

Chapter 4

Duoethnographic Perspective on Supporting Students of Refugee Background in Middle School

Antoinette Gagné

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6179-177X>
OISE, University of Toronto, Canada

Thursica Kovinthan Levi

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4491-9292>
OISE, University of Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

Students with refugee experiences face several social and academic challenges in the Canadian school system. Supportive relationships and school spaces where educators, parents, and peers act as cultural brokers to help students navigate challenges can contribute to reducing experiences of educational inequality for children with refugee experiences. This duoethnography maps these relationships during a year-long identity text project with Grade 6 students in an ESL/ELD classroom by two educator researchers. Using an intersectional lens, the authors identify gaps and highlight promising pathways and practices for the integration of students with refugee backgrounds, including 1) working towards the greater interconnectedness of service and referrals between welcome centres, schools and service organizations; 2) knowledge exchange surrounding different education pathways and practices and the opportunities afforded by these for the integration of students with refugee experiences; 3) individually tailored educational support and services; and 4) translanguaging pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In this duoethnography, we describe and reflect on our experiences working with students of refugee

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background within the context of a middle school program for students who have experienced significant interruptions in their education. We explore our contrasting and sometimes overlapping experiences as teachers, teacher educators and researchers supporting students of refugee background as well as promising pathways leading to positive school experiences for them in Ontario. The Bridging Multiple Worlds model (Cooper, 2014) and Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989 & 2017; Hankivsky, 2014) are central in our critical reflection. Through discussions about our experiences working with students on a yearlong ‘me mapping’ identity text project in a Grade 6 classroom dedicated to accelerated learning in math and language, we highlight promising practices for the successful inclusion of students with refugee experiences as well as their smooth transition between their various classrooms and other spaces in the school. As much of the literature focuses on one aspect of programming or pedagogical practice in support of refugee students, our chapter addresses the need for an integrated description of effective programming in middle school.

CONTEXT

Canada is a world leader in the resettlement of refugees welcoming over 1 088 015 refugees since 1980 (UNHCR, 2022). Many of these newcomers settle in urban centers where their children attend schools that sometimes provide specialized programs to support the specific needs of children who may have significant gaps in their education due to their pre-migration experiences as well as their migration experiences while fleeing their homeland. This chapter focuses on the Literacy Enrichment Academic Program (LEAP) in one Ontario school district which offers a specialized self-contained classroom program to support children and youth with significant educational gaps, often due to conflict and war. The program falls under the English Literacy Development (ELD) stream of programs offered by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME, 2007) to support multilingual language learners in elementary schools from Grades 4 to 8. The OME (2016) also produced a resource guide for teachers focussed on working with students of refugee background. Students in the ELD program are usually two to four years behind in their education and have limited literacy skills in their first language and English. Class sizes are limited to approximately 14 students and are led by a teacher specialized in teaching English as an additional language (EAL). While students in the ELD program are kept together in this specialized class in the mornings, they are integrated into regular classrooms with similar-aged peers in the afternoon. During this time, students learn subjects such as Art, Science, History, Geography, Music, Health and Physical Education in an integrated classroom model. This inquiry’s main objective is to understand better how students navigate these very different classroom experiences and how they move between them in the context of the school, home, and community. Our chapter provides front row seating in a middle school that welcomes students with refugee experience that allows for an immersive experience where the practices suggested in the literature come to life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our literature review includes four areas directly related to schools and classrooms that welcome students with refugee experiences.

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