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## ENGAGING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG REFUGEES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ENGAGING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG REFUGEES IN THE LANGUAGE  
CLASSROOM

By

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Submitted to the School of Honors Committee

In partial fulfillment

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Dedication

For the millions of refugee children in need.

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## Abstract

As the number of refugee students increase each year, many language teachers find themselves uninformed and ill-equipped to effectively engage refugee students in the classroom. Thus, through a survey and synthesis of the current body of research, the following literature review seeks to present the specific needs of refugee students and suggest practical ways in which language teachers can effectively meet those needs and engage refugees in the language classroom. The findings suggest that though the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration experiences present numerous physical, emotional, behavioral, cultural, social, and academic challenges to refugee students in the classroom, teachers can combat these obstacles and empower students by becoming a willing listener, establishing trusting relationships with students, creating a safe classroom environment, enlisting the help and support of the community, and equipping students with practical and relevant instruction in the classroom. Such an approach will not only contribute to the healthy establishment of refugee students in the host country, but will also equip them with the tools they need to achieve their high ambitions.

**KEY WORDS:** Refugees, trauma, education, language learning, challenges, meeting needs, teaching strategies

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Helen Thorpe, a renowned journalist and author, dedicated a year and a half of her life to observing and studying the lives of twenty-two refugee and immigrant students at South High School in Denver, Colorado. In her book, *The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom*, Thorpe documents her experiences and observations not only within the ESL classroom, but also of her time with the students' families and of her travels back to their homelands. Through the highs and lows, Thorpe documents the reality of the refugee and immigrant experience in and out of the classroom, reminding the world not only of their humanity and vulnerability through the many challenges they face, but also of their ability to persevere and overcome these challenges with the support and encouragement of a caring community.

On the first day of class, Thorpe notes an essay hanging above the teacher's desk:

*Life was difficult. I was living in the middle of a civil war. 2002 was when the Ethiopians came. They were firing at everyone. . . All the kids were running. I was holding onto the back of a truck. . . After that I lost my eye. Then we went to Ethiopia and lived in a refugee camp. We went from Addis Ababa to Amsterdam, then to Chicago, and then to Denver. . . Our apartment here smelled bad like marijuana. My life here is really good now. Compared to my life in Mogadishu it is much better here. (Thorpe, 2017, p. 14)*

Thorpe explains that the teacher kept the essay as a reminder not only of the “stark environments his students had left behind,” but also as “evidence of how much English he could teach them in a single school year,” (Thorpe, 2017, p. 14).

Such a testimony points to the importance of education in the healthy establishment of refugee and immigrant students in America, as well as the potential impact language teachers can have on the lives of their students. Thus, it is vital that language teachers become aware of the rising challenge of educating refugees, as well as prepare themselves to respond.

### **Context**

As of 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that there are nearly twenty-six million refugees worldwide, with over half of that number representing refugees under the age of eighteen (UNHCR, 2019). Such an influx of student-aged refugees poses a significant challenge to educational systems worldwide, as they are now tasked with the integration of a highly vulnerable population. In addition, most refugee students are unfamiliar with the language of the host country upon arrival, and are thus in need of special language instruction before fully integrating into the mainstream classroom.

However, education also has the potential to play a significant role in the healthy establishment of refugee students in the host country, as it not only provides opportunities for acculturation and language learning, but also paves the way to higher education, greater job opportunity, and possibly even citizenship.

But refugee students enter the language learning classroom with more than just linguistic challenges. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), culture shock, and familial strains are just a few of the many common obstacles faced by refugee students that may hinder academic advancement. If left unaddressed, such complex issues may result in discouragement, a lack of motivation, and even premature school dropout. Thus, it is imperative that the unique needs of refugee students are met in the classroom, and that they receive the support and encouragement they need to overcome these challenges.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem, however, is that many language teachers are uninformed and ill-equipped when it comes to educating refugees. Language teachers often lack awareness and understanding in regards to the refugee experience, and are not equipped with the practical tools and strategies needed to effectively engage specific refugee needs in the classroom. This lack of preparation can result in both teacher and student frustration, leading to tension, discouragement, and apathy in the classroom. Because of this, many refugee students do not complete their education, and ultimately continue in the cycle of poverty their parents so desperately hoped they would escape.

### **Overview of Methodology**

In order to address this issue of educating refugee students, the following questions must be considered: *How does the trauma of the refugee experience impact refugee students? What specific needs do refugee students have? How can language teachers meet these specific needs and further engage refugee students in the classroom?* In order to answer these questions, this review of the literature has surveyed current research evaluating the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration experiences of refugees in order to first provide the context for refugee trauma. Next, it synthesizes current research explaining how young refugees are affected physically, emotionally, behaviorally, culturally, socially, and academically by their experiences, and how teachers can practically address these specific needs in the classroom.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The focus of this literature review is on young refugee students, and therefore does not provide an in-depth discussion of immigrant youth, youth of the host country who have been affected by trauma, or adult refugee students. In addition, the majority of studies and surveys included in this review were conducted among refugees from the Middle East, Africa, Southeast

Asia, and Australia, with very few documenting refugees from Central or South America. Thus, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experience of refugee students and best teaching practices to serve them, further research needs to be done among refugees from different regions. Further research is also advised among at risk populations not discussed in this literature review, as growing numbers of immigrants and victims of urban violence enter educational systems.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNDERSTANDING THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

“Refugees are the uprooted...suffering losses of every description, including social identity, place, family, livelihood, and support systems, and must struggle to find their way in a new, often hostile, environment with a foreign language and customs. The conditions associated with refugees clearly put them in the category of risk for physical and psychological distress, because embedded within them is the often unspeakable violence associated with the refugee experience,” (George, 2010, p. 5).

Before teachers are able to understand the challenges refugees face in the classroom or how to respond, they must first understand the context of those challenges within the refugee experience. In other words, teachers must be familiar with the circumstances that have created these challenges before they will ever be fully prepared to address them. Thus, the following chapter will attempt to address this context by discussing the common pre-migratory, migratory, and post-migratory experiences of refugees as presented across the existing literature.

#### **Pre-Migration Experience**

Refugees come from all over the world and from a wide range of circumstances. Some flee from natural disasters such as famines or earthquakes; others flee from persecution, whether

it be political, ethnic, or religious; and others flee from war. Some have lived in affluence, others in poverty. Some have been well educated, and others do not know how to hold a pencil. Regardless, it is impossible to fully understand the refugee experience until it is personally experienced, and even so, the experience of each individual refugee differs drastically. Because of this, it is of utmost importance to know refugee students on an individual level and to listen to the stories of their own personal experiences. However, in an attempt to familiarize and prepare English teachers for what may lie ahead, this section surveys the literature for some of the common traumatic experiences faced by refugees in their home countries in order to prepare teachers for some of the common tragedies and experiences that may present themselves in the classroom.

### **Traumatic Experiences**

According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), children in particular are susceptible to the traumas of war. The traumatic experiences of refugee children may include witnessing and/or being victims of violence; lacking basic necessities such as food, water, and shelter; experiencing physical injuries, infections, and diseases; enduring torture, forced labor, or sexual assault; lacking medical care; being separated from family members; and not having easy access to schooling (NCTSN, n.d.).

McBrien (2005) also discusses some of the travesties endured by children in war-torn countries such as rape, abduction, trafficking, becoming child soldiers or child brides, and taking on the responsibility of caring for younger siblings after parents are arrested or killed. McBrien also notes that these traumatic experiences often result in PTSD, which often contributes to additional challenges in the classroom (McBrien, 2005). In their study of Bosnian refugees in the United States, Vojvoda, Weine, McGlashan, Becker, and Southwick (2008) discovered that

traumatic experiences among their participants included “forced march, death of a family member, exposure to a fire, forcible removal of personal property, detention in a concentration camp, witness to violence or death, being beaten or tortured, and lack of food or water,” (p. 2).

### **Cultural Trauma**

Beyond the trauma of war, persecution, and natural disasters, a refugee’s pre-migratory experience is also characterized by a culture--the culture of their home country. While this culture exists outside of tragedy, certain aspects of the culture that are heightened during tragedy may harm the refugee. For example, Hattar-Pollara discusses the ways in which the “patriarchy, tradition, and religious practices” (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 1-2) of Syrian culture, combined with the stressors of war, make it virtually impossible for Syrian girls to receive any form of education and put them at a higher risk for “gender-based physical and psychological...abuses” (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 5). In Hattar-Pollara’s study, the participants reported being “not as equally valued or supported as their male siblings,” “kept away from school,” and “perceived as a liability and a burden” until they married, especially during wartime (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 5). Participants also reported being discouraged from doing homework and told that their education had “no value to their role as wives and mothers” (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 6). These abuses, while indirectly related to war trauma, are representative of how a refugee’s culture can intensify the trauma experienced during war. Thus, language teachers should not only be aware of the trauma caused by war-related violence, but also the trauma related to a student’s cultural background.

While these traumatic experiences do not characterize the experience of every refugee, teachers need to be aware of these common experiences in order to prepare a response and not be

caught off guard should such experiences be brought up in class. Teachers should also be aware of the fact that many students may not admit to having certain traumatic experiences because they are either ashamed of them or do not want to receive any special treatment because of them. Either way, such traumatic experiences are a reality for many refugees, and knowing the stories of each and every student is necessary in order to give them the support that they need.

