

# What Is Special about Special Needs of Refugee Children?

## *Guidelines for Teachers*



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### **Introduction**

The past decade has seen a rapid growth of increasingly diverse immigrant populations in the United States—the most vulnerable among these are refugee children. Most immigrants enter a host country with a goal of improving their opportunities in life. Further, they arrive after years of preparation, such as locating housing, securing jobs and support from the local ethnic community and/or nuclear or already established extended family. Most importantly, while preparing to move, many immigrants become somewhat familiar with the new language of the host nation.

Unlike these typical immigrants, however, refugees are fleeing a history of oppression and have often experienced untold human horrors. Rather than immigrating with a goal of improving their lives, they do so simply to save their lives. Often they arrive in a strange country (sometimes a country they have never heard of before) with their entire belongings reduced to the clothes on their bodies.

On their own, they flee fear of persecution in search of refugee camps where they wait (sometimes for years) to be sent to a

safe nation where they can resume their lives. There are currently about 12 million refugees or asylum seekers worldwide (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2006). Of these, more than half are children (Clark, 2001)—children who are increasingly likely to end up in American classrooms.

Teachers in the United States are a relatively homogeneous group. The great majority are White and monolingual with very modest if any international travel experience. Moreover, they tend to come from secure, middle-class backgrounds. Their experience with the horrors of war and trauma are generally limited to watching the evening news or occasional documentaries.

Given this background, it is unlikely that such teachers are prepared to respond to the specialized needs of refugee children during the most vulnerable period of those children's lives. It is the goal of this article to alert teachers and administrators to this problem so that they might be more likely to respond to the special needs of refugee children who arrive in their schools.

### **Obstacles Faced by Refugee Children**

#### **Impact of Diverse Traumatic Experiences on Children**

Many researchers emphasize the negative impact of traumatic experience on the social and psychological development of refugee children (Coleridge, 2001; Ghazali, 2004; Parkins, 2004). Children fleeing their

home countries have diverse traumatic experiences, which later impact their successful adjustment in host countries.

Bosnian Muslim refugees, for example, have experienced war, genocide, desecration (destroyed mosques, organized rape of Bosnian women and children) (Snyder et al., 2005). Many Sudanese refugees, on the other hand, report having survived starvation, attacks by lions, near-drowning in crocodile-infested rivers, and long treks across deserts with insufficient food and water (Bates, Baird, Johnson, Lee, Luster, & Rehagen, 2005). Afghanistan refugee children experienced war, murder of parents, hard labor, and marriage at an early age (Coleridge, 2001).

Ajdukovic (1998) suggests that the most frequent stressful events Croatian refugee children have experienced prior to coming to the United States include: "loss of home (80%), loss of personal belongings (66.7%), separation from family members (66.7%), damage to property (48.9%), exposure to enemy attacks (46.7%), and death of a family member or friend (37.8%)" (p. 209).

The majority of refugee children come to American schools with experiences such as these—experiences they relive in their nightmares and experiences they try to forget during the day. Very few teachers will ever experience hardships of the magnitude experienced by refugee children. Nevertheless, with a bit of deliberate understanding of refugee children's pasts, teachers can play a major role in helping them carve a brighter future.

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### **Increasingly Diverse Languages**

Most teachers would agree that the better we know our children, the more likely we are to respond more appropriately with instruction. Getting to know refugee children, however, is a challenge for several reasons. Perhaps the most compelling deterrent to gaining insight into lives of very young refugee children is language itself. As noted above, immigrants often have the opportunity to learn at least a bit of the host country language prior to their move. Refugee children, however, are thrown into a land that many have never heard of prior to their arrival—let alone the language(s) of that land.

Some language translation assistance might be obtained through collaboration with local organizations, such as the International Institutes which are available in many larger communities. However, greatly increasing diversity among current waves of refugees has challenged even most International Institutes. Many recent refugees, for example, come from Somalia—a nation where 80 different languages are spoken. Such language diversity is becoming increasingly common.

### **Parent Resistance**

Even if a translator can be obtained, because of a lifetime of fear in sharing information, it is difficult to get to know refugee children and their families. As Szente, Hoot, and Taylor (2006) note, for example, it is illegal for teachers to even ask about a child's immigration status. Thus, unless children or parents volunteer this information, teachers are unlikely to know if the child is a refugee. Moreover, refugee parents are often unwilling to share the extent of their children's trauma. In their study of refugee parents Szente, Hoot, and Taylor, (2006, p. 3) exemplified this view in the words of a refugee parent who stated:

I don't believe teachers need to know the reasons why we left our country. It is not necessary. What matters is that my child gets the same education as the other, non-refugee children. I want teachers to talk to my child about his experiences only when he brings it up.

