

Re-thinking pedagogy for middle school students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling

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ABSTRACT: The arrival of substantial cohorts of English language learners from Africa with little, no or severely interrupted schooling is requiring new pedagogic responses from teachers in Australia and other Western countries of refugee re-settlement. If the students are to have optimal educational and life chances, it is crucial for them to acquire resources for conceptually deep and critical literacy tasks while still learning basic reading and writing skills. This requires teachers to extend their pedagogic repertoires: subject area teachers must teach language and literacy alongside content; high school teachers must teach what has been thought of as primary school curriculum. The aim of this article is to describe some teacher responses to these challenges. Data are drawn from a study involving an intensive language school and three high schools, and also from the author's experience as a homework tutor for refugees. Stand-alone basic skills programs are described, as are modifications of long-established ESL programs. It is also argued that teachers need to find ways of linking with the conceptual knowledge of students who arrive with content area backgrounds different from others in their class. Everyday life experiences prior to, and after re-settlement in the West, are rich with potential in this regard.

KEYWORDS: English language learners, literacy education, middle-school curriculum, refugee education, teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

How can learners of English build resources for conceptually deep and critical tasks while still acquiring basic reading and writing skills? This is one of the challenges confronting educators working with some of the middle-school students who are now arriving in the West as refugees from Africa. The aim of this article is to look at some pedagogic responses teachers are making to these students' needs. Given the strong formal educational backgrounds of most migrants and refugees in recent years, Australian teachers are often, although not always, confident and effective in their work with English language learners who arrive from East Asia and other regions with high level literacy and academic development in their first language, and years of formal study of English. However, with the arrival of new cohorts of refugees from Africa teachers are challenged to find new ways of working with English language learners.

Refugees represent a new African student cohort in schools in Australia, as in Canada (Dachyshyn, 2008), the UK (Rutter, 2006), the US (McBrien, 2005), New Zealand (Hamilton, 2004) and other Western countries of re-settlement. For many years there has been a small inflow of Africans into Australia under the skilled migration and family migration programs – teachers included (for example, O'Brien, 2009). However, at present, most new arrivals from Africa are refugees with high-level

educational needs. They have typically spent protracted periods in camps or other difficult living situations in transit countries. As a consequence, a large majority of the young people have had little, no or severely interrupted schooling prior to re-settlement. This is a point of distinction from most previous refugee groups and poses new challenges of school engagement and successful re-settlement. In the years leading up to this study, increasing numbers of young Africans needed to begin learning English on arrival, and had low literacy levels and limited academic development (Community Relations Commission, 2006; Ibtisam, 2006; Queensland Government, 2008; Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007).

The data reported here are drawn from an interview study conducted in four Australian schools with eight students from Sudan, Eritrea, Burundi and Rwanda, and their parents, teachers and other educators. The first round of interviews occurred in late 2006 after the students' arrival in an intensive language school for adolescent learners of English as a second language (ESL). The second round of interviews occurred in early to mid-2008, after the students' transition into three mainstream high schools. The student participants in the interview study were Sudanese who arrived in Australia via Egypt, Eritreans who took refuge in Sudan en-route to Australia, and Burundians and Rwandans who came to Australia from camps in Tanzania. All participants had some schooling prior to re-settlement in Australia. The Sudanese and Eritreans had been schooled in Arabic and some of them had begun studying English formally. They spoke Dinka or Tigrinya and other languages at home. The Rwandans and Burundians, who had been schooled in Tanzania for repatriation, had studied Kirundi and French. They all spoke Swahili and Kinyarwanda or Kirundi, and all but one had learned some English, one having studied it and the others having picked it up informally in Tanzania, where English is an official language alongside Swahili.

All of the eight focal students had received most if not all of their schooling after their families took refuge. However, there was great diversity of school experience and achievement on arrival in Australia. Two of the students had completed 5-6 grades in an age-appropriate fashion, while the others had started late, had extended breaks in their schooling, and repeated grades, with the result that two of the students had not progressed beyond second grade. In Australia, five of the students were placed in Beginners, a class that assumes no formal English background; one was placed in Post-Beginners; and two were placed in Foundation, a class set up to teach "learning to learn" skills historically assumed by a school program that had catered primarily for students with uninterrupted school histories. Reported proficiency in first and other languages was considered in these placements, although not formally assessed.