### **Trans-Migration Experience**

It was a normal day in my adult English class. We did a warm up, I taught vocabulary, we did our reading for the day and then worked on some fluency exercises. For our final activity, I asked my students to reflect back on the reading for the day, in which one of the characters had to make a big decision. I asked my students to write about a time when they had to make a big decision. As usual, I asked them to share with the class. I will never forget the student who held her paper with trembling hands, squinting through tears welling up in her eyes. With a quivering voice barely above a whisper, she began to recount the decision she had made almost fifty years prior to flee her home country of Cuba for the United States and leave her aging mother behind. The pain of that decision, personified by the tears dripping off her chin, was still as raw as it had been fifty years earlier.

The decision to leave is probably one of the hardest decisions refugees must make. The decision is not just about leaving their country. Refugees are also choosing to leave their culture, their heritage, their home, and their family behind for an unknown place, often times without knowing when or if they will ever return, and that is only the beginning. Often times the journey that lies ahead will bring even more pain than the leaving itself, and there is always the possibility of never reaching the destination at all. It is no wonder my student could not contain her pain. Such an experience, especially for young refugees who do not fully understand why

they are having to leave, must be extremely disorienting and painful. Though my student was well into her seventies, having fled her homeland in her mid-twenties, her response demonstrated the immense pain faced by all refugees, regardless of age, as they are forced to leave their homelands.

### **Trauma During Flight**

According to the NCTSN, the hardship and trauma of living in the host country does not relent during displacement (n.d.). Refugees may endure threats of violence, separation, hunger, exposure, family separation, living in refugee camps, harassment by local authorities, and traveling long distances by foot during the trans-migration process. In addition, some refugees travel as unaccompanied minors, which only intensifies the trauma of these experiences and the resulting PTSD (O'Toole Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2017). According to the UNHCR, “75,000 unaccompanied or separated children under the age of 18 were reported to have claimed asylum in 2016 in 70 countries,” (UNHCR, 2016, para. 56).

In a study on the trans-migration experiences of refugee children, Meda reports some of the intense trauma experienced by refugees trying to cross over the border of Zimbabwe into South Africa. Some of the major contributors to this trauma include the lack of sufficient funds and documentation. Without a passport or money for a flight, many refugees must turn to crossing the border illegally, which could include swimming across crocodile-infested rivers, bribing drivers, riding on the inside of chemical or gasoline trucks, or crossing long distances by foot into gang-infested territory (Meda, 2017). These illegal means often result in going long periods of time without food, contracting deadly diseases such as cholera, being taken advantage of and assaulted by gang members, being beaten and raped, being arrested or killed by soldiers, and witnessing murder (Meda, 2017). Other commonly reported experiences during trans-

migration include traversing desert on foot and crossing long stretches of water in makeshift boats. Meda reports that these tragedies result in a 10% mortality rate due to dehydration, drowning, or pirate attacks (as cited in Meda, 2017).

### **The Refugee Camp Experience**

Apart from the trauma of crossing borders, refugees also experience hardship during their stay in refugee camps. In the camps, refugees are still susceptible to the same acts of violence such as harassment, arrest, sexual assault, and abuse, as well as disease outbreaks, food shortages, lack of medical care, overcrowding and lack of accommodations (Westermeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996). According to Trueba et al. (1990), such living conditions often contribute to significant, often chronic ailments, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, malaria, kidney damage, and liver damage. Within the camps, refugees are also often taken advantage of in regards to work. Many refugee children are forced to work to supplement family income during their residence in camps. They work long days for minimal pay. They are also often tricked and lied to by their employers and not paid according to their agreements. Despite this injustice, refugees remain helpless to protest for fear of being reported or arrested due to their illegal status, (Meda, 2017).

### **Disrupted Education**

In addition to the trauma experienced in refugee camps and crossing borders, the transmigration experience also results in the disruption of education. According to UNHCR Malaysia and the U.S. Department of State, “only 39% of primary school aged refugee children (ages 6 to 11) and 7% of secondary school students (ages 12 to 18) are getting a rudimentary education via refugee schools,” (as cited in O’Neil et al., 2018, pp. 7-8). One cause of this, according to a study conducted in Malaysian schools for Burmese refugees, may be the fact that many refugee

students seem to view their stay in refugee schools as temporary, and therefore do not feel the need to do homework or engage in class (O'Neil et al., 2018). Nonetheless, even refugee students who are motivated to pursue their education still endure many challenges.

Refugee teachers, who are dealing with the same struggles as their students, often lack the formal training, education, and language proficiency needed to run a language learning classroom. Wide age ranges, socioeconomic backgrounds, and education levels are also represented in these schools, providing an enormous challenge even to the most experienced teacher (O'Neil et al., 2018). In addition, refugee schools often lack sufficient funding, resulting in a lack of materials and overcrowded classrooms, often "hidden in...apartments, garages, and basements" (O'Neil et al., 2018, p. 8). But the most challenging aspects of running these refugee schools is obtaining adequate curriculum. The curriculum used in these schools is rarely recognized by any national authority, making accreditation virtually impossible. Without an accredited education, many of these refugees will have little to no prospect of higher education in the future (Wachob & Williams, 2010).

Whether the trans-migration experience is only a couple of days or spans many years, the challenges that arise in the process are sure to leave a lasting impact. As I saw with my student in English class, the reminder of her experiences brought immense pain even after fifty years. Thus, teachers must be aware of this traumatic process and understand how it affects their students. Language teachers must recognize that refugees in flight continue to experience separation, hunger, and violence, often making the migration experience just as traumatic, if not more traumatic, than their experiences in their home country. Language teachers must also be aware of the fact that refugees in flight also experience a disruption in their education. Thus, language teachers must not only be sensitive to the hardships and trauma endured by refugee students

through the migration experience, but also understand how this trans-migration experience has affected their education.

### **Post-Migration Experience**

Until this point, refugees have experienced immense tragedy and hardship. However, these struggles do not end upon arrival to the host country; in fact, even more challenges arise. These challenges can include, but are not limited to culture shock, language difficulties, familial strains, social challenges and discrimination, as well as practical difficulties such as finding work and learning to navigate a new city. According to Montgomery (2011), these stressful life conditions actually have a greater impact on refugee mental health and overall well-being than “previous traumatic experience-related to violence,” (p. 32).

According to the NCTSN, there are four core stressors faced by refugees throughout the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration experience. However, three of these core stressors occur primarily during the post-migration phase. These stressors include resettlement stress, acculturation stress, and isolation stress. Resettlement stress may include financial stressors, housing difficulties, finding employment, loss of community, transportation difficulties, and other practical challenges. Acculturation stress describes the challenges of navigating between two cultures, which can include familial and generational conflicts, conflicts with peers over cultural misunderstandings, fitting into school, and forming an integrated identity with elements from both cultures. Lastly, isolation stress describes social challenges such as being a minority in a new country; feeling lonely from a loss of social support networks; discrimination; harassment from peers, adults, or law enforcement; and loss of social status (NCTSN, n.d.).

## **Culture Shock**

Kim (2016) argues that sociocultural factors after resettlement can affect a refugee's mental health even more so than pre-resettlement factors because they compound the effects of post-traumatic stress. Culture shock, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation." Common effects of culture shock include boredom, withdrawal, feelings of isolation, feelings of helplessness, excessive sleeping, irritability, suffering from body pains and aches, extreme homesickness, and cynicism of host culture ("Stages and symptoms of culture shock", n.d.). These symptoms, compounded by the symptoms of PTSD, may have a detrimental effect on refugee students during resettlement, as they may result in a lack of motivation to participate in school or severe anxiety.

Another component of culture shock is language. Without knowing the language of the host country, seemingly simple tasks become exhausting and frustrating, only adding to the stress of resettlement. But language goes deeper than communication. Language is tied to culture (Weine et al., 2004), and therefore remnants of culture shock will remain until the language of the host country is mastered.

## **Employment and Financial Stress**

Practical difficulties such as enrolling in school, finding a place to live, figuring out public transportation, and grocery shopping comprise much of the initial stress upon arrival in host countries, and are only compounded by refugees' lack of language proficiency and unfamiliarity with the host country's systems. However, one of the most difficult and stressful challenges for newly arrived refugees is finding employment. Not only is employment

fundamental to establishing a new life, but it plays a major role in shaping other aspects of resettlement, such as identity and familial roles.

Whether it be a lack of language proficiency or unprocessed paperwork, the initial stages of settlement can be especially stressful financially as refugees begin the search for employment. When refugees are able to find work, the job usually requires long hours for minimum pay, meaning that parents must often work multiple jobs, and adolescents must find work after school to supplement the family income. The tragedy of this is that many refugees who resettle are highly educated and experienced. For example, Morrice (2009) looks at highly educated and qualified refugees in the UK, and explains that even the former engineers, medical staff, and professors cannot find work in their respective fields because their degrees often do not transfer to the host country. These highly qualified and educated refugees find themselves working minimum-wage, blue collar jobs or completely unemployed altogether. One participant described his shock and frustration towards being unable to use his education and work experience as an engineer to contribute to society:

*We think that it's our responsibility to give something for the community that gives us lots. We try our best but actually still the system does not fit with us. We try to do what we can, just to give some of that we take. We are not that kind of family that we always take, we appreciate what we have and we appreciate that you give some of that to other people. So we try to help in our specialist area but still the system puts some barriers in the way. (Morrice, 2009, p. 6)*

This inability to contribute to society only intensifies the challenge of acculturation, as it forces refugees to find a new career path and reestablish their identity in relation to the community (Morrice, 2009).

