

TEACHERS CAN TEACH REFUGEES: MAKING THE CLASSROOM A WELCOMING PLACE FOR REFUGEES THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Mary Petrón, Ph.D.

Sam Houston State University

Burcu Ates, Ph.D.

Sam Houston State University

Helen Berg, Ph.D.

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

The number of refugees worldwide has reached a record high. From 2010-2020, Texas was the number one state of initial residence for refugee families. Schooling provides stability for refugee children. This article addresses the need for culturally relevant literature and culturally responsive teaching in order that refugee children see themselves reflected in the curriculum. In addition, their classmates will have the opportunity to develop empathy. A sampling of books for children and adults, online resources, and recommendations for teachers and teacher educators are included.

Keywords: refugees, resettlement, PK-12 education, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant literature

Refugee children have lost their homes, but we cannot allow them to lose their future. #EducationForRefugees—One

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that by mid-2021 more than 84 million people world-wide have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to violence, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2021). This represents an increase of 1.6 million over the previous year. Not all displaced persons are considered refugees. The UNHCR defines refugees as “people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.” A total of 26.6 million people have been officially classified as refugees, a record high (UNHCR, 2021).

Under the Trump administration the cap on the number of refugees allowed into the country per year was 18,000. Under the Biden administration, the cap has grown to 125,000 (Russell et al., 2021, p.11). This cap is expected to increase even more as a result of the Russian invasion of

Ukraine. Despite efforts to restrict the number of refugees allowed into the state, particularly those from Syria, Texas ranked number one as the initial state of residence for refugee resettlement from 2010-2020 (Monin et al., 2021). Texas is expected to resettle the second highest number of Afghan refugees. Almost 10,000 Afghans have already come to Texas (Rhone, 2022) with about 4,700 Afghans to the Houston area alone (Hennes, 2022). Russell A. Smith, the CEO of Texas Refugee Services, estimated that about 12,000 Ukrainian refugees will be resettled in Texas (De Alba, 2022).

Refugees include children. Education is an essential element in creating stability for refugee children. Worldwide only 50 % of refugee children attend elementary school, as compared to 91% of all children (UNHCR, 2016). In the United States under federal law, all states are required to provide equal access to public

elementary and secondary education to refugee students. Resources available to assist with their education include Title I: Services for Educationally Disadvantaged Children, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and Migrant Education Programs. In addition, states must allocate at least 15% of their Title III funds in the form of subgrants to local educational agencies in areas that have experienced a significant increase in immigrant children for English language acquisition programs. Unfortunately, there is no mandate that this education be culturally responsive. In this article, we advocate for the use of culturally relevant literature as a way of both validating the experiences of refugee children and developing empathy in the classroom.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is especially critical today. As the demographics of students continue to become more diverse, the teaching workforce remains overwhelmingly White, female, middle-class, monolingual and monocultural. Teachers will have students who are of different races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, religions, cultures and languages in their classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching has shown to be an effective approach of addressing the achievement gap by integrating the students' cultural elements and perspectives in all aspects of teaching and learning (Gay, 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As more refugee children enter Texas classrooms, teachers need resources to attend to their unique circumstances. Their emotional, social and academic needs are distinct and responding to their diverse lived experiences is of great importance.

Ladson-Billings first made popular the notion of culturally relevant teaching in the early 1990s as an approach that “empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically” (Gay, 2010). This approach was expanded upon by Gay into culturally responsive teaching. Gay defined culturally responsive teaching as an approach that advocates “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). In this way, a teacher views students' culture and identity as assets and creates learning opportunities and environments that value, support and empower them.

There are five essential components of culturally responsive teaching. First, teachers must develop a

knowledge base of diversity and accept the legitimacy of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their students. Second, they must use this knowledge to design culturally responsive curriculum by including representation and multiple perspectives as a part of classroom instruction. Third, a caring learning community that bridges home and school and validates diverse cultural identities must be co-constructed. Fourth, there is an emphasis on cross-cultural communication in which teachers understand and embrace diverse communication styles and modify instruction accordingly. Finally, teachers establish congruity in classroom instruction by connecting prior knowledge and cultural experiences to new knowledge.