In this article I draw not only on the interview study, but also on my own experience as a volunteer homework tutor for refugees. In 2004-05, I worked for six months as a tutor in a community-based homework centre, and then for a year as an in-home tutor for a Somali family. Given the unfamiliar pedagogic decisions this required of me, I kept a reflective journal during the period. Like many Australian teachers, I was accustomed to working with English language learners with high-level first language literacy and academic achievement and so needed to extend my pedagogic repertoire in order to work effectively with the students I was tutoring.

NEW PEDAGOGIC NEEDS

For some of the refugee students, the academic challenge is formidable: to learn, for the first time, concepts and forms of language essential to school success – and to do so not only in a new language, but in a written language. George, an indigenous Burundian who was born into an unschooled family of subsistence farmers, is a case in point (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). George started school at age 9 in a Tanzanian refugee camp and repeated both first and second grades. On arrival at an intensive language school in Australia, he was unable to read and write in any language. For students with less schooling than George, pencil-holding, book-handling and other foundational capabilities for literacy cannot be taken for granted.

For other refugees from Africa, the challenge is less daunting but considerable nonetheless: to fill conceptual gaps and learn academic English. For some this entails mastering a new script and new functions and forms of written language required in Australian schools. Sophia, an Eritrean born in Sudan to a father who held pharmacy qualifications and a mother who worked in nutrition in a hospital, is a case in point. Sophia had topped her class six years in a row in a regular town school in Sudan. While living in Sudan she had aspired to university studies and a medical career, dreams that persisted during her intensive language studies in Australia. But after entering high school, Sophia lost interest in science: “When I came here I can find the science getting hard.” Her aspirations changed as she came to understand her dilemma: “I don’t, can’t be a doctor, if I’m not good at science.” Sophia’s family had the social and cultural capital to secure homework tutoring for her several afternoons a week, but her science marks remained below average.

Students like Sophia often have gaps in content area knowledge. These arise in part from differences of curriculum between countries; years of schooling lost to conflict and flight; and limited resources, especially in schools for refugees. A Congolese teacher who had taught in regular and refugee camp schools in Africa, and was working as a bilingual aide in Australia, described the constraints on conceptual outcomes in the camp schools with which he was familiar: “No computer, the African teaching was more practical, I think you understand, more practical... You can learn, yeah, if you have equipment. Like trees, there’s equipment like trees, but where other things are needed, they cannot get access to that.” He explained that the students might, as a consequence, have memorised scientific principles but not have had opportunities to deepen that knowledge through experiments.

In addition to conceptual knowledge, students like Sophia also need to add skills in a new language and a new script to their literacy repertoire. They need to build skills for reading and writing to learn in content areas. Technical vocabulary, spelling and complex grammar are challenges for many students, first language speakers of English included. With respect to ESL students, it has long been established that limited mastery of these language and literacy skills are implicated in the growth of cumulative gaps between the achievement of learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and other students in the middle school years (Thomas & Collier, 1997). In the case of African students in Australian schools, recent research investigating the difficulties that science is presenting, even for students like Sophia, has pointed to these skills as areas of particular need, prompting an intervention program to explicitly teach the requisite skills in the course of science lessons (Miller,

2007). Historically, neither language nor literacy education skills have been part of the repertoire of most science teachers, despite efforts to develop language-across-the-curriculum approaches. Furthermore, widespread recognition that all teachers need to be able to teach reading, whether to African students, ESL students in general, or speakers of English as a first language, is relatively recent in the local context.

Responses to the pedagogic needs of refugees from Africa include foundation classes, like those in which two of this study's participants were placed, community and school-based homework clubs like the one in which I worked, and new programs to teach skills were previously assumed in middle-school education (Community Relations Commission, 2006; Queensland Government, 2008; Refugee Health Research Centre, 2007). There is also considerable pedagogic innovation on the part of teachers (for example, Miller, 2007; Luizzi & Saker, 2008) as they discover that pedagogies, which worked for ESL learners with continuous and high-quality prior schooling, are inadequate for current cohorts of refugees from Africa (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007). It is this pedagogic work that is examined in this article.

The four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) provides useful terms for thinking coherently about the picture that emerges from the literature reviewed above. This model posits that literate people use four sets of resources: code-breaking resources (for example, knowledge of spelling patterns); resources for participating in textual meanings (for example, vocabulary, grammar); text use resources (for example, understanding the purpose of a text); and resources for critical textual analysis (for example, being able to identify an author's world view). A task of schooling is to ensure that students acquire a mix of resources adequate to the demands of the literate contexts in which they find themselves.