## **Familial Challenges**

According to Weine et al. (2004), there are four core challenges for refugee families during resettlement: “family roles and obligations, family memories and communication, family relationship,” and connections with ethnic and cultural identity (p. 5). Family roles and obligations are often redefined because of employment. As new members of the family are having to find work in order to support their new life, men, in their role as provider, are often displaced. This role reversal can be challenging for families who come from highly patriarchal societies, causing internal strife within families. In addition, children and teens often become the primary translators because they are able to more quickly pick up the language. This often forces adult reliance on children, causing a complete role reversal. Children are soon needed not only for translation in meetings and appointments, but also to do things like write checks and pay bills. Unfortunately, this role reversal can “create identity confusion and conflict between the generations” (as cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 2), which further complicates the acculturation process.

In addition, families often face challenges in regards to family communication and memories. The communication within a family is often weakened simply because they have less time to spend together after resettlement. Refugee families have reported that there is “too little time to spend together as a family...because they often have multiple jobs and conflicting schedules” (Weine et al., 2004, p.152). In addition, the pain of memories is often far too much for families to bear, and in coping with this pain, refugee families also struggle with emotional communication. Some refugees have reported that they do not want to burden other family members with their pain, and therefore revert to completely ignoring their painful memories and never discussing them. For adults especially, relating to their children and communicating the

pain they are feeling from past experiences can be hard. Children also try to ignore this pain, often fully embracing their new life and culture instead and not wanting to dwell on past experiences. Older generations, on the other hand, often find the idea of leaving everything behind unbearable. They resort to over-communication, telling the same stories of home over and over, unsure of how to balance the memory of past pain and ethnic cultural identity with a life and future in a new place. These generational differences in dealing with pain and trauma inhibit communication between generations, often leaving children without the emotional support and guidance they so desperately need at home (Weine et al., 2014). In addition, these differences also contribute to the disintegration of family relationships. While older generations may become frustrated with the younger generation's lack of value for ethnic culture, the younger generation may become annoyed with the traditional views of older family members and seek to fully assimilate to the host culture despite family concerns.

Lastly, familial relationships are strained by the enormous pressure put on young refugees to succeed in their new country. Because parents often find "little sense of purpose or meaning" in their new lives, they often cope with these feelings by living vicariously through their children's lives (Weine et al., 2004, p. 152). Such pressure may result in immense stress for young refugees in school, only intensifying the frustration and discouragement they experience when struggling with classroom material or after performing poorly on assessment.

These strains put on family are particularly detrimental to the success of refugees in their new home, as family is often "the most important remaining social institution" refugees have (Weine et al., 2004, p. 2-3). Thus, language teachers must not only become aware of refugee students' home environments, but also seek to bridge the gap between home and school and

cultivate trusting relationships with student families (as cited in O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018).

### **Social Challenges**

Refugees, like any other minority, experience social challenges such as discrimination, bullying and harassment (O'Shea et al., 2000). As cited in Kovinthan, "racism, discrimination, unfair treatment, exclusionary actions, and disrespectful comments" (2016, p. 4) characterize the experience of many refugees, often resulting from "cultural misunderstandings" (as cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 2). Religious backgrounds, historical conflicts between ethnic groups, and cultural differences may also contribute to discriminatory practices and bullying among peers (Gibson, 2002; as cited in McBrien, 2005). According to McBrien, this alienation from peers, in addition to familial conflicts, may result in students feeling that "they do not belong anywhere, as they become alienated from their parents but are not truly accepted by their peers" (2005, p.24). Recognizing this experience of isolation in refugee students is imperative for successful teaching. The classroom environment must be as inclusive and welcoming as possible.

### **Conclusion**

In her article "Learning and Teaching with Loss," Thursica Kovinthan admits that "one of the greatest challenges I experienced both as a refugee student and a preservice teacher was the lack of awareness by teachers regarding their students' pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration experiences" (Kovinthan, 2016, p.6). Thus, until language teachers are fully aware of refugee students' unique stories and experiences outside the classroom, they will never be able to effectively engage them. However, understanding how those experiences presently affect refugee students in the classroom is equally important. The trauma of pre-, trans-, and post-migratory experiences leave lasting impacts on refugee students, often creating many

additional challenges for them in the classroom. Because of this, it is vital that teachers of refugees are aware of the specific needs of refugee students as a result of their traumatic experiences, as well as how to effectively address those needs.

### CHAPTER 3

#### UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE PHYSICAL NEEDS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Whether it be traumatic instances of physical assault, countless nights without sleep, or dehydration on the long and arduous journey, it is no secret that the refugee experience takes a toll on the human body. However, even after recovering from the initial physical stress of traumatic experiences, there are certain, more subtle, residual health effects that may linger as a result of PTSD and its related symptoms. Thus, rather than focusing on the direct health effects of specific traumatic instances, the following section will focus on the residual health effects associated with the refugee experience as a whole, and explain how those effects impact refugee students in the classroom.

##### **Understanding Physical Challenges**

According to Bond et al. (2007), traumatic experiences result in numerous and varied health issues among refugees. Physical symptoms of PTSD include hyperactivity, which can lead to inattention, fidgeting, and distractibility in the classroom (Hart, 2009; O'Shea et al., 2000), as well as exhaustion, resulting from sleep disorders such as nightmares, tiredness, lack of sleep and/or disturbed sleep (Hadfield, Ostrowski, & Ungar, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2000). Similarly, the NCTSN echoes the concerns that sleeping disorders as a result of PTSD may result in insufficient rest and excessive tiredness in the classroom (n.d.). The NCTSN also suggests that refugee students may experience physical symptoms such as jumpiness, a pounding heart,

stomach aches, headaches, and other unexplainable aches and pains as a result of the traumatic refugee experiences (NCTSN, 2014). These symptoms may intensify “after being around people, places, sounds, situations or other things” that remind the student of traumatic instances or of a person who has died (NCTSN, 2014, para. 8). The article also notes that students “may minimize these physical reactions,” or “exaggerate minor ailments or injury,” and encourages teachers, regardless of the situation, to acknowledge the physical discomfort a student may be feeling and lead them in “physical activities to release tension...like deep breathing or gentle stretching,” (NCTSN, 2014, para. 9). Other physical health issues resulting from PTSD include, “nausea, constipation, angina, shortness of breath, dizziness, fatigue, headaches, and back aches,” as well as medical conditions such as “asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, heart disease, and fibromyalgia,” (Pacella, Hruska & Delahanty, 2013, p. 2). Physical signs of anxiety such as tension in the neck and hands are also commonly found among refugee students (Gomez et al., 2017).

Beyond the physical challenges directly related to the consequences of PTSD, there are other physical challenges that may arise simply as a result of acclimating to life in a new country. For example, in the initial stages of assimilation, refugees, just as any other immigrants, will have to adjust to the diet of their new home. New foods and limited access to familiar foods from their home country may result in digestive issues or a loss of appetite. Refugees may also find themselves sleep deprived, not necessarily from nightmares or sleep disorders as a result of PTSD, but because they work multiple jobs and take care of siblings to make household ends meet, resulting in insufficient sleep.

These symptoms only represent a portion of the physical challenges which may arise with refugees in the classroom, as each refugee is different and will be affected differently by their

own unique experiences. With this in mind, teachers should be prepared to deal with such physical disruptions in their classrooms, and actively seeking how to meet the physical needs of refugee students in order to more effectively engage them in the classroom.

### **Meeting Physical Needs**

While teachers are by no means medical personnel, there are a few practical things that can be done in order to address some of the physical challenges and needs of refugee students in the classroom. First and foremost, it is important to note that physical activity in the classroom enhances academic performance and concentration (Erwin, Fedewa, Beighle, & Ahn, 2012). Anything teachers can do to get their refugee students active in the classroom, even simple breathing exercises or gentle stretching will help curb any concentration issues as well as release tension in the body and provide a much needed physical outlet for those who are experiencing hyperactivity (NCTSN, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2018).

When addressing the needs related to sleep, there are several things that teachers can do. First, one simple way teachers can address the sleep issue is to educate their students on healthy sleeping habits (Bond et. al, 2017), such as following a routine sleep schedule, eating a healthy diet, drinking lots of water, not drinking caffeine late in the day, and not viewing electronic screens before bed. Some of these habits can even be implemented during the school day, allowing students and teachers to hold one another accountable throughout the day. While implementing these habits may not completely resolve the immediate issue of sleep deprivation, instilling healthy habits in young refugees will greatly contribute to their long-term health.