Thus, trying to understand individual experiences of refugee children is a challenge in the classroom. One possibility to ameliorate this problem is to be observant while sharing diverse literature. For example, while reading a story about brothers and sisters teachers might notice emotional distress on the face of a child who saw his/her siblings being killed or tortured. Teachers' heightened sensitiv-

ity might be the first step to approach the child's world of hurting—a step to help him/her overcome the pain, a step to approach a better future for the child.

### **Identity Issues**

Existing literature draws our attention to another obstacle in the way of successful adjustment of refugee children in the new society: formation of identity. Bash (2005) states, "The construction of boundaries between the self and the 'other' is fundamental in the formation of a stable and indeed bounded identity" (p. 354).

Researchers frequently identify refugees as people who crossed boundaries when leaving their countries and "lost their place in the world." Bash suggests a main challenge to children is making sense of their own existence as individuals and their relationship to those surrounding them. For refugee children, the task becomes more complicated since they have moved to a different country. They are trying to make sense of themselves from their previous experience in their home country and, at the same time, relate to people in the new world.

Bash (2005) describes the process they are going through as forming multiple identities, where a child displays different identities depending on the context (school, home, community). Multiple identities trigger psychological, social, and cultural conflicts which threaten the child's stability. Educators can play a major role in helping children manage their own, many-sided identities as they explore and selectively internalize cultural values of past and present experiences. Bash cautions educators about using children for purposes of "social engineering," or from imposing values which might conflict with those the refugee children have brought to the classroom from their home country.

Ajdukovic (1998) points out another reason for identity complications among refugee children. She suggests that war makes children question traditional ethical values, such as "do not kill" and "love your fellow man." This causes difficulties in developing a personal, group, and "philosophical" identity. Ajdukovic further suggests that in order to help children to overcome their psychosocial difficulties implementation of activities stimulating children's interest and positive perception of life is needed.

### **Discrimination Issues**

Trying to make sense of the new world around them and their place in this world, refugee children frequently encounter an-

other complication—they become victims of discrimination. "Cultural misunderstanding can result in prejudice and discrimination, with the result that students, already struggling with unfamiliar language and confusing cultural changes, must also work to overcome the impact of negative attitudes" (McBrien, 2005, p. 330).

The experience of discrimination affects children's self-perception, motivation, and achievement in the long run. Snyder, May, Zulcic, and Gabbard (2005) state that refugee children feel they are the subjects of xenophobia of their American peers, being ridiculed because of their differences. Szente and Hoot (2006) suggest that in order to better assist refugees' acculturation in a new setting, teachers should work on establishing an overall positive educational framework of multi-ethnic democracy.

Day (2002), in an article about forum theater as a powerful tool of "putting yourself in other people's shoes," shared effects of a performance about challenges of a refugee child on native students. She concluded that the students were able to better understand the unique life circumstances of refugees and transfer their empathy for the fictional character to refugee children in their school.

Thus, educators may consider drama as one of the ways to approach issues of refugee children so that their classmates can understand their experiences and relate to them and their unique circumstances. With the help of such fictional characters which children can relate to, they are able to look at refugees as individuals who deserve their understanding and compassion.

### **Socioeconomic Conditions**

Family background plays a significant role in academic achievement, school persistence, and educational attainment of refugee children (Wang, 2002). Existing literature reveals the low socioeconomic status of many refugee families, lack of education, and minimal career possibilities. Thus, in addition to traumatic past experiences, refugee children have to confront yet another major factor making their life in a host country more challenging—difficult socioeconomic conditions.

While teachers can do little to improve the socioeconomic status of children, they can take such factors into consideration in trying to better understand the needs of refugee children. Teachers and school administrators can also make certain that refugee children and families are taking advantage of the educational and community services available to them.

## **Cultural Shock**

When refugee children are uprooted from their culture, they have to adjust to a new country where cultural values might be very different. In order to understand a refugee child in a classroom, it might be useful to know that such acculturation does not happen in a day. Rather, it is a long process of reconciling traditional beliefs with those of the new country.

Segal and Mayadas (2005) suggest that "Traditional familial roles and responsibilities are frequently challenged, exacerbated by sociocultural differences and inadequate understandings between the new arrivals and the host country" (p. 563). According to Snyder et al. (2005), for example, most Bosnian refugees have a different family power structure, where all family roles are clearly defined—the head of a family is a father providing his wife and children with means, while a mother traditionally has a nurturing role.

That is why when a mother has to go to work to augment the family income needed to live in the United States, it interferes with traditional family values and indirectly influences a child's well-being. Likewise, since children acquire the new language faster than their parents, they often have to take on the role of interpreters for their parents, which undermines traditional respect for the authority of the elders in the family.