George and Sophia have need of somewhat different resources, but, nonetheless, it is possible to speak of some characteristics typical of many refugees from Africa, and which are not necessarily shared with other ESL and refugee students. From the literature it is clear that many African middle-school students have high-level needs for code-breaking and text participation resources in English. Some of the students are acquiring these resources for the first time, while others are extending repertoires of resources they began to develop in Arabic, Kirundi, French and other languages – and in the case of Arabic, for another script. Beyond beginning literacy, there is need for vocabulary and complex grammar resources that enable participation in the meanings of middle-school content-area texts. Code resources for spelling technical vocabulary are also needed. These are resources unlikely to be picked up with everyday English in a Tanzanian camp or learnt with beginner foreign language English in a classroom in Cairo, that was described by one of the Sudanese mothers as being more about keeping young refugees off the streets than academics.

The four resources model assumes that there is no hierarchy amongst literacy resources: critical text analytic skills can be developed alongside code-breaking skills. This is a point of considerable and ongoing controversy amongst ESL teachers in Australia (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). It forms part of the backdrop to the data presented here, as does tension around the need for subject teachers to teach language, and high school teachers to teach basic literacy skills.

CRITIQUE OF PEDAGOGY FOR AFRICAN STUDENTS IN THE WEST

Much of the rapidly emerging literature on African refugees, cited in the previous section, documents what are seen as the students' needs. However, the literature also presents critique of pedagogic provision for African students in the West. The critique pertains to the limited language, literacy and conceptual resources made available to African students in the West; discontinuities between community and school literacy practices; and the inadequacy of ESL provision for youth in digital and popular cultural worlds of English.

Firstly, there is some tension between the expectations and needs of African students and their communities and school English education in the West. One commentator (Romaniw, 2007) has criticised Australian teachers for not providing refugees from Africa with the grammar foundation they need for further study – that is, with resources for participation in complex textual meaning. The problem is attributed to pedagogic beliefs that de-emphasise explicit grammar teaching and reject teacher-directed instruction. This is a critique that was voiced by a teacher from Africa who participated in the study reported here, and is consistent with critique in other migrant communities in Western countries (Li, 2006).

At the same time, some Africans are offering critique of the conceptual development opportunities available to their children after re-settlement in the West. In the US, tertiary-educated Sudanese have criticised the paucity of geography, mathematics and history content taught in mainstream schools (Li, 2008). Similarly, some refugees in the UK are critical of low-level expectations in their new schools: “At first I thought the freedom was great, but a few years ago when I started to study seriously, realised something had happened. We had lowered ourselves down. ‘What kind of grade would I have got in Kenya?’ I thought” (McDonald, 1998, p. 161). The issue here went beyond expectations of ESL students in particular to academic expectations of students in general.

Additionally, there is evidence that some Sudanese in the US are discontented with withdrawal approaches to ESL which deny their children access to content area study and foreign language study available to other students and essential for tertiary entry (Li, 2008). Similarly, in Australia and the UK, there is some resistance to special preparatory or foundational classes by parents and students who construe this form of provision as exclusion from mainstream curriculum or isolation from local students (Community Relations Commission, 2006; McDonald, 1998). At the same time, however, age-based placement is highly contentious. Some Africans in the West argue that fourteen-year-olds would be placed in second grade if necessary in Africa, while Western educators counter by arguing the inappropriateness of this arrangement in Western societies (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Dachyshyn, 2008; Lodge, 1998).

Secondly, there is tension between school English education and language and literacy practices of African communities – in English or otherwise. A US study has shown how schooling in that country failed to connect and engage with community English literacy practices of Sudanese with strong schooling backgrounds in Kenya's Kakuma camp (Perry, 2007). It showed also how a regimen of basic skills training and testing put unnecessary barriers in the way of Sudanese students seeking opportunities for higher education. Problems arose because English literacy

capabilities evident in the students' community-building and activist work in the US and internationally were not adequately captured by decontextualised tests of basic code-breaking and text participation skills used in the US school system. In the state where the study reported here was conducted, there is concern that national literacy testing is having a similar effect. However, the assessment instruments used by the ESL teachers who participated in the study credit students for drawing on that which they know in their first language and for using first-language literacy skills (McKay, Hudson & Sapuppo, 1994), and given current refugee intakes, have recently been revised to enable recognition of the progress of students with low literacy backgrounds.