Another way teachers can address the sleep issue among refugee students as well as physical signs of anxiety is by leading students in relaxation techniques and by simply allowing students some quiet rest time during the day (Gormez et al., 2017). As simple as it may seem,

giving students a five minute break after lunch to put their heads down or lay on the floor will not only help calm anxious students, but will make a world of difference in energy levels throughout the rest of the day.

Lastly, while medical conditions such as asthma, heart disease, and fibromyalgia should only be addressed by medical personnel, there are ways teachers can meet refugee needs in regards to other physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, back aches, and nausea. Again, teachers can encourage healthy habits such as keeping students hydrated, allowing them rest breaks, giving them outlets for activity and leading them in stretches.

Refugees enter our classrooms with numerous needs, many of which may seem more pressing than the fact that they are dehydrated or sleep-deprived. But until we overcome these surface level obstacles, we will never be able to effectively engage our refugee students in the classroom or meet their deeper needs. Because of this, it is important that language teachers are not only aware of the physical needs of their students, but are also equipped with practical ways to address them. Once students feel comfortable in their classroom physically, the other areas of well-being will eventually follow suit.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

According to Kovinthan (2016), refugee students are often dealing with a variety of emotional issues upon arrival in the classroom, and because of this, may encounter additional difficulty while transitioning into the school setting. However, while there are most definitely areas of emotional trauma that teachers are not qualified to handle, Kovinthan also notes that education can be “a key aspect of refugee children’s social and emotional rehabilitation,”

(Kovinthan, 2016, p. 3). Teachers can play a vital role in helping students find a sense of stability and security within the classroom, which not only contributes to an increased willingness to share and process emotional needs and challenges, but also helps students find a stability in other areas of their lives as well. (Kovinthan, 2016). If teachers are aware of the emotional consequences of trauma and make an effort to create a welcoming classroom environment, they will gain the trust of their students as well as insight into how they can best support refugee students and meet their emotional needs (Allen et al., 2016).

### **Understanding Emotional Challenges**

Emotion regulation is defined by “a person’s capability to evaluate, manage, experience, express and improve emotional reactions in a way that helps proper functioning,” (as cited in Khamis, 2019, p. 2). Unfortunately, the consequences of PTSD severely inhibit this ability, often resulting in quite tragic expressions of emotional dysfunction. In their survey of Sri Lankan provinces affected by armed conflict, Elbert et al. reports that 68% of the surveyed children ages ten to fourteen experienced emotional disturbances, and 26% had been diagnosed with PTSD and were at a current risk for suicide (2009). While these statistics may not be representative of the refugee population at large, they do present the significance and importance of emotional awareness in the classroom.

Some of the most commonly suggested symptoms of emotional dysregulation resulting from the refugee experience are anxiety and depression (Gormez et al., 2017; Hadfield et al., 2017; Hart, 2009; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015; Lerner, 2012; Montgomery, 2011; O’Shea, Hodes, Down, & Bramley, 2000). In addition, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, outbursts of anger, homesickness, confusion, loneliness, social withdrawal, problems interacting with peer groups, blaming others, self-criticism, resignation, and feeling misunderstood can also be seen as

expressions of this dysregulation (Baker & Jones, 2006; Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Elbert et al., 2009; Hart, 2009; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015; Khamis, 2019; Lerner, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2000). According to the NCTSN, common emotional challenges may also include excessive crying, deep sadness, irritability, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, lack of motivation, emotional avoidance, shame, embarrassment, and feelings of helplessness (n.d.).

The NCTSN also notes that the outward expression of emotion may vary with age, as the impact of traumatic events may differ based upon a child's stage of development. For example, preschool aged children may throw temper tantrums, elementary aged children may withdraw from others and cling to their parents, and middle and high school aged students may experience difficulty in relationships and social interactions (n.d.). However, it is also not uncommon for refugee students to exhibit age-inappropriate behavior as a result of their emotional distress.

In addition, it is also important to recognize that oftentimes the symptoms of PTSD are not expressed right away. In Khamis's (2019) study of Syrian refugee children ages seven to eighteen, 25.6% of participants experienced delayed onset of PTSD. The study found that certain symptoms may not surface for up to 6 months after the initial trauma. Therefore, it is difficult to predict how any particular student may respond to emotional trauma, as their emotional stability may change over the course of time.

These findings suggest that teachers must continually assess the emotional stability of their students, and avoid making assumptions about student emotions based on previous assessment. Teachers must also be aware of the many expressions of emotional distress in order understanding why students exhibit such behaviors and be prepared with how to address such issues through practical means. Lastly, if teachers are aware of the potential emotional

challenges faced by refugee students, they may be proactive in addressing some of these needs in order to prevent such disruptions in the classroom.

### **Meeting Emotional Needs**

Many of these emotional challenges are rooted in much deeper internal trauma which many teachers may not be equipped to address. However, teachers may be able to provide a welcoming, stable, and understanding environment that does not punish students for emotional disturbances, and gives them space to explore and share their emotions. Teachers may also find that there are a number of practical techniques that can be used to address some of the symptoms of emotional trauma and even give refugee students themselves some tools to examine and understand their own emotions.

The first step in addressing emotional dysregulation in the classroom is teaching basic emotions such as happy, angry and sad in language instruction. Techniques such as assigning hand gestures or symbols to, drawing pictures of, and role playing different emotions are all effective techniques that will help students remember the language associated with different emotions (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006). Incorporating such instruction into the language learning process not only helps students recognize certain emotions, but also gives them the means to clearly express such emotions to their teachers and peers (Lerner, 2012; Szente et al., 2006). This capability is vital to a refugee student's emotional stability, because if students are unable to communicate how they are feeling within the school context, they will feel isolated, misunderstood, and lonely, which will only further contribute to their emotional instability (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006). In addition, if students are unable to clearly express their emotions in the language of their teachers and peers, teachers will not be able to address their

emotional needs. Thus, identifying emotions in the language of the host country is the first step to meeting the emotional needs of refugee students.

It is important to note here the importance of cultural considerations when teaching refugee students about emotions, as this may be a foreign concept to some refugee students. For instance, according to O'Neal, "Korean Americans and Asian Americans displayed fewer observable emotions, such as exuberance and sadness, than European American children," (2018, p.33). In addition, "children of some Eastern cultures are less likely to communicate negative emotions than children of Western cultures," (O'Neal et al., 2018, p.33). The resulting hypothesis is that "emotion containment may be a function of culture," (O'Neal et al., 2018, p.33). One teacher from Burma described it this way:

*We do not focus on such feelings as it is not our culture to do so. We, as teachers, cannot control our students' emotions because it is not our culture to do so. We focus on the subject matter and we run the school to teach them for their future.*  
(O'Neal et al., 2018, p. 24)

This sort of inattention to emotional development in the classroom may be the standard for refugee students, and therefore the attention devoted to understanding emotions in the classroom may be uncomfortable for refugee students at first. However, teachers may be able to counteract this disposition by first understanding this cultural difference, as well as by creating an exceptionally welcoming and safe classroom environment.

It has been noted that "children and adolescents who perceived their school environment positively tended to have lower levels of emotional dysregulation," (Khamis, 2019, p. 8). Giving refugee students the language they need to express their emotions is crucial to meeting their emotional needs, however, students must also feel welcome, safe and secure in the classroom

environment before they will be willing to express their emotions. Once an emotionally supportive environment has been established however, studies have shown how impactful they can be for students suffering from emotional dysregulation (Khamis, 2019). Thus, teachers must prioritize the establishment of a welcoming classroom environment that fosters emotional expression before they attempt to address any specific emotional needs.

The first step a teachers must take in order to establish a safe and welcoming classroom environment is to examine their own emotions and attitudes upon entering the classroom. Even non-English speaking students are able to perceive teacher attitudes and emotions, which, if negative, may hinder the formation of a welcoming classroom environment (Hek, 2005). In addition, one simple way a teacher can contribute to a welcoming classroom environment is by smiling, as it is not only encouraging and affirming for students to see a reassuring smile, but it also establishes a positive tone for the class (Lerner, 2012; Szente et al., 2006).

The next step in creating a safe and welcoming classroom environment is to be a willing listener (Hek, 2005). According to Allen et al., listening to student stories and getting to know them on an individual level is foundational to the establishment of trusting relationships and a welcoming classroom environment (2016). Refugees must first be convinced that the teacher is their friend before the teacher can make any further progress (David, 1943). Feuerverger also suggests that the first step in helping refugees is to simply “listen to their stories when they are ready to tell them,” (2011, p.9). This will not only provide a point of connection between refugees and teachers, but will also greatly contribute to their sense of belonging in the classroom, which is key to fostering emotional stability and growth (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018).

Lastly, teachers can foster a comfortable classroom environment by allowing students to build connections between home and school (Prior & Niesz, 2013, p. 11). According to Prior and Niesz, one way to foster this connection is by allowing students to have “something from their home environment represented in their classroom” (2013, p. 11), such as utilizing toys in the classroom that are similar to the ones refugees have at home, or by simply letting them share a fond memory or experience from their home life with the class. Such connections will not only provide a sense of security and familiarity in the classroom, but may also significantly contribute to emotional development from feelings of “loneliness, anger, fear and sadness,” to “excitement, comfort, happiness, and community” (Prior & Niesz, 2013, p. 9). However, teachers will not be able to foster such a bridge between home and school for their students if they are not familiar with the home life of their students. One way to resolve this issue is by making home visits. If a teacher feels comfortable and the school district permits it, visiting the homes of students will not only provide insight into the lives of students outside of school, but will help teachers establish positive, trusting relationships with students and parents (Lerner, 2012; Szente et al., 2006).