As Taylor and Sobel (2011) emphasized:

When teachers understand that learning and teaching are culturally and linguistically impacted, they recognize that instruction is more effective when the learner's broad cultural backgrounds, racial/ethnic identity, and life experiences are integrated within the curriculum. Teachers who make themselves aware of the learners' backgrounds and life experiences are better prepared to adapt instruction in responsive ways and demonstrate that they can teach like their students' lives really do matter (p. 3).

Professionals in the field of teaching agree that effective teachers must master the content knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach. However, Gay (2010) called on teachers to become culturally responsive practitioners by making changes in several ways including instructional techniques, didactic materials, building positive relationships, classroom environment, and most importantly, self-awareness to improve the learning outcomes for students.

Culturally responsive teachers use the cultural experiences and perspectives of their students to help them learn more effectively. This means teaching in ways that consider the students' culture and prior experiences as frames of reference. This is especially critical for our refugee students. While teachers may be aware of diversity in the U.S., they could lack any knowledge of the cultures and experiences of refugee families. Yet, refugee students should be empowered to feel proud of their culture and resiliency in the face of traumatic events. When they see themselves and their communities as belonging in schools, this will positively affect classroom engagement and academic success. Teachers are responsible for making this

an integral part of their classrooms. Building healthy rapport with their refugee students, teachers can help them have meaningful and successful school experiences (Taylor & Sobel, 2011).

The Need for Inclusion

That's me!

There is an urgent need in U.S. schools to include literature about refugees in classrooms (Lamme et al., 2004). The literature most U.S. students encounter consists of White American and middle-class representations (Tschida et al., 2014). Yet, children from marginalized and underrepresented cultural groups, like refugees, should also see themselves reflected in the literature (Tschida et al., 2014). Congolese students are not African American students, nor are Iraqi students Arab Americans. Refugee students should be able to reflect and say, "that's me" or "that's like me." This type of inclusion goes beyond warm feelings and into the realm of academics. For example, Ebe (2010) found that the reading comprehension of English learners increased when texts were culturally relevant. Thus, educators need to be more knowledgeable and intentional in selecting books about refugees for their classroom library.

Why Representation Matters

Representation is a critical element of culturally responsive teaching. Many educators and scholars highlight the importance of providing students with literature in which they see themselves and their lived experiences (Bishop, 1990; Fleming et al., 2016; Sims, 1983). Bishop (1990), a children's literature scholar, used the metaphor of viewing books as, "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" in her discussion of why representation matters. She argued that books can be *windows* into the realities of others and not only into imaginary worlds. Through *windows* refugee children can be exposed to new stories and experiences of their peers and others in the United States and thus, bridge the path from the unfamiliar to the familiar. Books can be *mirrors* that reflect the lives of readers. Through *mirrors* refugee children can read stories about children who are like them or have similar experiences. Books can become a catalyst for providing refugee children with a voice when they are silent, in a literal and/or figurative sense. Books can also be *sliding doors* where readers can walk and more deeply experience the world and experiences of others. Through sliding doors, refugee children can have the opportunity to immerse

themselves in their new environment. This may provide a pathway to new beginnings.

All Students Need to Know about Refugees

While it is essential for refugee students to encounter their own stories in their classrooms, it is equally important for other children to learn about refugees and their lived experiences (Berg et al., 2017). Thus, books on refugee children are not only for refugee students, but for all students. Cummins (2016) argued, "Students [from the cultural majority] need access to culturally specific narratives appropriate for their age level that humanize children and teens with immigrant backgrounds and open up conversations." (p. 25). Reading and discussing books where the characters and homelands are different than their own will serve to assist all children in understanding their peers' background, culture, and language. For example, Lamme et al.'s (2004) argued that:

We believe that if children read books about children's life experiences that may differ from their own, they may develop an understanding of children from other cultures. Further, through their enjoyment of the stories, children learn about diverse cultures and the history of those cultures (p. 124).

This could result in all children developing positive attitudes and compassion towards their refugee classes and diminish societal stereotypical views of refugees in general. Being treated humanely with kindness and respect is crucial for refugee children to feel accepted and be part of the new learning community. Unfortunately, restrictive immigration policies implemented by nation states have contributed towards a climate of hostility and xenophobia towards all "foreigners," including refugees in schools and classrooms. Therefore, teachers must work to ensure that refugee children are welcomed and have positive social relationships inside schools.

