

Capacity Building K–12

Special Edition # 45
July 2016

This monograph offers a framework for reflecting on current practice and taking a whole-school approach to the successful integration of students with refugee backgrounds in the school community.

The **Capacity Building Series** is produced by the Ministry of Education to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools.

The series is posted at:
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/.

For information:
studentachievement@ontario.ca

Supporting Students with Refugee Backgrounds



A Framework for Responsive Practice

“...[English language learners] come from every country and every circumstance. They bring with them a valuable world perspective needed by all students to operate successfully in a global community. Their parents come with the hopes that their children will achieve what they could not have achieved elsewhere.”

*Supporting English Language Learners:
A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 1 to 8 (2008, p. 17)*

Among the thousands of English language learners who attend Ontario schools, there is one group of students who bring both very specific challenges and very special gifts. These are students who, with their families, have fled war, conflict and environmental catastrophe and arrive in Ontario as refugees. They model perseverance and resilience, gratitude and a desire for education. And they come from all over the world – Afghanistan, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Haiti and most recently the newcomers from Syria. These attributes and global experiences will benefit every classroom.

Ontario educators have a rich history of welcoming and supporting refugee students. With each new world crisis and wave of refugees, they have been

called upon to adapt their practice. They are asked to work creatively and strategically to meet the literacy and numeracy needs of large numbers of students with interrupted and sometimes limited prior schooling. They are also called upon to respond to experiences of grief and loss and provide space for students to rebuild identity and self-esteem. The framework for responsive practice shared here is based on their experience and work to date.

Becoming “Trauma Informed”

Many refugee students have experienced violent conflict, loss of home and country and the interruption of their education (MacNevin, 2012; Stewart, 2011). Often, they have not

concepts and instructions. Group and pair students in order to support first-language discussions.

- Decrease whole-group time; increase small-group instruction.
- Use visuals – visual schedules, word banks with diagrams or pictures, picture books, photographs of landforms, illustrated science vocabulary, historical photographs, etc. If you have a Smart Board, tablets or computers in the room, you may wish to leave them open to a web browser so that you can put images up quickly if needed.

Focus for Responsive Practice # 2

How can we ensure that students see themselves in the learning environment?

All students, but particularly refugee students, need to see themselves in the learning environment – they need to feel that they are welcomed and have a place in the life of the school. The learning environment does not begin at the classroom door.

For newcomers, their first interaction is often with the administration or support staff. In order to facilitate a smooth entrance to the school, staff might consider learning greetings in the home language of newcomers, posting signs in dual or multi-languages throughout the school to designate common spaces such as washrooms, library, gymnasium and if possible providing translations of newsletters and other key communications so that parents can successfully support their children and communicate with staff.

Invite students to share their own experiences in their own language in identity texts ...

Many everyday classroom activities and assignments can be adapted – and enriched – by allowing students to approach them using more than one language. Inviting students to use their first language as well as English enables them to draw on their strengths, including their existing academic, linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Tips for Practice

- Determine your students' learning skills and their familiarity with school routines, and where they need explicit support, using the ministry's "[Orientation to School Life in Ontario Continuum.](#)"
- Pair incoming students with a buddy who will introduce them to others, guide them and explain or model routines. A same language speaker is ideal.
- Identify and remove barriers to enable parents to become involved with the school. If language is a barrier, interpreted videos might be used to support parent engagement.
- Invite parents in for an orientation to the school. Once you have an understanding of your newcomer families, plan targeted sessions to help them understand the school system and their partnership in the education of their children.

Focus for Responsive Practice # 3

How can we encourage students to invest "their identities in learning"?

Making opportunities to listen and learn the "story" of the student's life enables educators to plan meaningful tasks that are culturally responsive and build on the student's prior experiences. Successful teachers of newcomer students describe continually building upon their students' experiences to introduce new academic concepts. These teachers do not view students from a "deficit" position; they approach them as

bringing knowledge and life experience to the learning context (Dooley, 2009).

