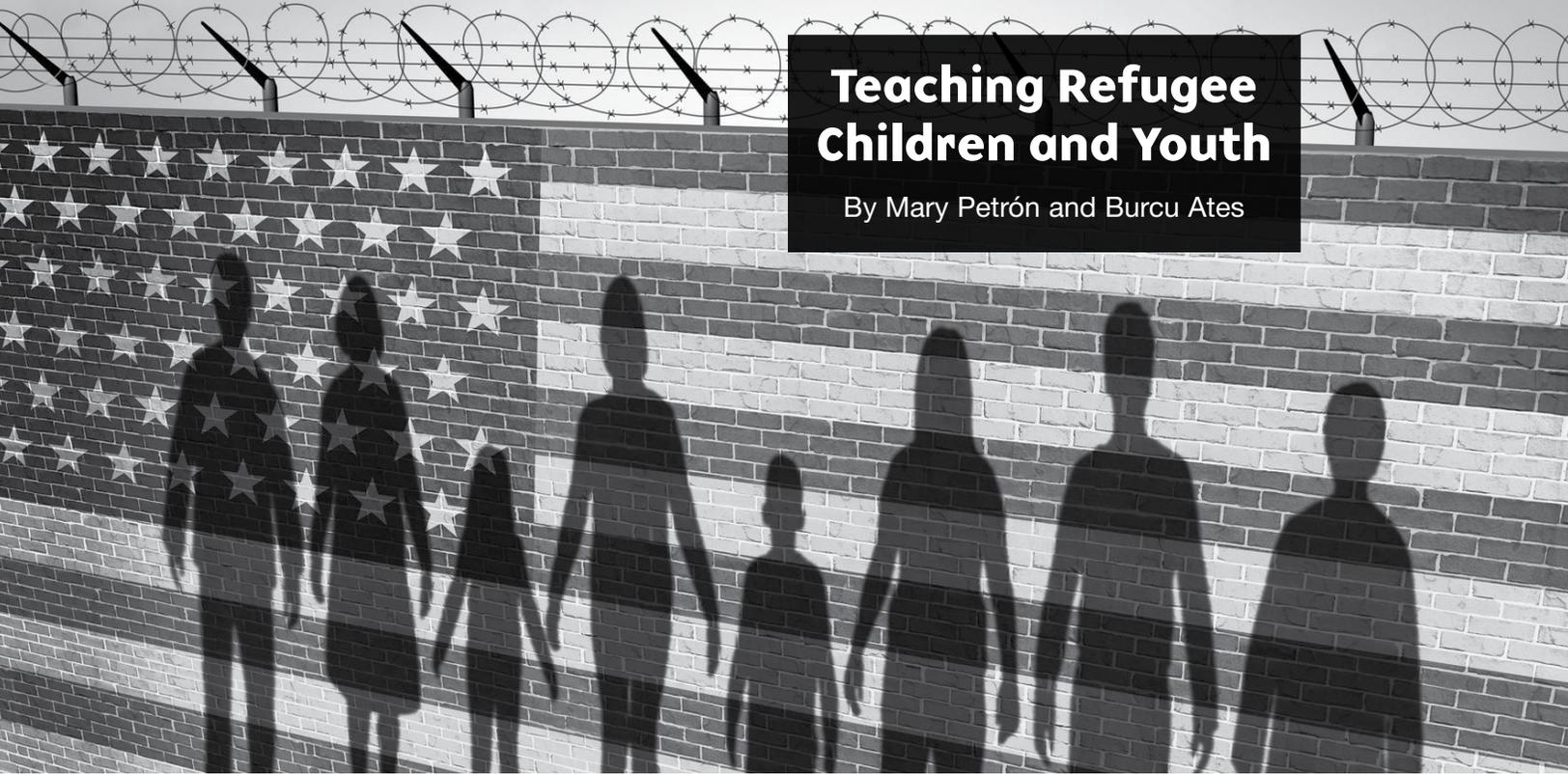


THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Teaching Refugee Children and Youth

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Worldwide 65.3 million people were displaced from their homeland to escape war, conflict, or persecution in 2015 (Edwards, 2016). This is the highest level in recorded history. The U.S. is the world's top resettlement country (Zong & Batalova, 2015) and Texas is one of the major hubs for refugees. About 7,000 were relocated to Texas in 2016 (Fernández, 2016). Although refugees are primarily concentrated in metropolitan areas such as Dallas and Houston, they may be found in every corner of the state. The great number of refugees in the U.S. creates challenges for educators to determine the best ways to embrace refugee children and incorporate culturally and linguistically appropriate classroom practices to successfully meet their educational and emotional needs (Prior & Niesz, 2013).

