Understanding ESL Learners: Teaching Refugee Students

A refugee, as identified by the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, is one who has been forced to flee his or her country due to persecution. Refugee students who come to Canada are often escaping violence and oppression in their home country. They may come directly from the country that they are fleeing, from a refugee camp or from a country that harboured them while they waited for government or family sponsorships.

The information provided in this brochure has been extracted primarily from the website www.teachingrefugees.com, funded by Alberta Education. The content of this website was and continues to be researched and supported by the Calgary Board of Education's ELL specialist team at Kingsland Reception Centre.

Refugee Journey

In most cases, the experience of being a refugee can include multiple losses and possible traumas. Generally, there are three stages of experience: leaving the home country, the journey to the receiving country (in this case, Canada), and adjusting to life in the new country.

Stage 1: Leaving the Home Country

Refugee learners may have experienced any of the following:

- Forced evacuation (home, country)
- Loss of close family members (including parents)
- Loss of friends
- Exposure to war or combat
- Violence or torture (toward self or others)
- Intimidation; threats to family
- Dispersal of broader supports, such as extended family, neighbours or community supports, which often scatter and become unavailable
- Disrupted education
- Increased parental distress, leading to parents becoming less able to offer consistent comfort, and less available in the face of other survival threats
- General insecurity
- Reduced sense of safety, familiarity and confidence in self and others; loss of consistency and well-being; sudden changes in attachment figures and relationships; loss of feeling able to make change—locus of control shifts.
- Loss of own ability to cope
- Developmental vulnerability to traumatic experiences (for example, young children are particularly vulnerable to war-related trauma, given their limited cognitive frameworks)

Risk or resilience to the above losses or traumas is dependent upon the student's age, culture, cognitive competence, coping strategies and parental support.

Stage 2: Journey to Canada

This is often a time of additional stressors, such as

- long periods (months, years) in transition and life in refugee camps;
- accidental separation from family;
- purposeful separation from family; for example, a strategy to keep a child safe, to help improve refugee status or because the family can only afford to send one person away;
- loss of a sense of place (material, emotional, social, cultural and so on).

Stage 3: Adjusting to Life in Canada

Stressors at this stage can become secondary traumas that overwhelm the individual's ability to cope. Students may experience struggles across broad dimensions of family, school, social and personal venues. Special challenges include, but are not restricted to

- sense of loss (family members, homeland, their old life and old friends, and so on);
- financial hardship for the family;
- limited access to parents/guardians due to work schedules;
- responsibility of caring for younger siblings while parents are at work;
- responsibility to assume adult roles too early, compensating for parents' lack of confidence and self-esteem due to challenges learning English and adjusting to the Canadian context;
- dealing with stereotyping, profiling, prejudice, racism, religious persecution and so on.

Refugee Learners in Alberta

Nearly half of Alberta's refugees are under the age of 18 (Ruban 2017). Alberta schools welcome refugee learners into safe and caring learning environments. These students enhance classrooms with their unique individual experiences, cultural knowledge and backgrounds; however, many refugee learners are also burdened by the challenges and stresses of the refugee experience, as stated above. To add to the complexity, most refugee students come to Alberta schools with little or no formal schooling. Some may also have learning and/or self-regulatory challenges.

Refugee students need help to overcome language barriers, culture shock, social isolation, socioeconomic barriers, assimilation challenges and loss of identity/self-esteem. "When given appropriate supports, [refugee learners] can thrive and be successful" (http://teachingrefugees.com/teaching-refugees-with-limited-formal-schooling/2835-2/).

Alberta Education recognizes that refugee learners benefit from intensive, targeted interventions, supports and services, many of which are already understood as best practice for English language learners (ELLs). These supports are necessary to help students deal with issues related to limited or disrupted formal schooling, traumatic events and cultural adjustment.

To ensure the availability of supports, Alberta Education provides five years of funding (grant code 640) specifically to support refugee learners in Alberta classrooms.

School challenges and the rush against time (dependent on age of arrival)

When students have gaps in their formal education, they are often unfamiliar with the conventions of schools and classrooms. Refugee learners may have had little, if any, exposure to books in either their first language or English, resulting in limited opportunities for early literacy development.

Refugee learners may not understand expected behaviours that are taken for granted in Canadian schools. School staff may need to help students understand how to

- use bathroom facilities;
- wait in line or wait for one's turn;
- communicate with adults about emergencies, illnesses, absences and so on;
- stay in one place for long periods of time (a desk, a classroom, a school building);
- use school devices such as doorknobs, switches, telephones or locks; or
- handle classroom materials such as writing instruments, notebooks and laptops.