By promoting first language use at home and in the classroom, we both enable newcomer students to engage in tasks that involve thinking and problem-solving and demonstrate our recognition of the value they bring to school as bilingual and sometimes multilingual speakers. Further, we help create a classroom environment where students feel valued for who they are and what they have to offer.

Tips for Practice

- Give students lots of time to adapt and develop their habits for school. Use *“Orientation to School Life in Ontario”* to help students with limited prior schooling develop learning skills. Recognize their strengths as they emerge and make sure they know that you value them for who they are. Celebrate small successes and foster resilience.
- Learn as much as you can about your students. If there is someone in the school community from the same region as your refugee student, arrange a meeting. There is a huge variation in the quality of camps and differences in communities and it will help to know about the daily life these students and their families have experienced (Stewart, 2011).

... many refugee students do not readily seek assistance from a counsellor, psychologist or social worker; they prefer to confide in a teacher that they trust.

- Choose materials that will engage students. Link learning to their personal stories and experiences. Create a safe environment so that a student feels their story is valued and important.

Focus for Responsive Practice # 4

How can we ensure that newcomer students acquire the confidence they need to express their opinions?

Refugee students often face a barrage of educational demands that can be overwhelming and erode confidence in the ability to achieve academic success. They are developing foundational literacy skills, learning the curriculum, navigating the routines and culture of the school while also learning a new language. According to Stewart (2011), many refugee students do not readily seek assistance from a counsellor, psychologist or social worker; they prefer to confide in a teacher that they trust. Jean Clinton reminds us that “every kid needs at least one person whose eyes light up when they walk in the door.”

Assadi (2014) writes, “the ability to maintain and thrive in one’s native language in the midst of foreignness is a key element in the success of refugee youth in the educational setting ... encouraging children to develop their identity and sense of agency both serves the national self-interest and respects the right of the child” (p. 171).

Educators should recognize that students will need to express themselves in a variety of ways while they are in the process of developing their English proficiency. They should also be provided opportunities to become actively involved in the school community. Participation in activities or courses such as technological studies, music, visual arts or sports provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their strengths and express their feelings – and learn and work with those who have similar interests and experiences and those who don’t.

Tips for Practice

- Listen carefully to students and their families to understand their questions, concerns, confusions and impressions regarding the school. Be prepared that not all feedback will be positive and be open to reflecting on what might need to be changed.
- Watch your students and learn from their behaviour. Many Canadian instructional methods and approaches will be unknown to them and school activities that are routine for many students may be a mystery to them.
- Set aside time to meet with other staff in order to reflect, plan and guide continuous learning and student success. Alternatively, investigate how technology can play a role in supporting communication.
- Consider a space in the school to give students a safe place to hang out, use their language with peers or obtain help with homework.

Focus for Responsive Practice # 5

How can we translate beliefs about holding high expectations for all students into instructional practice?

In high challenge/high support classrooms, equity gaps diminish and all learners, regardless of background, achieve at higher levels (Gibbons 2008; Hammond 2008; Walqui 2007). This means that rather than simplifying the task, we should reflect on the nature of scaffolding that is being provided for learners to carry out that task. It is the nature of the support – support that is responsive to the particular demands made on students learning through the medium of a new language – that is critical for success (Gibbons, 2015).

Both high and low expectations can create self-fulfilling prophecies. Students must believe

that they can achieve before they will risk trying, and young people are astute at sensing whether their teachers believe they can succeed.

Responsive educators plan challenging tasks that provide high cognitive demands by building on English language learners' prior experience and strengths.

Tips for Practice

- Anticipate that teaching and learning can be different for English language learners with limited prior schooling as they require modeling and lots of repetition. Material needs to be presented in a meaningful context and tasks need to be both relevant and cognitively demanding. If not, academic learning can become frustrating, leaving students feeling disconnected and overwhelmed. Therefore, connecting students' prior experiences to new learning is a necessity.
- Collaborate with other staff as part of your planning for student success. This may mean collaboration between the ESL/ELD and content area/homeroom teachers in secondary or the collaboration between the classroom and ESL/ELD teacher or other support staff in elementary. This collaborative group will then be able to jointly determine where students are on the STEP continua, their strengths and the instructional strategies that may be required in different subject areas and classroom contexts.