This article aims to contribute to English teachers' understanding of refugee children and their unique strengths and challenges. The first section clarifies our definition of refugee and highlights the diversity of the refugee population. The second section explores pedagogical issues that English teachers who work with refugee students need to consider. Certainly, we cannot and do not claim to capture the totality of concerns that may arise when working with refugee populations. However, we seek to share the knowledge gleaned from our experience with refugee students and the literature.

Understanding a Diverse Population

Refugee Is Not a Synonym of Poor and Uneducated

Under U.S. law, refugees must live outside of the U.S. during the application process and their case needs to be approved before they are permitted to enter the U.S. In contrast, asylum seekers may (or may not) be admitted to the U.S. at entry. Similarly, unaccompanied minors who cross the southern borders may be accepted for humanitarian reasons (Duran, 2016). However, these are governmental distinctions. We see little difference between a refugee from war-torn Syria and an unaccompanied minor escaping cartel violence. Our use of the term *refugee* in this article encompasses all who are forced from their homeland. As Law and Eckes (2010) stated, "An immigrant leaves his homeland to find greener grass. A refugee leaves his homeland because the grass is burning under his feet" (p. 5).

There is a common misconception that all refugees are “poor, uneducated, and ignorant” (McSpadden, 1998, p. 157). The reality is refugee families come from all social classes and educational backgrounds; some are highly educated and fluent in English and some are not. They adapt to the host country in various ways; some experience “downward mobility while others flourish” (Espin, 1999, p. 47). Regardless of whether the refugee parents are educated or uneducated, speak or do not speak English, or are affluent or poor, they may struggle to understand the educational system in the U.S. This may limit their ability to assist their children with their schooling, but it does not mean they do not care about their children’s education and success. The background of refugee children is equally diverse. Duran (2016) stated, “Many of them had previous formal and informal education in another language. Many speak, read, write two or more languages at home” (p. 4). In contrast, others may have limited formal education and lack literacy skills in any language. Therefore, teachers need to make an effort to find out about their students’ background rather than simply making assumptions.

English teachers also need to be aware that refugee students who speak English may be stigmatized because of the variety of English they use. There is not just one English, but rather there are Englishes, which are spoken in all parts of the world (Seargeant, 2012). Unfortunately, many varieties of English are often classified as substandard, inferior, and “broken” compared to Standard English (Bolton, 2013). Vandrick (2002) noted that British and American English are often considered to be the only worthy standard bearers of the language, while other Englishes are “considered inferior and even laughable by many” (p. 419). Teachers need to be cognizant of the fact that a Somali refugee schooled in a Kenyan refugee camp before arriving to the U.S. most probably learned Kenyan English. Varieties such as Kenyan English have distinct lexical, morphological, phonological, and syntactical features. These differences do not mean these varieties are wrong or unacceptable. English teachers do not need to teach different varieties of English. However, they do need to teach all students to respect and honor the linguistic diversity that exists under the umbrella of English.

The U.S. as Savior

Teachers can sometimes take on what we refer to as the saint-and-savior attitude towards refugees. The notion that we are saving lives becomes dominant. Refugees are repeatedly perceived as unfortunate, desperate individuals who have been saved by entering the U.S. The focus is often on refugee experiences that are traumatic: They leave everything behind in their home country, run away from war, political oppression and/or religious persecution. The narrative follows that here in the U.S., they are given a chance to start a brand-new life in the land of opportunity. There is no doubt that many refugees are grateful; however, some may see Western political or military intervention as the reason they became refugees. Furthermore, all long for home and those whom they have left behind. This new life cannot fully make up for what they have lost: “Refugees are here because they had no choice but to be here. They couldn’t stay where they were” (Pipher,

2002, p. 336). Teachers need to put themselves in the place of refugees who are forced to leave home without knowing if they will ever return.

When teachers see refugee children simply as victims who need to be rescued by the wealthy and democratic U.S, it is problematic. The rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, strengths, and skills the children and their families bring to the U.S. are often dismissed (Duran, 2016). Vandrick (2002) especially cautions English language teachers about having colonial attitudes or “a feeling of superiority of West to East, of English to other (especially non-European) languages” (p. 411), that may unconsciously and unintentionally influence their pedagogy and perception of their students. She cautions teachers to dismiss the notion that they are saving souls by sharing the English language and Western culture. Vandrick concludes with the notion that “it is important to be aware of ways in which colonial history influences us, and to grapple with these issues, both as individuals and as a profession” (p. 421).

