



Immigrant Children in our Classrooms:

B E Y O N D E S L

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In almost every inner-city classroom in Canada, educators face the challenge of meeting the needs of refugee and immigrant children – needs which are as diverse as the radically different backgrounds, supports, and expectations they bring to the classroom. Many come from conditions of deprivation or extreme poverty. Some who come from advantaged backgrounds with well-educated parents and a strong support network continue to enjoy that status here, but many professional parents find themselves adjusting to unemployment or menial, entry-level positions in Canada, with adjustment consequences for their children as well. Children who have spent time in refugee camps have frequently dealt with serious disruption to every aspect of their lives, particularly their education, and those who do not yet have refugee status live with uncertainty and the possibility of being returned to their home country.

ESL resources – while dwindling – provide some of these students with expanded opportunities to acquire English language skills; but what about the other special needs these children bring to the classroom? What impact are their past experiences – at home and at school – having on their new lives here? Are disturbing memories from their home countries interfering with adjustment and learning? Do some Canadian values conflict with their families' religious and traditional values? And, most importantly, what strategies will most effectively contribute to their success in school?

Adjusting to New Educational Values

The educational experience of immigrant and refugee students varies from elite “western” schools, to no formal education, to education which has been disrupted by war, natural, or man-made disasters. Regardless of the level of their educational attainment before coming to Canada, many students and families find difficulty adjusting to our school culture.

For example, many countries’ educational systems emphasize rote memorization rather than skill development and problem solving; self-expression may be actively discouraged. This is often a cultural difference, but may also result from necessity; for example, while Canadian children only need learn twenty-six characters – the alphabet – to spell any word in English or French, Chinese children need to memorize literally thousands of unique characters to write the Chinese language. This difference alone requires a radically different approach to language learning – something the author did not appreciate fully until he attempted to learn to read and write Chinese!

Because many immigrant parents came to Canada to make a better life for their children, they may put a great deal of pressure on their children to excel.

Those from a rigid, competitive school system may have unrealistic expectations and view the Canadian education system as lacking in rigour. Conversely, other parents may find the curriculum expectations of Canadian schools too challenging, and feel that the school puts far too much pressure on young children, in particular. Reconciling these two views – particularly in the same classroom – can be a challenge!

In many cultures, gender equity is a foreign concept. While most immigrant and refugee parents place a great deal of importance on their children’s education, boys and girls are often treated differently. Some families value and support the academic success of boys to a much greater extent than that of girls. In other cases, however, the reverse may be true; there may be pressure on young men to curtail their education to provide financial support to the family.

Many Canadian schools try to be welcoming, but many immigrant and refugee parents have had radically different experiences with schools in their home country. In some totalitarian regimes, schools have been instruments of state control, and, like any other government institution, are suspect by those who have fled oppression. More

commonly, schools have been distant institutions where parental involvement has been minimal or nonexistent. Parents with little or no formal education themselves may find schools and educators intimidating and inaccessible – particularly if there is also a language barrier. One principal recalls that some of her immigrant parents felt the need to fortify themselves with a stiff drink before coming into the school for a meeting with the principal! This kind of dynamic makes it a challenge to build a truly supportive partnership between school and parent.

However, if refugee and immigrant children introduce challenges to the classroom and the school, they also bring strengths. They are often highly motivated to succeed academically and so provide positive role models for their peers. They bring diversity to the classroom and offer unique opportunities to explore a variety of cultures, traditions, and experiences – bringing social studies, language, drama, dance, and art to life with a richness that cannot be obtained in any other way. Classrooms and schools that truly embrace this diversity become broader, more tolerant, and more stimulating learning environments.



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Coming to Terms with the Past

In a world where children are recruited as soldiers and where ‘ethnic cleansing’ and other forms of brutality against children are all too common, it is not surprising that many of the children whose families flee to Canada have either witnessed, or themselves been victims of violence. They may have seen family members killed, tortured, or brutalized; friends and family members may still be in jeopardy in the home country, creating a source of stress for both children and their families. Students and their families may be reluctant to disclose the fact that they have been victims of such violence – either from shame, a reluctance to relive horrific events in their past, or a desire to put it behind them as part of their new start in their new country — but they often suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, which can manifest itself in disrupted sleep, aggressive behaviour, isolation, and lack of concentration. Parents sometimes discourage their children from talking about these experiences hoping that ignoring them will help the memories fade, but in the best interest of the child, the school must be aware that such memories may exist.

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New Social and Cultural Expectations

In spite of Canada’s commitment to a multicultural society which respects differences, the religious and cultural norms of minority groups are sometimes in conflict with the policies and practices of Canadian schools. Controversy over religious clothing, swimming, physical education, music instruction, and sex education can put immigrant families at odds with their new community, causing particular difficulties for the children, who are torn between their families and the need to “fit in” with their peers.

Interracial dating is one area where this conflict can become particularly acute; parents who already fear that their children are being “lost” to them through assimilation may see new relationships outside of their community as a further threat. For many cultures, the whole concept of dating is an issue in itself. For families from fundamentalist religious backgrounds, issues of sex

education and homosexuality can be problematic, sometimes resulting in a real estrangement from the school community.