Thirdly, in another, but related strand of criticism, ethnographic work with continental francophone youth who arrived in Canada as refugees and immigrants from Somalia, Djibouti, Senegal and Ethiopia likewise raises questions about the appropriateness of language and literacy education in the West (Ibrahim, 1999; 2004). The ethnographer, himself a refugee from Sudan, argues that curriculum in Ontario is insufficiently relevant, engaging and integrative for the students. He suggests that English, and in particular ESL education, can address this by working with popular culture, the site where youth form and perform their identities as Black people in racist North American culture: the argument is that the language, texts and ways of learning of hip-hop culture should be brought into the classroom. The gist of the argument is that teachers should work from English language resources in which students have invested heavily, and which include critical perspectives on the mainstream culture in which the students are marked racially.

Finally, commentators have argued that pedagogy should ensure that refugees enjoy opportunities to acquire the literate practices of digital communities and the new economy. Equal access to social and economic goods demands rich programming that enables equal access to new curricula, pedagogies and technologies, including cross-disciplinary, problem-centred and project-based learning using digital platforms (Christie & Sidhu, 2002). The call for rich rather than restricted programming resonates with well-established principles in the ESL literature. Thomas and Collier's (1997) landmark program evaluation study of the records of over 700, 000 students in US public schools argued that it is cognitively complex interdisciplinary tasks rather than back-to-basics approaches that close cumulative academic gaps between ESL students and proficient English speakers. Rich curriculum is not only engaging, but also conducive to the linguistic and conceptual development essential for ESL students' success in middle schooling. More recently, researchers have argued the importance of programming which provides both high intellectual challenge and high language support, especially for students in the middle years (Rushton, 2008).

To sum, there is tension between Africans' expectations and school English education in the West on the one hand, and between school English education and language and literacy practices of African communities on the other hand. There is also an imperative to ensure that schooling enables refugees to access the fullness of literate practice in a digital world. This body of critique goes to the heart of some established practices of English language education. In what follows, analyses of responses to the pedagogic needs of African refugees with little, no or severely interrupted schooling are presented with cognisance of this critique.

TACKLING UNFAMILIAR CONFIGURATIONS OF NEED

One strand of the critique reviewed above is concerned with structures that exclude African students from mainstream curriculum opportunities. That was not the issue in the interview study. Rather, the concern was with the inability of the students to keep up in mainstream classes. Age-based placement was identified as a source of problems in this regard by some students, parents and educators. An experienced teacher from Sudan, who was working as a bilingual aide in both the intensive language school and a high school, described age-based placement as one of the key problems experienced by refugee students. The data were elicited by a direct question about difficulties of transition between intensive language school and high school. In response to the question, the aide identified unfamiliar content area subjects of the high-school curriculum as a source of difficulties, and then spoke about age-based placement:

A: ... they go to the other places [high schools], to the class according to their age and that is something, literally, it is a shock to many of them because in Africa it is not a problem, there we can go, for example, you might be 15 and you may be in Year 6. No problem. And there still, you can, you're considered, you're a child. But here it is different. So that is the big challenge.

For teachers and schools, the “big challenge” is to help students build resources for conceptually deep and critical tasks that are part of the high-school curriculum while still acquiring basic reading and writing skills. The four study schools responded to this complex challenge in a multi-faceted way. Stand-alone programs had been put in place to target basic literacy skills. These represented a new curriculum development for ESL units that had previously catered to literate, and often highly literate, migrants and refugees, and in mainstream high schools in which literacy has been more or less assumed. At the same time, some ESL and content-area teachers were modifying long-established pedagogic approaches to better engage the refugee students from Africa.

The following extract from an interview with three ESL teachers at one of the high schools illustrates the multi-faceted nature of the response to the African students' needs. The data gives a glimpse of both the reading program developed in the ESL unit and pedagogic modifications for the new student cohorts. It was produced in an interview with three ESL teachers at Shusu's high school. Shusu was born in Sudan and arrived in Australia via Egypt, where she spent time in a school for refugees. According to her mother, Shusu had been an above-average student in Sudan, placed in the top ten in her class. In Australia her high-school teachers described her performance as “average” for a refugee from Africa.

