigrant and non-white populations to our area. Education is the key to success and we want all members of our community to feel welcomed and successful.

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