Importance of Accurate Representations

Refugee stories in children's and young adolescents' books need to be accurate and not stereotypical. When refugee children find themselves in books, they will feel validated. However, if underrepresented children, like refugees, see themselves through a lens that is "distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990). A stereotypical image of a refugee is often one of poverty, illiteracy and "broken" English

(Petrón & Ates, 2016). Yet, as we know, refugees from countries as diverse as Syria, the Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo can be highly educated, from the middle and upper classes, and English-speaking. Kwon and Sun (2021), caution educators to be aware of stereotypical images of immigrants that may occur in books and implement ways to demonstrate accuracy. One way is, “to center children and/or their families’ voices in interpreting these [immigrants] stories and invite them [children and/or their families] to author their own transnational experiences that may resonate with or differ from portrayals in the available picture books” (p. 29). Thus, teachers must strive to present accurate and diverse stories of refugee experiences.

Getting Started

Children’s Books

While somewhat limited, children’s books about the refugee experience both enable refugee children to see themselves and help other children develop understanding and compassion for the refugee experience. Cummins (2016) discussed the importance of a diverse array of books and that, “Reading and discussing multiple books portraying immigrants and refugees can convey heterogeneity and diversity rather than expecting one text to be representative” (p. 24). This could also mean even though a teacher has one student from Ukraine and/or Afghanistan, they should have multiple books that represent their students in order to have a wider lens on their cultures and backgrounds.

For young children, *Together We Grow* (Vaught, 2020) reminds us that offering comfort to others is an essential element of community. A fox family tries to seek shelter in a barn during a storm and is turned away by farm animals who view them as enemies. The most vulnerable of animals, a little duckling, acknowledges the needs of the fox family. The message is one of empathy and inclusion for refugees. *The Paper Boat: A Refugee Story* (Lam, 2020) is a wordless picture book about the flight of refugees from Vietnam. It is a semi-autobiographical tale that recounts the author’s departure from post-war Vietnam. *Mustafa* (Gay, 2018) tells the story of a young boy and family who come from Canada as refugees. He spends time in the park observing, too timid to engage with others. Slowly, he begins to open up and interact with a girl and her cat that he often sees in the park. This moving tale focuses on the life of a refugee child after coming to a new home. *The Journey*

(Sanna, 2016) tells the story of a family fleeing their home after it was destroyed, and their father went missing. While there is no definitive happy ending, it serves to build compassion for refugees and hope for the future.

For older children, *Dia’s Story Cloth: The Hmong People’s Journey of Freedom* (Cha, 2002) recounts the author’s story of how the family survived the war in Laos and four years in a refugee camp in Thailand to ultimately settle in the U.S. *When Stars are Scattered* (Jamieson, 2020) is a graphic novel memoir that tells the tale of Mohamed’s life in a refugee camp in Kenya. It details the difficult choices he has to make that could influence the future of the family. *Out of Iraq: Refugees’ Stories in Words, Paintings and Music* (Wilkes, 2010) provides a refugee’s view of Iraq before they left, why they had to leave and how they view life as a refugee. It is a tale of resilience and the dreams of a stable life. *Shooting Kabul* (Senzai, 2011) is based in part on the escape from Soviet-controlled Afghanistan of the author’s husband. The main character, Fade, is a middle school boy trying to adjust to life in the U.S., wracked with guilt about his sister and fear regarding his mother’s health.

While stories of today’s refugee children from places like Ukraine, have yet to be written, familiar folktales and stories set in their homelands can be a comfort. *The Mitten: An Old Ukrainian Folktale* (Tresselt, 1989) retells the tradition tale of how a boy’s lost mitten became a refuge from the cold for multiple animals. *Waiting for the Owl’s Call* (Whelan, 2009) centers on a young Afghani girl who weaves rugs as have generations of women in her family have done before her. *The Storyteller of Damascus* (Schami, 2018) highlights the Syrian tradition of storytelling through a tale of love.