In addition, expectations of refugee children regarding their teachers may differ from those of their peers. If teachers are too democratic, refugee children may feel that they can take following teachers' directions as an option. Thus, teachers should consider that some behaviors of refugee children may be explained by different traditional values they bring into the classroom. Judging all children through a lens of one culture is not fair to the children who are trying to understand and internalize the new values of the new country.

### **Common Behavioral Problems of Refugee Children in Classrooms**

Previous traumatic experiences often result in troubled behavior at school. Blackwell and Melzak (2000) have identified a number of specific behaviors refugee children may exhibit at school.

#### **Explosive Anger**

Explosive anger may be encountered in the behavior of very young refugee children. This behavior would be considered a disproportionately inappropriate reaction to the slightest provocation. Provocations refugees

receive from their peers might not trigger such violent reactions in children who have not experienced the extent of violence encountered by many refugee children.

For example, when a child with a relatively happy childhood is told that his mother is a "bitch," he/she might be upset, but not to the extent of a child who in the past watched his mother gang-raped by soldiers.

#### **Problems with Authority**

Another type of adverse behavior refugee children might exhibit is a problem with authority. Such behavior is associated with either expressing excessive indifference towards teachers or outright disrespect towards them. Problems with authority might result from being mistreated by adults in their past.

For example, their parents and government might not have been able to protect them from the horrors that occurred in their early years. Those children need to redevelop trust in adults. They need to respect their parents and believe in teachers in order to be able to learn and make sense of their world. Our role, as educators, is to work on creating trusting relationships with these children.

#### **Inability to Concentrate**

Some refugee children appear to have much more difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. In addition to problems with language, reoccurrence of post-traumatic stress can account for such problems. Frustration with being unable to concentrate often leads to disruptive behavior.

In response to this problem, Blackwell and Melzak (2000) recommend extra effort by teachers to make lessons very captivating for refugee children in order to divert their attention from daytime nightmares.

#### **Rule Testing**

Children who experienced so many horrors in their lives often feel that bad things happen to them because they are bad (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). This perception may lead to further testing of limits and controls in the world around them in order to see how bad they really are.

In this case teachers would do well to provide consistent discipline through which the bad behavior consistently results in the same consequences. If their behavior is ignored, the children might keep testing the world until they find some limits.

#### **Withdrawal**

In the fast-paced world of classrooms,

children who are quiet often become almost invisible. Children displaying this kind of behavior usually fall behind in their school work and in social interactions with their peers. Such withdrawal often results from memories from the past or problems children are facing in the new country.

As a result, withdrawn children frequently have the predisposition to be socially isolated. In this case, teachers can support these children by making an effort to make certain these children are adequately socialized in the classroom.

#### **Age Inappropriate Behavior**

Another type of behavior teachers may have to deal with is age inappropriate behavior. If children have experienced adult problems at an early age, such as horrors of war and feeling responsible for their parents and siblings, they have, in a way, skipped their childhood. Since they cannot be children at home, they might take the opportunity to be children at school and behave as if they are younger than they actually are.

#### **Lower Academic Achievement**

Although a vast body of research reveals a high dropout rate among refugee children, Wang (2002) found evidence of high academic achievement of certain ethnic groups of refugees. These academically successful refugee children shared background characteristics usually associated with school failure, such as low SES, residing in low-income neighborhoods, attending poor schools, little proficiency in English, and an incompatible culture.

However, the exceptional academic success of the children was found to correlate with strong family and community support. Wang (2002) explains this phenomenon, "values emphasized in the family were reinforced in the community, and these shared values constitute a source of direction to guide children in their successful adaptation" (p. 14).

#### **Conclusion**

Our childhood is passing. There has been war and drought in our country for so long now. Many of us have had to leave our homes and many have died. Each year there is more sickness and poverty. Though you have come and heard our stories many times, we do not see anything changing for us, and we do not know what you are doing with our stories. (Coleridge, 2001)

We know that refugee children are increasingly likely to be students in our early educational classrooms. In order to maximize the potential of these children,

teachers must first recognize barriers they encounter following a history of traumatic experience prior to their arrival in this new country. Those barriers include the challenge of identifying themselves in a new cultural context, facing discrimination from culturally inexperienced people, living in families with lower SES or without family, and conflicts with their traditional cultural values.

As a result of these obstacles, children can experience educational difficulties such as troubled behavior in school and lower academic achievement. Understanding the unique experiences of refugee children should make teachers more committed to assisting them in their school experiences. We need to transform their lives of past horror into lives of future promise.

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