Once a welcoming and safe classroom environment has been established and students have built a trusting relationship with their teachers and peers, students will feel more comfortable expressing their emotions and teachers will soon be able to address specific emotional needs in the classroom. One highly effective method of not only providing a means for emotional expression, but also addressing emotional issues resulting from trauma is creative therapy. Mediums such as visual arts, music, drama, creative writing, and dance may all offer much needed creative outlets for refugee students to express themselves, and have been shown to directly improve emotional well-being (as cited in Quinlan, Schweitzer, Khawaja, & Griffin, 2016; as cited in Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005). Creative therapies

have been linked to reductions in depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, as well as improvement in self-reported mental health, self-esteem, and general emotional well-being (as cited in Quinlan et al., 2016). Creative outlets also provide opportunities to “channel frustration, anger and aggression into experiences of creativity and mastery,” reducing the expression of these negative emotions through poor behavior (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006, p. 9). For example, in studying how the stories and artwork of young Karen refugees changed overtime, Prior and Niesz found that while at the beginning of the school year refugee artwork depicted “emotions of sadness, anger, and loneliness,” by the end of the school year it was marked by “smiles and stories of friends,” (2013, p. 9). These findings suggest that creative therapies not only provide insight into the emotional needs of refugee students, but also help students gain emotional stability. According to Khamis (2019), encouraging emotional expression by providing creative outlets plays a significant role in addressing emotional dysregulation.

While these therapies will always be implemented best by trained professionals, there are certain ways to incorporate creative therapies into the classroom even when professional therapists are inaccessible due to logistical or monetary barriers. One particularly useful avenue of creative expression that can be easily implemented by teachers is music therapy. Activities such as lyric analysis, song-writing, group singing, relaxing with music, listening to favorite songs, sharing songs from original cultures or religious backgrounds, dancing, and learning a musical instrument are all musical outlets that can be implemented in the classroom as a means of emotional expression (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006; as cited in Quinlan et al., 2016). Even if a teacher has no musical background, many of these activities may be easily implemented throughout the school day as an emotional outlet for expression through music.

Musical therapies in general have been especially helpful for young refugees processing trauma, as they provide “a common starting place for the discussion of personal issues,” as well as a safe place for the “authentic voice” of students to be heard (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006, p 4). Research has also shown that music therapies provide channels for negative emotions such as “frustration, anger and aggression,” (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006, p 4). Even if teachers are not trained to conduct professional therapies, the implementation of the most basic creative outlets throughout the day will not only contribute to a sense of security in the classroom, but will also provide a safe medium through which students may express and communicate their feelings and experiences to their peers and teachers (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Gormez et al., 2017; Lerner, 2012; Prior & Niesz, 2013; Szente et al., 2006). Only after this self-expression will teachers be aware of the specific emotional needs of their students, and until teachers are aware, they will never be able to address these emotional needs in the classroom.

Meeting the emotional needs of refugee students may be quite the challenge for teachers, as traumatic experiences pose significant emotional barriers to healthy functioning in the classroom. In addition, many refugee students are also at a “crucial emotional developmental life stage” as they establish their “self-concept, self-perception, identity...autonomy and morality,” further complicating this process of emotional healing (as cited in Baker & Jones, 2006, p.3). However, this only highlights the importance and significance of a teacher’s role. Language teachers have the opportunity to both positively impact refugee students as they endure this difficult transition and potentially become the determining factor in a student’s healthy establishment in the host country. Thus, teachers must not only be aware of the emotional needs of refugee students, but also be open to trying new, unconventional methods in order to meet the emotional needs of their students.

CHAPTER 5  
UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE BEHAVIORAL NEEDS OF REFUGEE  
STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Classroom management can be the most difficult aspect of running a classroom. This difficulty is only exacerbated when teachers must learn to manage students from multiple cultures who are dealing with significant emotional disturbances. Thus, the following section will address the many common behavioral issues found among refugee students recovering from trauma, as well as practical ways in which teachers can prepare for such behavioral issues and establish a healthy classroom of respect and cooperation.

**Understanding Behavioral Challenges**

Salman was a sixth-grade refugee student from Lebanon “who spoke little to no English,” (Kovinthan, 2016, p. 7). Salman could not write the alphabet or his numbers, and displayed disruptive behavior both in the classroom and on the playground. To keep him occupied in class, the teacher had him staple handouts, pass out papers, fold papers, color, and work on his English homework. One week, while acting-out in class, Salman broke a chair, resulting in a parent teacher conference to discuss his behavior. In this meeting, the teacher learned that Salman had come from a refugee camp in Palestine, where he had “almost no schooling” and “experienced significant abuse,” (Kovinthan, 2016, p. 7). Afterwards, the teacher admitted to being “unable to let go of the feeling that I had failed these...students by not seeing them for who they were but rather for the labels attached to them: ESL, behavioral, modified program, and so forth” (Kovinthan, 2016, pp. 7-8).

This example not only demonstrates the importance of knowing students on an individual level, but also how refugee behavior is not always as straightforward as it may seem. Many

interwoven and complex issues contribute to poor behavior in the classroom, and teachers must seek to understand these underlying issues before they may appropriately address behavior issues among refugee students. According to the literature, some common contributors to this misbehavior include, but are not limited to emotional dysregulation, cultural adjustment issues, and trauma-related behavior.

According to the literature, behavioral issues are often the result of poor coping mechanisms in response to emotional dysregulation (Khamis, 2019). As discussed in the previous section, emotional dysregulation occurs when a student is unable to understand or regulate their own emotions (as cited in Khamis, 2019). Students may cope with unwanted emotions through the internalization and externalization of emotional problems, resulting in a variety of behaviors (Hadfield et al., 2017; O’Neal et al., 2018). Internalizing behavior may include lack of concentration, unwillingness to participate in classroom activities, disengagement, distractedness, exhaustion, withdrawal, excessive shyness, apathy, lack of motivation, and not caring for or making eye contact with the teacher (Kovinthan, 2016; O’Neal et al., 2018). On the other hand, externalizing behaviors may include outbursts of anger, rule testing, seeking revenge, irritability, problems with authority, troubled relationships with peers and teachers, age-inappropriate behavior, overreacting to situations, distracting classmates, disruptive behavior, outward expressions of frustration, insolence, physical aggression, temper tantrums, self-injury, risky sexual behavior, drug or alcohol use, and other conduct issues (Kovinthan, 2016; NCTSN, n.d.; NCTSN, 2014; O’Neal et al., 2018; O’Shea et al., 2000).

In addition to emotional contributors, cultural adjustment issues may result in misbehavior in the classroom. One primary cultural contributor is a refugee student’s desire to fit in and quickly assimilate into the culture of the host country (McBrien, 2005). For example, a

refugee student arriving in an inner-city American high school or poor neighborhood may seek acceptance by adopting harmful behavior for the sake of status such as drinking, self-injury, or sexual behavior (“Helping Teens with Traumatic Grief,” n.d.). Another issue prevalent with the desire to assimilate quickly is the alienation from traditional and conservative family members. This identity confusion, resulting from a lack of complete acceptance by peers or family, may cause many refugee students to “turn to gangs, drugs, school dropout, and sexual promiscuity” (McBrien, 2005, pp. 18-19).

Another cultural factor that may contribute to misbehavior in the classroom is the cultural difference in school discipline. According to McBrien, refugee students may come from “places of authoritarian rules and harsh punishments,” making American schools look as if they have no disciplinary system at all in comparison (2005, p. 28). In addition, discrimination and bullying as a result of cultural differences among peers often result in retaliation, and many refugees may respond with survival tactics learned in refugee camps in order to defend themselves (McBrien, 2005). Lastly, another cultural challenge that may contribute to behavior issues is culture shock and assimilation in general. Learning the customs and culture of a new place can be emotionally exhausting and frustrating, and oftentimes the only way students may know how to express these frustrations is through misbehavior.

In addition, it is important to note that misbehavior in the classroom is often times a direct result of traumatic experiences. PTSD has been linked to the formation of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) among refugee students, which often exhibits itself in poor behavior among distracted and hyperactive students (Hadfield et al., 2017). The traumatic experiences also often result in a distrust of authority figures, which may contribute to rule-testing and insolence with adults. This distrust and test of authority often develops because of

strain on familial authority figures, culturally insensitive social workers, negative experiences with pre-migration counselors, and even untrustworthy political figures (Hadfield et al., 2017).

Traumatic experiences may also result in the formation of certain instinctual responses that may result in culturally unacceptable behavior. For example, a student who has experienced food insecurity in a refugee camp may try to push to the front of the lunch line to get food, or a student may react fearfully to loud noises that remind him or her of past trauma, and run out of the classroom (NCTSN, n.d.; NCTSN, 2018). Such behaviors should be closely monitored, and teachers should not only make an effort to distinguish between such instinctual and trauma-related behaviors, but also be aware of students' pasts in order to best understand why they behave the way they do in certain situations and know how to best address these issues.