T: Sushu didn't have any greater difficulties than the majority of ESL, African ESL students, but I try to look at getting regular reading for her and other students in small groups with a teacher aide and myself. Sometimes it was individual reading, sometimes it was shared reading. But what I tried to do, in agreement with the [head of ESL studies], is to have that consistent – a lesson a day if possible, and get to assess her, not with some formal assessing but rather my notes to look at where she is, where the difficulties are before that and with reading draw her awareness to the

difficulties or issues that she has with sounds, get the teacher aide to follow as well, as I would take a turn with other students.

In addition to stand-alone work to develop code-breaking and text participation resources not historically part of the high school curriculum, Shusu's teachers had modified the way they taught content in class. For two decades, Australian English teachers in general, and ESL teachers in particular, have made extensive use of a genre approach to explicitly teach text-types required for school success. The underpinning assumption is that a critical education must make genres of power available to ESL students – an assumption contested by those who argue the necessity for ESL students to engage in ideology critique (Macken-Horarik, 1999). The genre approach entails developing students' knowledge of the content and academic language for an assignment, explicit teaching of linguistic and text-level features of the genre in which they need to write, and opportunities to co-construct texts with the teacher before working independently. Teacher-directed study of grammar is integral to this approach, although this element in the pedagogy is not always given due emphasis.

Shusu's teachers added reading and other strands to complement their genre teaching, and were also careful in the way they taught genre. This is evident from the following extract. The data was produced a few exchanges after the data presented above. The same teacher is speaking:

T: I also looked at using things that supplement that [reading program] such as short sentence writing, spelling on a regular basis to address the literacy skills that I think is the basis for them and also model, very often in class if there is sentence writing, but me showing the parts, students do one together, then to do it individually give comments as much as they can at individual basis. And if you are to do a short narrative, like [in] genre [teaching], we try to pitch it at where they're at and a little bit harder than that, not to overrun them with the requirements of that particular genre or piece of writing they had to do. I try, and in this class and in every class, to do, to break that down in bits. We call it "deconstructing", showing them the bits. That's the bit, the part, where they find it really hard getting to write short narrative, what is writing a news report. So to break, to show them these parts, to make it as visual as you can, pointing, cutting, pasting, drawing, you know, all these markers, different colours, and then putting it as a class together. So of course not everybody gets it first time or the second time, some never, but, you know, you're trying as a teacher to do as much as you can to use various strategies, visual and sitting with them and showing the group to actually getting to be able to repeat the steps and, as I said, succeed in what, you know, the expectations are for the peers at that year level. I felt that our reading program worked well.

The mix of activities developing code-breaking and text participation resources for independent reading and writing, and the more deliberate approach to genre teaching, is similar to that which I came up with as a homework tutor. In a presentation I gave to local ESL teachers at the time (Dooley, 2004), I observed that the exercise books and handouts students brought with them made it clear that teachers had carefully prepared their classes for assignments in accord with the principles of genre teaching. Yet, the students with whom I worked struggled with their independent research tasks.

At the time I noted that the problems I confronted were similar to those described in the adult literacy literature (Barber, 2002, 2003). Specifically, students did not know

technical language that had been taught in class; did not fully understand content taught in class; had trouble locating information in familiar texts; did little planning for their written texts; wrote very brief texts missing some elements of generic structure and linguistic features taught in class; and spent considerable time on mechanics – especially rubbing-out or whiting-out spelling errors – rather than ideas when editing.

In responding to these problems, I drew on my training as a primary-preschool teacher and a teacher of English as a foreign and second language (ESL/EFL). Strategies from reading education, genre pedagogy, ESL/EFL pedagogy, process writing and critical literacy melded in my practice. I found myself inventing guided reading “lessons” on the run to deepen comprehension and critical understanding of texts brought from class or found on the internet. When I was sure that the students understood the readings, I helped them use concept maps, retrieval charts and other graphic organisers for note-taking. I gave the students opportunities to talk ideas through to develop technical vocabulary and complex grammar before writing. In doing so, it was necessary to search for links to the students’ experiences and knowledge. After this type of discussion, I helped the students plan their texts and to think about the world views of their readership. I scaffolded text and sentence-level editing. Finally, I let the students loose with eraser and white-out, grabbing teachable moments in order to build sound-symbol and spelling pattern knowledge. As a tutor, I was constrained to work with the topics and readings the students brought with them to the homework club, but the teacher in me wondered about how the assignments might be made more do-able for the students. There was a sad irony in seeing students who had fled armed conflicts struggling to write a modern history assignment on war and revolution.