Most of us have never and will never experience the loss that is felt by refugee children. However, we must be cognizant of the fact that their presence in our classrooms is intimately tied to that loss. To expect them to be grateful to be here is ultimately to expect them to be thankful for that loss. Furthermore, by consciously or unconsciously assuming a position of cultural and linguistic superiority, we are demonstrating little respect for who they are.

Pedagogical Considerations

First Language Literacy

Extensive research suggests that first language (L1) literacy facilitates the acquisition of second language literacy (L2) (August & Shanahan, 2006). Assumptions about a refugee child’s level of literacy often cannot be made based on chronological age or prior schooling. Birthdates may be unknown or based on different calendar systems. School records may be incomplete or nonexistent (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services, 2016). In addition, education systems vary greatly across the globe. How and when reading is taught, as well why one learns to read, differs considerably from country to country (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2006). However, knowing if a child is literate in L1 is a valuable piece of information. Bilingual dictionaries are useful only if one can read the entries.

Teachers often assume that because they do not know the L1 of the child, it would be impossible to assess whether refugee children are literate or not. This is an erroneous assumption. Simply giving them a book and asking them to read may at least provide information as to whether they are literate at all in L1. It may also give a teacher a rough estimate of their reading level. Fluent reading sounds like fluent reading, even if one does not understand the words being read (Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Via the Internet, reading materials are readily accessible in a myriad of languages. The International Children’s Digital Library is a good place to start (see Appendix).

Native English-speaking students are encouraged to tap into their linguistic repertoire to express themselves in any way they can (García & Wei, 2014). However, bilingual children are often discouraged from using their L1 based on the notion that it impedes their second language learning process. As García and Kleyn (2016) stated, “Once educators start looking at language from the point of view of the bilingual learner and not simply at the named language with its prescribed features, everything changes” (p. 17). If English teacher adopt this bilingual perspective, they will never tell students to refrain from utilizing L1 in the classroom (García & Kleyn, 2016).

Tapping into the L1 of the child can help with the English acquisition process. Although it is a common myth, use of L1 in the classroom does not slow down or hinder the development of English (Lin, 2015). In fact, studies suggest that L1 in the classroom leads to higher levels of motivation to learn the language, higher levels of metalinguistic awareness, and higher levels of proficiency (Cook, 2001; Lin, 2015; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Furthermore, it may serve to create and enhance a safe, nurturing learning environment.

Translanguaging and Language Brokering

English teachers often view refugees who are ELLs through a deficit lens of “limited English proficiency” without recognizing that the linguistic repertoire of the child is spread across two or more languages. Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) defined translanguaging as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (p. 283). Translanguaging disrupts the monolingual perspective in favor of the bilingual fluidity of bilingual lives. It represents the internal reality of the speaker and how he or she uses multiple languages for their own purposes. Translanguaging is quite prevalent among bilingual writers. Zapata and Laman (2016) argue that “teaching writing that strives to value, leverage, and teach into students’ everyday languaging practices” (p. 366) is of critical importance. Teachers need to allow students to express themselves in L1 and English when writing. To limit refugee children to one language or another serves to deprive them of the full extent of their language resources.

The “language deficit” perspective often stands in direct opposition to the child’s role in the home. The refugee child labeled as an English language learner may indeed be the most fluent English speaker in the family and therefore be called upon to mediate as a language broker between the home and outside world. Language brokering refers to the practice of immigrant and refugee youth interpreting and translating oral and written language for others, including family members. Perry (2014) has documented refugee children serving as language brokers as young as five years of age. Research suggests that language brokering can contribute to both the social and academic development of children (Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008; Hall & Guery, 2010).

One of the tenets of current educational theory is the importance

of authentic learning and instruction. This approach is based on the exploration of real-world experiences relevant to the learner (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). Connecting language arts and reading standards to the real-world activity of language brokering would certainly fill a need that is relevant to the learner. For example, several of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills in English language arts and reading at the high school level deal with the comprehension of informational and procedural texts. Having the learner identify and work with real-world texts, like health information on high blood pressure, will serve an important purpose in his or her role as a language broker for a parent who suffers from this ailment.

Bilingualism to any degree, including emergent bilingualism, is an asset. This is a fact that refugee parents recognize as they call upon their children to use their linguistic talents in the real world. While our job is to teach English, what the L1 refugee children bring to the classroom is a valuable tool in the learning process. To neglect this resource is the equivalent of tying one of the child’s hands behind his or her back.