### **Meeting Behavioral Needs**

While a spectrum of behavioral issues may display themselves in the English language classroom, there are several general classroom management techniques presented throughout the literature that have proven effective in addressing and even in preventing these behavioral issues. The first of which is setting explicit, clear, and consistent classroom rules and expectations, explaining to students the consequences of their actions, and enforcing these expectations with authority (Allen et al., 2016). Holding clear and consistent expectations gives refugee students a sense of security and control over their own lives (NCTSN, 2006). If refugee students are aware that certain behaviors will be rewarded, and others will have consequences, they will have greater control over their environment because they will be able to foresee the outcomes of their actions. In addition, teachers must also make sure to explicitly state expectations that stem from cultural norms, as these often unspoken and implied expectations may not be so obvious to students with different cultural backgrounds. Expectations such as raising your hand to speak or

asking to use the restroom before leaving class may “not be obvious to a student from another culture,” (NCTSN, 2006, p.1). Thus, teachers should state such expectations from the beginning and should not punish refugee students for violating cultural norms which have not been explicitly stated.

Along with consistent expectations, refugee students also respond well to consistent routines and structures. The pre-, trans-, and post-migration processes often lack the structure that developing youth need, and the classroom may be the only opportunity they have to experience this structure even after resettlement. Thus, for refugee classes especially, teachers should establish and follow a routine from the beginning, and when improvements or adjustments need to be made to the schedule, teachers should warn students in advance and explain how the schedule will be changing.

Another important aspect of addressing refugee behavior is to understand students’ cultural contexts. Certain behaviors that are inappropriate in the context of the host culture might be culturally appropriate in a student’s home country. Other behaviors in the classroom may be a “culturally specific way to express mental health distress,” (NCTSN, n.d.). Thus, before teachers can effectively address behavioral issues, they must be familiar with the cultural contexts of their students. In addition, it is important to note the differing cultural perspectives on parental involvement. Certain cultures may view the teacher as solely responsible for student behavior in the classroom and may see parent involvement as disrespectful to the teacher’s authority, while others may find frequent involvement in their child’s educational behavior necessary (NCTSN, n.d.). Teachers should take this into consideration when communicating with parents about student behavior and progress, as well as when they are trying to fully understand a student’s cultural context. Teachers should also be aware that often times, students have different

behavioral needs based on their cultural backgrounds. For example, in their survey of refugee students, Allen et al. found that Hmong refugee students were positively motivated by strict instruction, while “Somali and Latino youth responded to positive reinforcement and encouragement rather than strictness,” (2016, p. 8). Lastly, teachers must be intentional about not allowing “misunderstandings to result in prejudice and judgement,” and reserve any pre-judgements of student behavior based on “ethnicity, dress, or cultural/familial background.” These prejudices and judgements will only end up being “barriers to identifying student needs and...potential,” and will result in “resentment towards teachers,” and “undermined teacher-youth relationships,” (Allen et al., 2016, p. 10).

Allen et al. also states that “while both teachers and youth workers identified clearly articulated high expectations for achievement and behavior as crucial, students emphasized that rule-setting and enforcement could only be carried out within a caring relationship,” (2016, p. 11). These findings imply that the foundation of any behavioral management is building trusting relationships with students. According to interviews conducted among refugee students, Allen et al. found that trust between students and teachers is built when clear behavioral expectations are set, and when teachers show interest in the students on a personal level and are willing to listen (2016). Trust is also built through respectful communication. Allen et al. also notes that by “making eye contact, smiling, not yelling, and conveying an interest in what students have to say,” teachers demonstrate their respect for students, which is reciprocated by student trust (2016, p. 10). If a student feels threatened or stressed by their environment, they may respond instinctively with poor behavior (NCTSN, n.d.). Therefore, it is vital that teachers have patience and remain calm through even the toughest behavioral situations, as this will greatly contribute to the security and safety found in a welcoming classroom environment (NCTSN, 2014). Once

teachers have established a welcoming classroom environment and built individual relationships with each of their students, they will have gained the trust needed for students to be receptive of behavioral correction.

Once these foundational aspects of teacher-student relationships have been established, there are additional practical techniques presented by the literature that may be particularly effective when dealing with behavioral issues among refugees. O'Neal et al. suggests positive reinforcement such as “stickers, gifts and prizes for engaging in and completing work” to be a helpful tool in managing classroom behavior (2018, p. 26). Engaging activities are also an important feature of well-behaved classrooms, as such activities have been noted to not only help students better remember the material, but also provide an outlet for hyperactive students (O'Neal et al., 2018). One teacher noted that different classroom arrangements, such as having the students face the teacher and one another in a group circle, may also provide additional classroom management support (O'Neal et al., 2018).

Creative activities especially may help address behavioral issues, as they have been directly linked with “lower levels of teacher reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children,” (Quinlan et al., 2016, p.3), as well as effective means for “managing disruptive and maladaptive behaviors in young people,” especially those linked with “hyperactivity and aggression,” (Baker & Jones, 2006, pp. 2-4). Research suggests that because creative therapies encourage appropriate expression of emotions by allowing refugee students to explore “issues of self-identity, adjustment, acculturation, anti-racism and feelings of failure,” as well as allow students to practice “impulse control, turn-taking, listening and respecting each other,” they in turn reduce incidences of “inappropriate expression (of emotions) in poor behavior” (Baker & Jones, 2006, p. 9). When there is a reduction in negative and disruptive behavior in the

classroom, distractions will also be minimized, further enhancing and improving the classroom learning environment for all students (Baker & Jones, 2006, p. 11).

Yet even with the numerous classroom management techniques, behavior issues among refugees may still prove too challenging for teachers to address due to their deep emotional and psychological roots. Thus, teachers should never be afraid to ask for professional help, especially if the behaviors are risky or harmful to the student or anyone else (NCTSN, 2014). However, whatever is done to address behavioral issues, teachers and administration should avoid expelling students at all costs, as doing so would only expose an already at-risk population to even greater danger (O’Neal et al., 2018). Rather, it should be the goal of teachers and administration to in no way allow disciplinary action to deter refugee students from coming to school, as it may be the only opportunity to build a different life for themselves.

## CHAPTER 6

### UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

The process of acculturation is challenging for nearly everyone, whether they have had time to prepare for the transition or not. Conflicts between one’s native culture and the host culture persist even after many years in a host country, and this conflict often results in what is known as acculturation stress, which may lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, confusion, shock, anger, panic, shame, and despair (Feuerverger, 2011; Lerner, 2012; McBrien, 2005; O’Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018). This stress may also be heightened for refugee students as they may have had to flee with little to no warning or without any idea of where they were going. Additionally, as people adapt to new cultures, they are not only challenged to leave certain aspects of their own culture behind but may also be challenged in their “sense of identity, values,

and beliefs,” (McBrien, 2005, p. 2). Such challenges may prove too overwhelming for young refugee students, especially if the support that they need is unavailable at home (Feuerverger, 2011). Because of these factors, there is “an urgent need to facilitate their (refugee students’) integration into asylum-countries,” (as cited in O’Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018, p. 1).

However, it has also been suggested that the best way to integrate refugees into the host country is “through the...school environment,” (as cited in O’Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018, p. 1).

Thus, teachers must take an active role in not only understanding the cultural and social needs of refugee students, but also in facilitating healthy acculturation in the classroom.

### **Understanding Cultural and Social Challenges**

There are a number of cultural and social challenges for refugees that are presented by the literature, however, some of the most prominent are challenges as a result of bullying, hostility, discrimination, and racism due to a lack of cross-cultural understanding among classmates and even teachers (Hadfield et al., 2017; Hart, 2009; Lerner, 2012; as cited in Mendenhall, Bartlett, & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; as cited in Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). These challenges often contribute to conflicts among classmates of differing cultural backgrounds, as well as “feelings of alienation, an awareness of being different,” (Gibson, 2002, p. 9) and a sense that one does not belong anywhere (as cited in Maryam, 2007; as cited in Mendenhall, Bartlett, & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017). As a result, students may often try to avoid being identified as a refugee by “minimizing their uniqueness, and avoiding talking about war or past experiences,” (Gibson, 2002, p. 9; Hek, 2005). Such practices will often contribute to “social isolation and a loss of identity,” (Morrice, 2009, p. 10; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008), which, along with the stress of acculturation, can be detrimental to a child’s proper development. So much of a child’s social, emotional, and behavioral functioning is shaped by culture that when the culture is

discontinuous, it inhibits proper child development (Bond et. al, 2007; Gibson, 2002; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015; Lerner, 2012; McBrien, 2005).