It was the conceptual and academic language development that concerned me most: there was never enough time. It was with interest then that I heard the comments of an ESL teacher who provides in-school homework support. This teacher honed in on the problem of conceptual development. The data were produced as part of a lengthy comment on the do-ability of homework. The teacher described the ways she went about making homework more do-able. She then said that some of the homework students received in mainstream high school classes was not do-able:

T: Mainstream classes, of course they’re [African students] supposed to be doing what everybody else is doing, And, we find when they come with the HPE [Health and Physical Education] assignment, you just, it’s so hard sometimes because conceptually they haven’t got it... And it’s not even the language; it’s the concepts, and it’s really not about, “they’ve got it and they’re just trying to find the words to express those ideas”. You have to go right back and express the ideas.

On first reading, this teacher seems to be speaking from a deficit position: students “haven’t got it”. However, the teacher’s criticism was of mainstream HPE teachers who assume that students think in certain ways, and fail to find out what students know and how they think. Her point was that the difficulties some young African students face are more fundamental than learning the academic English required by their assignments; the difficulties arise in part from teachers’ assumptions about students’ knowledge and ways of thinking.

The teacher went on to explain how she makes homework do-able for African students. She gave the example of an essay she was planning to set a semester after the interview. In preparation for that assignment, she said, “Everything I do is all about building up the concept” so that “by the time they find out what the question is or find out what they have to write, they’ve already got a lot of that conceptual structure in place.” The idea is to ensure that “the whole task doesn’t then become so incredibly daunting”. The essay for which she was preparing them was to be about the representation of oppression in three different texts. Accordingly, at the time of the interview she had already “spent a whole week looking at what oppression was and exploring the concept of oppression and [we] just keep coming back to it again and again and talking about it.” She went on to say: “Each time we’re just building up, this is being represented in this text in this way, so hopefully they can pull it all together.”

During the preparatory phases, the teacher makes explicit links to students’ prior knowledge: “I spent a whole lesson today just talking about the Russian Revolution...and about communism and fascism and drawing on their own experiences...[and they said], ‘Oh yes, that’s what happened in Ethiopia’.” The teacher emphasised that even though students might have no prior knowledge of given content, it is possible to link to relevant conceptual knowledge. In this way she had been able to build on what Kurdish, Rwandan, Burundian and Liberian students brought from their experience in order to successfully produce essays about the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, she has been able to draw on some students’ experience of the Sahara in order to learn about Antarctica as the driest place on earth. The students were, apparently, rather surprised and intrigued that there was somewhere drier than the Sahara – evidence that the teacher had engaged the students and was successfully building on their existing concept of dryness.

Linking to students’ prior knowledge is widely recognised as a principle of good teaching. In a sense, then, there would seem to be nothing new in this teacher’s approach. However, in a context in which some teachers were taking a strong deficit position, inferring a lack of conceptual knowledge as the basis of differences in content area background, this teachers’ efforts to connect with student experience and concepts were notable.

There are two points of interest in the teacher’s approach. The first is the distinction between content and concepts: students who know nothing of polar geography might have a concept of dryness from their experience of the Sahara. This distinction is especially useful for thinking about how to make content accessible to students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling. The students’ lives in the West, whether in hip-hop culture as in North America (Ibrahim, 1999, 2004) or not, is a further source of content and concepts – and has critical potential.

As was noted earlier, the issue of whether or not ESL students should be taught critical resources has long been highly contentious in the Australian state where this study was conducted. There are many who claim that text analysis is too difficult for ESL students. That was not the position of this teacher. She argued that it was easy to get African and most other ESL students talking critically about texts, provided she chose the right topic and designed the pedagogy well:

But I think sex, politics, religion, basically...you can get something [critical from the students]. So I mean not something about how the Aborigines are viewed, because a lot of that is too, I guess, too remote, but I guess if it's something about, you know, politics or gender differences. And particularly something about gender will really get everybody fired up and then you get them thinking about, "Well, why have you said that? Why have you done that?" And then I use that as a way of saying, "Well, right, do you know you believe that because of the way you were brought up?"