Books for Teachers

There are also books available for educators to gain valuable background information on the lived experiences of refugees in their home country, refugee camps, as well as their new life in the United States. These books introduce educators to key conflicts that brought refugees to the United States and provide strategies to assist them as many have experienced limited or interrupted formal education. Pipher’s (2002) *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community* is one of those books. It shares the experiences of refugees from a variety of countries who resettled in Lincoln, Nebraska. It also portrays the personal story of Pipher as a cultural

broker who had first-hand interactions with refugee students and their families. Even though the book was written 20 years ago, similar struggles of refugees are ongoing and still relevant in today's context.

Another great resource is the book, *The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom*. Thorpe (2018) documents the experiences of newly resettled refugee students from war-torn places such as Iraq, Burma, El Salvador and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who attend high school in Denver, Colorado. Thorpe mainly focuses on one teacher, Mr. Williams, who teaches the English as a second language course. The students learn English, intercultural skills and much more as they adjust to their new life in the United States. As we read the stories of students, we also learn about their families' backstories. It is a compelling book which is a must read for K-12 teachers and teacher educators.

In a more recent book, *The School I Deserve: Six Young Refugees and Their Fight for Equality in America*, the journalist Napolitano (2021) brings to light the fight for access to education of older (ages 17-21) refugee students. The book is about six refugee students who fought alongside American Civil Liberties Union and the Education Law Center in *Issa v. School District of Lancaster* to demand equal access to education. It discusses how the school district of Lancaster, Pennsylvania was sued for refusing to admit older refugees who are English learners and instead, sending them to a disciplinary alternative education program. The book also illuminates the overall lack of support refugee students may face in the U.S. public school system.

Teacher Resources

Websites are an important resource when looking for suggestions and books about teaching refugees. The sites described below have a wealth of information for teachers and teacher educators.

The Diverse Book Finder (<https://diversebookfinder.org/>) is a searchable database, recognized by the American Association of School Librarians as the 2021 Best Digital Tools. Use a country name or refugee as a search term.

What We Do All Day?

(<https://www.whatdowedoallday.com/childrens-books-about-refugees/>) has a great list of children's books dealing with refugees separated by age level. It also has a tab with a selection of traditional games played in other countries.

Colours of Us (<https://coloursofus.com/>) has a searchable database of multicultural children's books. There are children's books about countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Book Trust (<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/>) is dedicated to getting children and families reading. It has an extensive list of books about immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Colorín Colorado (<https://www.colorincolorado.org/>) is a resource dedicated to bilingual education and English as a second language. It also features a booklist about the refugee experience. Use refugee as a search term.

Edutopia (<https://www.edutopia.org/>) is designed for teachers in general. It also has book lists and short articles that deal with refugee children. Use refugee as a search term.

Although the children's books, educators' books and websites listed above are certainly not exhaustive, they represent a good place to start for teachers and teacher educators.

Recommendations

1. Help refugees feel safe in your classrooms by understanding and acknowledging their experiences. Their world has been a very frightening place; the classroom should not be.
2. Be intentional in building relationships with your students. Refugee students need to feel they are valued, respected and that their teacher cares about them. Remember they have lost many of their relationships, from former teachers to family members to friends.
3. Begin with folktales from the home country. This can provide refugee children with a sense of familiarity and pride in their homeland. It also provides a bridge to their culture which may be comforting to refugee students and enlightening for other children.
4. Read children's books about the refugee experience. They are relevant to the refugee children themselves and can enhance the knowledge base of other children about refugees. Children who know little about refugees can be unkind when someone arrives in the class who speaks, eats or dresses differently.

5. Do not single out a refugee child or ask them to tell their own story. It is always the child's choice.
6. Include literature that highlights the strengths of the refugee characters rather than their weaknesses. Choose books that portray what they are good at.
7. Avoid books that include stereotypical and inaccurate depictions of refugees, for example as objects of pity and despair. Instead focus on humanizing representations of refugee children.
8. Avoid books that display Americans as saviors. The emphasis should be on refugees' struggles, resilience and perseverance in new life for themselves.
9. Include books that show variety and diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, gender and socio-economic status of refugees.
10. Remember that teachers can teach refugee children!

It may take effort, but meeting the needs of refugee children is part and parcel of good teaching. Searching for books and resources that reflect refugees and their homelands takes time. However, by doing so, teachers and teacher educators can set the stage for creating a welcoming classroom for children who have lost much of the world they knew.

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