The role of the child within the family often changes with immigration or is inconsistent with the roles of their peers. Interpreter, breadwinner, surrogate parent – immigrant children may find themselves thrust into any of these roles. Children often learn their new language more rapidly than their parents and become ‘interpreters’ of the new language and culture for their families, giving them a power – and responsibility – that may weigh heavily upon them. They may resent the loss of their childhood, actively rebel against having to assume such responsibility, or take advantage of their situation to evade reasonable rules and restrictions. Parents, for their part, may feel – justifiably – powerless and relinquish active involvement in their children’s lives and education.

Strategies for Support

The most important strategies to help these students often come naturally to good teachers – listening, observing, and responding. A teacher who is aware of a student’s situation will instinctively modify her expectations and program.

One key strategy is to provide students with opportunities for self-expression – while all children need safe, supportive environments in which they can talk, write, or draw about their experiences, hopes, and fears, this is particularly critical for students who may not have had safe outlets for their feelings. Drawing, painting, puppetry, and other expressive arts provide important opportunities for students to express feelings that they cannot easily put into words.

In an era of shrinking resources and increasingly heavy curriculum demands, programs that target individual students are increasingly impractical. One solution is to utilize strategies with an entire class or school that have a particular benefit for refugee and immigrant children – for example, the International

Children’s Institute’s “Building Bridges” program, which combines whole school initiatives and classroom activities focusing on children’s self-expression. While the program is targeted at refugee and immigrant children who are dealing with traumatic events, its activities enhance the coping skills and resiliency of all children. The program also provides teachers with the knowledge and skills to support children who have experienced traumatic events.

It is also important to ensure that all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Classroom teachers can ensure that reading material reflects the range of cultures present in the classroom, and they can take advantage of a growing variety of books, curriculum materials, video, internet, and other resources to present an inclusive view of the world. Awareness and celebration of the rich variety of days of significance provides one such window of opportunity. Books and films presenting the immigrant experience from an adult or child’s per-



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Dans presque toutes les salles de classe situées dans des zones urbaines défavorisées au Canada, les enseignants et enseignantes doivent répondre aux besoins d'élèves dont les parents sont immigrants ou réfugiés. Ces enfants, s'ils ont déjà fréquenté l'école, doivent s'ajuster à de nouvelles valeurs et attentes éducatives tout en devant composer avec un passé souvent douloureux et de nouveaux rôles culturels. Or, il existe une variété de stratégies pour aider ces élèves et leur famille à s'adapter à la vie au Canada.

spective offer yet another opportunity for refugee and immigrant children to see themselves in the curriculum.

On a school-wide level, recognizing a variety of celebrations, providing translation for key events and documents, having (if possible) teaching, support staff, and clerical staff that reflect the languages and cultures of the student body are important expressions of openness to refugee and immigrant students and their parents. An increasing number of schools are also respecting the religious and cultural diversity of their populations by adjusting nutrition programs to reflect religious dietary requirements, by providing private, quiet space for prayers or other religious observance, and by ensuring that their dress codes accommodate religious attire. Active promotion and enforcement of policies against name-calling, bullying, discrimination and harassment are critical in providing a safe and secure environment for all students, but especially for immigrant students.

Listening to, and communicating with, parents is key to successful integration into the school and the community. Since many immigrant and refugee parents are reluctant to communicate with the school, special efforts must be made to make them feel welcome, valued partners in their children's education. Such simple things as providing translators for parent teacher interviews, parent meetings, and translations of significant school documents go a very

long way toward making these parents feel wanted and respected.

Time spent explaining to parents what the school expects of their children and how they can best help is time well spent, as is the time spent listening to parents tell about their own experiences, and learning what they expect for – and from – their children. Open, respectful communication can eliminate misunderstandings and help build a real partnership between student, parent, and teacher.

At a time of continuing cuts to children's services, it seems that the supports available to refugee and immigrant children are vanishing rapidly. But not all supports cost money. While most teachers will "buddy" a new student with an established student, a more structured buddy system, in which groups of children are trained to support a new peer over a period of time, can benefit both parties. With some encouragement, parents may also be willing to assist with either ongoing activities or special events. Food – whether it's a shared snack or a class-wide or school-wide potluck dinner – offers wonderful opportunities for everyone to participate and feel a valued part of a class or school community.

Other resources may already be available in the school. Instructors of international language programs can help provide invaluable assistance in bridging the gap between old and new cultures. International language

instruction, itself, helps children develop and maintain their first language skills, particularly literacy skills, while at the same time supporting their English language learning. It also minimizes the estrangement that often occurs between immigrant children and their parents, and particularly grandparents, as the children learn English, often at a more rapid rate than their parents.

Other staff members – teachers or support staff – from the immigrant community may also be willing to provide support. And social service agencies – like the S.E.P.T. (Settlement Education Partnership in Toronto) program, which situates settlement workers right in Toronto schools – can sometimes offer support to educators and school communities, either informally or in formal partnership arrangements.

The positive academic, social, and emotional development of immigrant and refugee students benefits all of us. In the broader community, as in the classroom, a willingness to ask the right questions, to really listen, and to forge partnerships will mean that the complex needs of refugee and immigrant students are more effectively met. 🗣️

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