This teacher's observation was consistent with my own. As a homework tutor I found that helping students make sense of socially and culturally unfamiliar texts was most difficult. Once the students understood the text, the critical move was relatively easy – a consequence, perhaps, of embodied experiences of discrimination (Luke, 2004) and of not being the reader assumed by the text (Wallace, 2005).

In another of the study schools, an ESL teacher outlined an approach that used students' life experiences to engage them in conceptually deep work when they did not have basic code and text participation resources. The data were elicited in a discussion about George. On arrival at the intensive language school, George displayed no evidence of literacy skills, and on exiting he was the lowest functioning of the eight focal students. In mainstream classes at high school, he required assistance from a teacher aide at all times. In ESL classes, he required individualised literacy tasks. At the time of the interview the teachers were grounding these tasks in his experiences of heavy drinking and trouble with the police:

... whenever he is in ESL, you know, he's participating. His English, he's very confident in spoken English, it's the writing that's the problem. And just to motivate him, because it's too much sometimes, it's overwhelming for him, to expect that kind of writing when he can't even write one sentence on his own, so we give him computer skills, things that he's interested in, give him, some topics that he's motivated to do. I say, "How about we do a leaflet about drugs?" You know, a brochure we prepare and look at the effects, what it means and because he's got his personal experience, he has been involved with the alcohol, so it's for him, how did he learn to focus and to give up that kind of lifestyle? So he, he can do it with his experience. So he's making progress but we always need someone to continuously encourage him until he gets on his feet and can work independently. Even at the moment he cannot work independently...

The point here is that it is not only experiences in Africa – of the dryness of the Sahara, for example, or of civil war in Eritrea – but of life in Australia that is available as a base for conceptually deep and critical work. The social experience of creating a life in the West and the cultural work of forming self in everyday and popular culture – all this experience can be viewed as a starting point for conceptual development and acquisition of literacy resources in school. There might be experience in the culture of hip-hop (Ibrahim, 1999, 2004) or of Bollywood or a chatroom frequented by Somali youth in Somalia and in the diaspora in Africa and the West (Dooley, 2008). As in the interview study reported here, there might be experience of Swahili youth culture and music, Australian soap operas, the Simpsons, soccer or the life of the mosque or evangelical church.

LEARNING IT ALL – AND AT ONCE

The problem addressed in this article is a new one for many teachers of African refugees in the West: to build students' resources for conceptually deep and critical tasks while helping them to acquire English and basic literacy skills. For teachers, the challenge is to not only to learn new skills but to think anew about the work of the school.

A study of Mexican American youth in a comprehensive, inner-city high school in Houston, Texas (Valenzuela, 1999) is cause for consideration. That study was a three-year ethnography conducted in a school of 3000 students, nearly all of whom were Mexican. 45 per cent of the students were first generation migrants. Some of these students were preliterate, having been unschooled or poorly schooled. It was these students who were most at risk. They enrolled with dreams of becoming literate, but their literacy needs were not addressed and there was hostility from teachers who were incredulous at the presence of preliterate youth in high school. In the absence of respect for their literacy projects, and appropriate pedagogy, the students dropped out.

Both the interview data, and my experience as a homework tutor, show teachers thinking anew about pedagogy. There is evidence of teachers tapping into a range of pedagogic approaches in order to develop in students the conceptual knowledge and the mix of literate resources required in high school. The lines demarcating the work of subject teachers from ESL teachers, and high school teachers from primary school teachers blur. Every teacher of middle-school students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling needs to be a teacher not only of language, as ESL teachers have long argued, but also of literacy – a new task for many ESL and high school subject area teachers. Given that it is socially inappropriate for adolescents to enrol in primary school in societies like Australia, it is the high school that must change in order to cater for the pedagogic needs of students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling.

At the same time, it is crucial to recognise the limits of language and literacy pedagogy in engaging refugee youth in schooling. The focal student most like the preliterate Mexican youth was George. Unlike those youth he enjoyed the respect of his high school teachers, constant ESL support, and individualised ESL programming. Yet, he withdrew from school before his second interview for the research reported here. I think often of George and wonder what he would have told us had he been interviewed a second time for the study reported here. And so, of the many needs discussed in this article, the last is a need on the part of teachers, specifically a need to understand better the place of school in the post-resettlement pathways of refugee youth with little, no or severely interrupted schooling.

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