Cultural challenges may also arise from a conflict of cultural values. For example, In Hattar-Pollara's interview of female Syrian refugees, many participants described the "troubling exploitative and abusive practices used to keep Syrian girls in line with traditional cultural and religious teachings," (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 9). Such teachings often include a strictly domestic female existence, arranged marriages, and little if any female education (Hattar-Pollara, 2019). These cultural expectations would not fare well in most western societies, where females fight for total equality, and are encouraged to express their opinions and seek an education. Such cultural conflict may obstruct healthy acculturation by hindering the full participation of refugee students in the classroom. An example of this may be incomplete homework or a lack of participation in class discussion. It is possible that a student's family might discourage them from doing homework, or maybe ingrained cultural norms keep them from voicing their opinion in discussion. As a result of this, the cultural transition into a western style or host country classroom may not be as smooth as teachers might hope, and it may take time for refugee students to acculturate to these educational expectations.

Cultural challenges may also arise from the more specific teenage or youth culture of the host country. For example, Bosnian refugees in Gibson's survey describe their shock at certain realities of teenage American life, such as "teenage drinking, drug use, crime, and violence," (2002, p. 8). Soon after the initial shock of these realities however, refugee students may try to adapt to this broader youth culture in hopes that they may be better accepted by their peers (as cited in Allen et al., 2016). While not only harmful to themselves, these popular cultural practices may often conflict with a refugee's native culture and family tradition, sometimes

causing refugees to be alienated from their traditionally-minded family members (O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018). Such alienation from native and host cultures may contribute to isolation and loss of identity among refugee students, who, like any other developing child, need affirmation and social support to properly function (Hek, 2005; O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018).

These identity issues resulting from cultural conflicts point to the complexity of cultural identity. For instance, some refugees who come from particularly traumatic backgrounds may not want to associate themselves with their former life in any way. For instance, the participants in Gibson's study reflect on the complexity of "what it means to be Bosnian in the aftermath of a war that killed people and destroyed property based on ethnic identity," (2002, p. 14). While this may not deter students from accepting their cultural heritage, it may add to the complexity of redefining their new cultural identity.

### **Meeting Cultural and Social Needs**

Four themes have emerged from across the literature in regards to meeting the cultural and social needs of refugee students. These themes include the importance of teacher awareness in regards to culture, fostering a school-wide awareness and appreciation for diversity, encouraging students in their cultural identities and social belonging, and utilizing a holistic approach to education.

One of the greatest and most sobering cultural challenges faced by refugee students as presented through the literature is a lack of teacher understanding when it comes to culture (McBrien, 2005; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). This challenge not only highlights the importance of teachers making themselves aware of culture, but also indicates where meeting the cultural and social needs must begin. Before teachers can address any further cultural challenges or meet

any other social needs, they must first make themselves aware of the cultural composition of their classrooms and show a genuine curiosity and desire to understand student cultures better (Gibson, 2002; O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018).

One practical way teachers can learn more about the cultural composition of a classroom is by recognizing refugee students as the experts on their culture and allowing them to give a presentation on their native cultures to the class (Allen et al., 2016; Lerner, 2012; O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018; Pryor, 2001). This serves a dual purpose, as it not only helps to educate the teacher and class on that student's cultural background, but it also encourages students to take proud ownership of their culture and to actively embrace their heritage (O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018; Taylor, Sidhu, 2012). If students do not know enough of the language to present to the class, are too timid, or simply do not want to present, another way teachers can learn more about the cultures of their students is by connecting with community members or more established refugee students who are from that same culture. By asking about the culture and the process of acculturating from that specific culture, teachers may gain insight into the more culturally specific needs of their students.

Another important aspect of meeting refugee students' social and cultural needs is by fostering a school-wide environment that is inclusive, open and accepting of diversity, as well as supporting a positive view of refugees in the classroom (as cited in Allen et al., 2016; Hek, 2005; O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Before this environment can be established however, teachers must first check their own attitudes and ensure that they not clouded by judgements of prejudices based on students' cultural or religious backgrounds (Allen et al., 2016). Once a teacher has established his or her own sense of appreciation and openness towards diversity, the foundation will be laid for a class-wide and even school-wide atmosphere

of awareness and acceptance of diversity in the classroom. Some practical ways that teachers can incorporate an appreciation and awareness of diversity is to display classroom signs and “welcome signs in different languages,” “display photographs or items from different countries” throughout the classroom, and even “lead class discussions” on general topics such as “stereotypes and prejudices,” (NCTSN, 2005, para. 10). Another way teachers can foster a healthy atmosphere of diversity appreciation and awareness in the classroom is through creative therapies, especially music therapy, which have been shown to contribute to the resolution of social and cultural conflicts (as cited in Rousseau et al., 2005). According to Baker and Jones:

*Music...provides a unique opportunity to bridge gaps between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. As each culture has its own musical history and identity, group musical experiences provide opportunities for sharing and communicating differing beliefs and hopes in a safe and accepting environment. (Baker & Jones, 2006, p. 4)*

As discussed before, providing space and encouragement for refugee students to present on their native cultures is one way to spread awareness and appreciation in the classroom. In addition, it may even be fun to incorporate certain cultural norms from a student’s home country into the class for a period of time (O’Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018). For example, maybe a teacher would provide chopsticks rather than western utensils for students to eat their lunches, or maybe a certain student’s cultural music is played throughout the day in the class, or maybe a class-wide reading relates to one student’s cultural background. Incorporating such activities would not only foster more appreciation for and familiarity with diversity, but may also contribute to a sense of cultural ownership and pride among refugee students. Another way teachers can help increase understanding of the refugee experience specifically is by reading children’s literature pertaining to the refugee experience. This not only contributes to increased

peer understanding, but also acknowledges the experience of refugees and gives them the sense that they are not alone in their experiences (Szente et al., 2006).

Another important aspect of meeting the cultural and social needs of refugee students is incorporating anti-bullying education into the classroom and enforcing anti-bullying policies that emphasize inclusion and mutual respect (Hadfield et al., 2017; Hek, 2005). One major contributor to the effective implementation of such policies is ensuring that students feel comfortable discussing incidences of bullying with teachers (Hek, 2005, p.10-11). Hek's survey reports that students who experienced bullying felt vulnerable "because of their accents and ethnicity," (Hek, 2005, p. 10-11). Such findings imply that an increased awareness and appreciation for diversity may greatly contribute to eliminating bullying and discriminatory practices. However, teachers should also keep a vigilant eye on especially vulnerable students and address instances of bullying quickly in order to reduce the potentially detrimental effects of these instances on refugee students.

Lastly, it is important to understand the inevitability of conflicts in the classroom. According to Medley, "Because many traumatized children have witnessed or experienced violence being used to solve problems, they need another model for resolving interpersonal and social conflicts," (Medley, 2012, p. 12). As a solution, Medley suggests that teachers incorporate conflict resolution strategies into language instruction, and provide students "with the language to solve practical problems in the classroom," (Medley, 2012, p. 12). In addition, educators "must try to open spaces for dialogue so that such complex issues can be discussed in safe ways, gaps can be bridged and differences can be reconciled," (Feuerverger, 2011, p. 13). Fostering such an environment of dialogue and communication will open the door to greater cross-cultural understanding and greatly contribute to a class and school-wide appreciation and respect of

diversity. Thus, such conflicts should not be viewed as obstacles, but rather opportunities for greater understanding (Feuerverger, 2011).

Encouraging students in their cultural identities is another way teachers can attempt to meet the cultural and social needs of refugee students. Teachers can begin by positively acknowledging, supporting, reinforcing, and appreciating students' cultural and religious backgrounds and identities, as well as their experiences (Allen et al., 2016). Some practical ways to do this is to simply know how to correctly pronounce their names (Allen et al., 2016), and to learn a couple of basic words in their native language (Lerner, 2012; Oikonomidou, 2010). Another means of encouraging students in their cultural identity is through music therapy, as it has been seen to help refugee students “construct meaning and identity,” by allowing them “to work through their losses, come to terms with trauma, and reestablish social ties broken by repression,” (as cited in Rousseau et al., 2005, p. 1). In addition, simply letting students use their native language in the classroom may be a way to validate their heritage and culture, and let students know that their culture and language is still valuable even in the context of learning a new culture and language (O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018). Teachers can even present multilingualism and multiculturalism as a source of pride and encourage students to not let go of their native language and culture nor reject the host country's language and culture (as cited in Feuerverger, 2011). When students sense that their culture is valued, it will give them a sense of hope (Feuerverger, 2011).

Social support and belonging within the classroom is also a great need among refugee students. According to their survey, O'Toole Thommessen and Todd reported that

*Participants stressed the importance of social support and guidance, both in the form of educational advice from teachers, mentors outside the school context, as well as broader*

*support from peer groups. They valued the advice, time and guidance provided by teachers and mentors, especially as their own parents were not in a position to guide them in this way, as they could not navigate in the new society's educational system...Friends and peer groups were highlighted as an important means of social support. (O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018, p. 8)*

Thus, teachers can meet the social needs of refugees by simply making themselves available to listen and give guidance, connecting refugees with mentors outside the classroom, helping students build bridges between home and school, and helping establish peer support groups by encouraging friendships among refugees and non-refugees alike (Hek, 2005; O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018). Medley also suggests that opportunities for self-expression may contribute to a sense of belonging because they have been shown to contribute to a sense of trust among classmates, the establishment of a safe classroom environment, and a healthy acknowledgement of trauma in the school setting (2012). Lastly, teachers can also contribute to this sense of belonging within the classroom by valuing refugee students' experiences and contributions, and by offering refugee students "meaningful roles within the school," (as cited in Allen et al., 2018, p. 2; Hek, 2005).