Certain aspects of the school environment may trigger anxiety or behavioural reactions. These include

- dark corridors;
- people wearing uniforms or heavy boots;
- loud or harsh talking;
- bells, fire alarms or evacuation drills;
- use of unfamiliar language or body language; or
- items associated with North American holidays, such as masks and skeletons at Halloween.

How do I create a safe and welcoming environment? How do I respond to cultural and linguistic diversity?

Programming ideas: Closing the gap—what can I do in the classroom? What can the school do?

1. Best practices

Programming plans should incorporate

- orientation programs that help students and their families understand various aspects of school life, such as routines, social customs, grading systems, expectations and so forth;
- age-appropriate grouping;
- special programming options for refugees, *even when there is no critical mass to support preferred-option programming*. Refugee learners should have access to a self-contained program or classroom offering intensive, accelerated English, literacy and numeracy instruction for at least the first year or two to help close the gap;

- intentional English language development (ELD) with a focus on function (purpose of language, especially that which is required for specific academic and social situations), form (grammar and vocabulary) and fluency (Dutro and Moran 2003). Explicit English language instruction for ELD should include
  - ▷ effective language scaffolding strategies supported by key visuals, hands-on materials and experiential learning opportunities;
  - ▷ a gradual release approach ("I do, we do, you do") to model and practise desired skills;
  - ▷ frequent opportunities for oral practice and interaction;
  - ▷ integration of multiple language strands into each lesson; and
  - ▷ continual review and recycling of vocabulary and concepts (Miles and Bailey-McKenna 2016);
- intensive small group or individual literacy interventions that use
  - ▷ collaborative reading strategies (Lee 2016),
  - ▷ assistive technology, and
  - ▷ assessment and educational materials that have been developed specifically for English language learners;
- well-articulated transition plans for integration and inclusion that enable students to access regular ESL classes and mainstream classes *as appropriate* (that is, when students are ready for greater challenge);
- provision for ESL/literacy teachers to plan with and work alongside mainstream teachers in mainstream classrooms to support refugee learners;
- provision of first language educational assistants or tutors if possible;
- extended time for such things as
  - ▷ school processes (for example, parent conferences, filling out forms and so on) or
  - ▷ high school completion;
- modified scheduling and provision for extended day and out-of-school learning time;
- a mechanism for fostering a sense of belonging and dealing with the lack of acceptance, or marginalization, that refugee students may feel at school; teachers should
  - ▷ be culturally responsive. Decapua (2016) states that teachers should avoid making assumptions about students with limited or no formal education by making an effort to gain deep cultural knowledge about these students;
  - ▷ recognize and incorporate first language experience and culture;
  - ▷ be cognizant of and respond to socioeconomic, racial and educational stratification within the classroom (Wilbur 2016);
  - ▷ provide mentorship opportunities (peer and adult). The role of the mentor is to be a friend, advisor, advocate, mediator, problem solver, listener and person to trust;
- support for LGBTQ refugee students:
  - ▷ Are GSAs capable of addressing the needs of refugees?
  - ▷ Would refugee students who are already dealing with stigma from their own communities and the greater community feel safe enough to join a GSA?
  - ▷ How can these refugee students be supported at school?

2. Community Supports

Attending to the needs of the child alone may not be sufficient to achieve the necessary results. Entire families may need support through schools and their community partners and agencies. The school can become the first point of contact with community agencies that can offer assistance to refugee families. A whole-school–community approach to serve the academic and social needs of students and their families should include

- providing access to a range of recreational sport and arts activities that, according to Perry (2016), can help to reshape and reorganize areas of the brain by reducing cortisol or stress levels (Durham 2016);
- providing access to a range of services, including translators (preferably trained and certified), cultural brokers, immigrant and refugee serving agencies, tutors and homework clubs, adult ESL classes, mentoring, counselling, home–school liaisons, and community services to address resettlement. Resettlement agencies can
  - ▷ provide language training, employment support and housing;
  - ▷ address special needs for women, refugees, children and youth;
  - ▷ provide overall support to immigrant communities in a holistic and flexible manner, adjusting to the community needs; and
  - ▷ conduct follow-up and continue to act as a bridge for immigrant clients as they navigate a variety of social systems;
- supporting families in meeting their basic needs by ensuring access to food, clothing, before- and after-school care, and healthcare;
- addressing socioemotional needs and offering support for educational and career planning;
- supporting family learning and family literacy;
- helping parents to understand the school system through coordinated efforts to involve culturally diverse parent and community groups;
- appropriately welcoming refugee parents into the school; for example, when meeting with families, ensure that there is an appropriate interpreter present (that is, one who is not from a conflicting tribe or area, because this could create unnecessary stressors and anxiety for the family during the interview). Ensure that the interpreter clearly explains the purpose and process of the meeting to the family.