Reading and Writing Can Be Therapeutic, But an English Teacher Is Not a Therapist

Writing as a tool for coming to terms with traumatic experiences has been documented extensively in the field of psychology (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Although refugee children often demonstrate incredible strength and resiliency in the wake of tragedy and trauma (Rutter, 2003), many suffer from mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and grief (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Gadeberg & Norredam, 2016). Well-meaning English teachers, inspired by Hollywood images of the teacher as savior, a la *Dangerous Minds* (1995) or *Freedom Writers* (2007), may encourage refugee children to write about their experiences. However, an English teacher is not a trained mental health professional. Attempting to help a child in this way may do more harm than good.

Refugee children should be given the opportunity to write on self-selected topics and dictate the parameters of what they choose to write about. Even a common and seemingly simple prompt, such as “Compare and contrast your life with that of the main character,” may be wholly inappropriate because remembering the past at that point in time is too painful. However, it is relatively easy to provide an alternative prompt, such as “Compare and contrast the main character in novel X with the main character in novel Y.” The key is to provide choices rather than require them to explore their past experiences.

It is important for teachers of language and literacy to incorporate diverse literature into their classrooms. Exposing children to other ways of being and knowing benefits all. As Thomas (2016) stated, “if today’s children grow up with literature that is multicultural, diverse, and decolonized, we can begin the work of healing our nation and world through humanizing stories” (p. 115). It is important to select books that unearth and honor diverse students’ lives and stories, rather than keeping them

invisible. All children should be encouraged to examine books with a critical lens. Thomas (2016) further argues, “Raising questions about books that erase, caricaturize, marginalize, or present diverse children and families as less than fully human is a critical part of our charge as educators” (p. 117). There are books that can help both teachers and students understand the experiences of refugees, such as Mary Williams’s book *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (2005) and Thanhha Lai’s *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011). A list of other recommended books on refugees is provided (see Appendix). Incorporating books that include refugee experiences endorses diversity in literature while allowing all students to appreciate culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Again, providing options to refugee students is critical. It allows them to explore or not explore past experiences.

Regardless of the texts chosen or writing prompts provided, English teachers need to be hyper-observant of the emotional state of refugee children. Even reading a nondescript mainstream story may evoke a torrent of emotions in a refugee child. For example, a simple story about a family may trigger memories of family members who have been killed (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). There is no way to predict if or when this will happen, nor is it possible to completely prevent it from happening. However, working out a contingency plan with the school counselor before the need arises is beneficial. This plan can be something as simple as establishing a safe zone for the child in the counselor’s office.

While it is true that literacy can have therapeutic purposes, it is also true that teachers are not trained therapists. By offering refugee children options as they engage in reading and writing experiences, we are providing them with the space to confront or not confront past trauma. Healing can take place only on their timeline.

Final Thoughts

Teachers are the first line of defense for refugee children in school and the main point of contact for parents. Refugee parents who do not speak English have the right to receive the same information and services as English-speaking parents. However, teachers may need to advocate for refugee families. It might be necessary to meet with school administration to request services of interpretation when communicating with parents orally and translation for written communication. The importance of being able to communicate with parents who do not speak English is highlighted in a variety of federal documents, including the 1970 Memorandum (Pottinger, 1970) and the No Child Left Behind Act (2008). Again, it is often the teacher who must advocate for these services. Universities and refugee organizations may be useful in obtaining interpretation/translation services for less commonly spoken languages.

Refugee children are some of the most vulnerable, particularly when they are also English language learners. If a teacher believes that a refugee child is not being provided with comparable and nondiscriminatory access to education,

he or she may contact the State Board of Education or file a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services, 2016).

The stereotypical image of a refugee is one of poverty, illiteracy, and “broken” English. However, the reality is often very different. We must strive to understand refugee families and the diversity of their backgrounds. Learning from and about our refugee students and the world they came from, as well as the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the classroom, is a necessary precursor to effective teaching. As Adichie (2016) noted in her speech at the United Nation’s World Humanitarian Day, “Nobody is ever just a refugee.”

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Appendix

Resources

International Children's Digital Library - <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>

Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services - <http://www.brycs.org/>

Office of Refugee Resettlement - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource-library>

University of North Carolina World View - <http://worldview.unc.edu/resources-for-teaching-the-syrian-refugee-crisis/>

The United Nations Refugee Agency - http://www.unrefugees.org/?_ga=1.91359194.1521860597.1481225917

Books and Films About Refugees

Colorín Colorado - <http://www.colorincolorado.org/booklist/refugee-experience-books-children>

Institute for Humane Education – <https://humaneeducation.org/blog/2015/14-childrens-books-refugees/>

What Do We Do All Day? - <http://www.whatdowedoallday.com/2015/09/childrens-books-about-refugees.html>

Good Reads - <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/refugee>

International Rescue Committee - http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/refugee_films_and_books.pdf