In high challenge/high support classrooms, equity gaps diminish and all learners, regardless of background, achieve at higher levels

Focus for Responsive Practice # 6

What can we do to help students realize their hopes and aspirations?

Refugee families arrive in Ontario with hopes and aspirations for a better future. In many cases, their lives have been turned upside down, family members have been left behind, property and livelihoods have disappeared. Refugee students are under tremendous pressure to achieve in their new communities. They aspire to higher education because they view educational credentials as providing them with successful entry into the Canadian labour market and financial stability. However, despite high aspirations, refugees face considerable challenges in completing postsecondary studies (Ferede, 2014). Indeed, many are working to support the family as well as attending school.

Educators should make every effort to get to know their students so that they can make suggestions about specific programs and courses as well as co-curricular activities and additional community involvement, based on strengths, aspirations and experiences. Further, they should recognize newcomers are often not aware of the many career paths that are open to them. Guidance counsellors and others who work with English language learners should make every effort to inform them of many and varied

opportunities for future learning and career pathways. Secondary students who have gaps in their formal education will require ongoing assessment, thoughtful programming decisions and individual support so that they can graduate from secondary school and follow the pathway of their choice.

Tips for Practice

- Create responsive timetables for English language learners as an important first step in ensuring success in school.
- Plan strategies and programs that will accelerate learning for English language learners with limited schooling so that they will be able to graduate from secondary school within a reasonable period of time.
- Provide every opportunity for students who are planning for postsecondary education to follow their chosen pathway.
- Consider providing opportunities for work experience and authentic language learning. For example, one Ontario high school has established a co-op program for English language learners with limited prior schooling.

Some Helpful Resources

School Mental Health Assist

This is a provincial team designed to help Ontario school boards build capacity to support mental health and well-being.

<http://smh-assist.ca/>

Settlement Services Ontario

<http://settlement.org/>

UN Refugee Agency Canada

<http://www.unhcr.ca/how-you-can-help/teachers/>

Government of Alberta

<http://teachingrefugees.com/>



Once the relationship of trust is established, then the learning can begin.

References

Asadi, N. (2014). The value of language in refugee youths' construction of identity. In C.A. Brewer & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and refugee students in Canada* (pp. 161 – 173). Alberta, Canada: Brush Education.

Clinton, J. (2015). [Teaching strategies that address trauma and resilience. LearnTeachLead video.](#)

Cole, R.W. (2008). Educating everybody's children: Diverse teaching strategies for diverse learners (Revised and Expanded 2nd Ed.), Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Cummins, J. (2006). Multiliteracies pedagogy and the role of identity texts. In K. Leithwood, P. McAdie, N. Bascia, & A. Rodrigue (Eds.), *Teaching for deep understanding: What every educator should know* (pp. 85 – 93). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Cummins, J. (2010, November). *Languages of schooling: Exploring the connexions between research, theory and policy in an ideologically complex environment.* Presentation at Intergovernmental Policy Forum in Geneva, Switzerland.

Cummins, J. & Early, M. (2015). *Big ideas for expanding minds: Teaching English Language Learners across the curriculum.* Don Mills, Canada: Pearson Canada.

Dooley, K. (2009). Rethinking pedagogy for middle school students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling. *English teaching: Practice and critique*, 8(1), 5 – 22.

Gibbons, P. (2008). "It was taught good and I learned a lot": Intellectual practices and ESL learners in the middle years. *Australian journal of language and literacy*, 31(2), 155 – 173.

Gibbons, P. (2015). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching English Language Learners in the mainstream classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

*Note that Hammond, 2008; Walqui, 2007; and Ferede, 2014 are cited in this source.

MacNevin, J. (2012). Learning the way: Teaching and learning with and for youth from refugee backgrounds on Prince Edward Island. *Canadian journal of education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 35(3), 48-63.

Stewart, J. (2011). *Supporting refugee children: Strategies for educators.* Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