3. Trauma-informed practice: Provide adequate and appropriate training and supports for mentors in understanding and dealing with mental health challenges.

Many refugee students experience mental health challenges, in particular post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression arising from issues related to housing, employment and social integration barriers. Refugee claimants face even harder challenges, as they are not eligible for many services and struggle to adapt or settle.

Trauma experienced by the family has a carry-over effect on refugee children and their ability to achieve mental well-being and readiness to learn. Students may lack a sense of belonging, feeling that they don't fit in anywhere. They may struggle to navigate two different cultures and value systems.

How trauma impacts the brain's response to stress and impairs a student's ability to learn

Bruce Perry (2016), founder and senior fellow of the Child Trauma Academy, in Houston, and an adjunct professor of psychiatry at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University, states that trauma

- alters the neural networks involved in the stress response, which can lead to emotional, behavioural and learning problems (for example, poor impulse control; difficulty learning to read), and
- fosters a persistent state of alarm and reduces ability to concentrate. Students may be hyperattentive to the nonverbal cues of a teacher, such as tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions. Unless teachers adopt some regulating practices for those students, such as meditative breathing or rhythmic motor activity, children will remain in the alarm state, impairing cognitive learning.

Teachers who understand the effects of trauma can begin to better understand the children who experience it and effectively address behavioural problems. The integration of relationally based disciplinary models and self-care for students, secondary-stress-reduction practices for teachers and trauma-sensitive policies within a school can all make a difference.

Reflecting on your school's capacity to support refugee learners

- How can the school program to ensure that the specific language and socioemotional needs of refugee learners are met?
- What resources (people, expertise/training, teaching resources, agencies and so on) can the school acquire, develop or access to assist and support refugee learners effectively and compassionately? For example,
  - ▷ district diversity teams, consultants, specialists, strategists and so on can provide information regarding existing supports for ELLs who have experienced trauma or have limited/no formal schooling;
  - ▷ Alberta Education includes rich resources for classroom teachers to download free of charge. Visit https://education.alberta.ca/media/3739782/2018-19-funding-manual.pdf for the Alberta Education Funding Manual for School Authorities (2018)
  - ▷ Teaching Refugees with Limited Formal Schooling (www.teachingrefugees.com) includes a Background Toolkit, where classroom teachers can find helpful documents, including
    - › *Tips for Identifying Students with Limited Formal Schooling*
    - › an interview template to use with LEAD (literacy, English academic development) families and students, and
    - › information about the stages of cultural adaptation.

    Under the **Instruction** tab, teachers can access sample units, videos and additional resources.
- What school personnel need/want training in order to protect against emotional burnout?

Assessment

1. Benchmarks

The Alberta ESL benchmarks are used to assess English language proficiency levels for the purpose of instruction and program planning. There are separate benchmarks available for students with no or limited formal schooling. Benchmarks are broken into four categories: K–3, Grades 4–6, Grades 7–9 and Grades 10–12. Benchmarks may be downloaded from www.learnalberta.ca/content/eslapb/ and http://teachingrefugees.com/instructional-programming/benchmarks/instructional-programming/benchmarks/.

2. Learning Indicators

Learning indicators have been developed that identify the fundamental knowledge and skills around which to guide instruction. The indicators identify the essential language, concepts and skills for which English language learners (ELL) with limited prior formal schooling require explicit instruction and scaffolded supports. Indicators should be incorporated into broad thematic teaching units that simultaneously address language development, literacy, numeracy, acculturation and acquisition of academic content. Essential components of English language development are organized into four core areas: vocabulary, function, form and fluency. Additional learning indicators address the learning needs unique to ELL students with limited formal schooling who have not assimilated the cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic skills to interact successfully with peers and adults in the community or in an academic setting and who have not acquired foundational literacy and numeracy required to access grade-level curriculum. For further explanations or examples, visit http://teachingrefugees.com/instructional-programming/learning-indicators/.

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