One important aspect of contributing to a refugee student's sense of belonging in the classroom is to provide them additional support without "othering" them (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). If refugees are singled out for needing additional support, this may give them a sense of inferiority or alienation from their peers, therefore if possible, teachers should give refugees additional support in discrete ways and attempt to include them with the rest of the class as much as possible (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Another way that teachers can contribute to the entire class's sense of belonging is by giving the class a democratic voice. If students are given some input in

the decision making-process in regards to activities or subject materials or scheduling, they will not only feel a sense of ownership for their learning, but also will feel that their voice and opinion matters, giving them a greater sense of belonging (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

The last major theme seen throughout the literature in regards to meeting the cultural and social needs of refugee students is a holistic approach to education, meaning that there can be more to language class than just language instruction. Recognizing the cultural transition and facilitating class-wide discussion on acculturation and the society and culture of the host country are excellent ways to incorporate this holistic approach (Morrice, 2009). According to Morrice, many students felt that “only through talking about these cultural differences” were they “able to properly understand and make sense of them,” (2009, p. 9). One student in the survey conducted by O’Toole Thommessen and Todd reported that “We had to acculturate and integrate into society– but no one tells you how you do that. How do you do that? What is it they do differently from us?” (2018, p. 6). Incorporating this type of discussion into the classroom may be a vital contributor to the healthy acculturation of refugee students, as they may have no other place to openly discuss such topics. Teachers should also recognize the importance of informal learning in the classroom. Side discussions, or seemingly off-topic conversations, might teach students more about culture, language, and society than the main lesson ever could. Language teachers should utilize these opportunities and make the most of them for the purpose of cultural and social education.

Another way to incorporate this holistic approach to teaching is by helping refugee students develop their social skills. This can be done by giving conversational language instruction, teaching students conversation starters, giving them lots of informal fluency practice, and even encouraging them to engage in social and extracurricular events outside of the

classroom (Feuerverger, 2011; NCTSN, 2014). It has also been reported that students who find a place in the school or community outside of the language classroom have a greater ability to make meaning out of their experiences and a greater desire to help others (NCTSN, 2006). According to the NCTSN, “Engaging in prosocial, constructive activities, whether volunteering for an environmental group, helping in a political campaign, or volunteering at a homeless shelter or hospital, can be very restorative for a child or adolescent whose trauma has led to a loss of faith in society,” (NCTSN, 2006, para. 9).

*These extracts illustrate the importance of social support from the immediate environment, such as peers, teachers and mentors outside the school context. Teachers, psychologists or mentors may have particularly important roles to play in helping refugee children and youth to navigate in the new country and culture, not only in terms of education but also through general support and encouragement, and to help children feel accepted in the new society. Some of the participants expressed how they felt unable to discuss concerns and worries with their parents, and they encourage professionals working with refugee children to really listen to the children's own perspectives and needs. (O'Toole Thommessen, & Todd, 2018, p. 7)*

## CHAPTER 7

### UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

According to the literature, cognitive functioning may be severely inhibited by PTSD and past traumatic experiences, especially in the areas of memory (Elbert, et al., 2009; Lerner, 2012), concentration (Hart, 2009; O’Shea et al., 2000; Weine et al., 2004), distractedness as a result of ADHD (Hadfield et al., 2017; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015), executive skills, abstract reasoning, and

language acquisition in the classroom (Bond et al., 2017; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015). However, teachers must also be aware of the fact that many academic challenges are not the result of impaired cognitive functioning, but rather a combination of other emotional, social, and cultural factors (Panter-Brick et al., 2019). Thus, all of these factors must be taken into consideration when attempting to address the academic needs of refugee students in the classroom

### **Understanding Academic Challenges**

One of the most common cognitive challenges resulting from exposure to traumatic experiences seen throughout the literature relates to memory. Such challenges may include deficits in spatial memory, visual memory, working memory, long delay free recall memory, verbal declarative memory, contextual memory, and long-term memory (Elbert et al., 2009; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015). In order for teachers to best understand the academic challenges of refugee students, they must first be familiar with the different types of memory and how they function in the classroom.

Spatial memory, according to Burgess and Bisby, includes “finding one’s way around an environment and remembering where things are within it,” (2019, para. 1). Spatial memory also includes the ability to “plan a route to a desired location,” and to remember “where an object is located or where an event occurred,” (Burgess & Bisby, 2019, para. 1). Such memory is especially crucial for those in a new environment, such as refugees in a new school who are trying to find their way around.

Visual memory refers to the recall of visual images and plays a crucial role in language learning. Visual memory not only provides the ability to connect a word to its meaning in reading, but it also allows students to remember what a letter looks like and how to spell a word

when writing (“Visual memory”, 2018). Impairments in visual memory may contribute to literacy challenges.

Working memory acts as a filter for sensory information, determining what information remains in short-term memory and what is disregarded. Working memory is especially crucial to problem solving and “the execution of complex cognitive tasks,” as it allows students to organize and piece together important bits of information (“Memory”, 2019, para. 1).

Long delay free recall is the ability to keep information stored in short term and working memory for an extended period of time (Camos & Portrat, 2015). Impairments in long delay free recall might make it difficult for students to repeat a sentence after the teacher or summarize another student’s response to a question.

Declarative memory refers to one’s ability to recount information about facts and events, and is directly related to a student’s academic growth and language acquisition (“Declarative explicit and procedural implicit memory”, 2019). For example, if students learned vocabulary on Monday and are unable to recount it on Tuesday, they may be suffering from impairments of declarative memory.

Contextual memory includes the discerning of “the origin of a specific memory,” through its context, including “time, place, people, and emotion,” or any other type of context (“Contextual memory”, 2019, para. 1). “Time restraint, stress, distractions, or a deficit in information processing skills” (“Contextual memory”, 2019, para. 1) may interfere with contextual memory, and such interference makes committing information to long-term memory very difficult. In light of language learning, if students are unable to commit information properly into long-term memory, they will most likely be unable to attain fluency.

Apart from memory-related academic impairments, traumatic experiences and PTSD may also contribute to other cognitive challenges for refugees including concentration issues, distractedness, and ADHD, which make it difficult for students to learn in the classroom (Kaplan & Stolk, 2015; O'Shea et al., 2000). Because of these challenges, teachers may have an especially hard time keeping refugee students engaged and focused in the classroom, and may find that traditional instructional approaches may not prove effective with refugee students. Another factor that may contribute to the inability to focus among refugees is that they may struggle with information processing. Kaplan and Stolk suggest that “insecurely attached children may be unable to cognitively process incoming information because they have not learned to integrate emotion and cognition,” which may also lead to “future maladaptive approaches to information processing” (2015, p. 6). Attention disorders as well as an inability to effectively process incoming information may also contribute to challenges in regards to abstract reasoning, especially among younger students (as cited in Kaplan & Stolk, 2015).

Refugee students have also been found to struggle with executive skills, which include planning, organizing, and completing tasks (Kaplan & Stolk, 2015). Teachers may find that when given an assignment, refugee students struggle with preparing a plan of action and negotiating the steps needed in order to complete the assignment. Refugee students may need explicit instructions and guidance in order to complete even the most self-explanatory of tasks. The combination of these factors makes learning in a traditional classroom environment especially difficult for refugee students, in addition to further complicating the language learning process.

One of the greatest concerns for incoming refugees and teachers alike is language learning, because until refugee students learn the language of the host country, they will be

unable to fully integrate themselves not only into the school environment, but also into society (McBrien, 2005). Even if refugee students are able to learn the language of their host country, students who occasionally use their native language or struggle with a heavy accent may be ridiculed or made fun of by peers. In addition, refugee students may even experience discrimination upon entering the workplace if their language skills are unpolished (McBrien, 2005). McBrien also notes that communicative challenges often arise because many language learning classes are “separated from mainstream classes,” and “newcomer students have few opportunities to learn the slang used by their peers,” (McBrien, 2005, p. 15). As refugee students struggle to learn the language spoken by their peers, they are also often simultaneously losing touch with their native language, resulting in an inability to communicate well in either language which may lead to immense frustration and withdrawal (McBrien, 2005, p. 15). Lastly, Bennett and Adriel found that “language difficulties emerged as the most common consideration influencing aspirations following resettlement,” meaning that frustration with language learning is one of the greatest contributors to losing hope for the future among refugee students (2014, p. 1).

Another linguistic challenge that refugee students may face is that while they often learn the colloquial, spoken language of the host country rather quickly, newcomer students may be challenged by the academic form of the language, especially those students which have not had formal language instruction (McBrien, 2005, p. 14). For example, a student may be able to “talk about the *causes* of war,” but struggle “if asked to *list the factors* that brought about a war,” (McBrien, 2005, p. 14). According to McBrien, this challenge results from the difference between two “qualitatively different skills,” that of “Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)” and “Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)” (2005, pp. 14-15). While

most refugee students develop BICS skills rather quickly, CALP skills may take “five years or more to develop,” causing an apparently fluent student to do poorly in the academic setting (McBrien, 2005, pp.14-15). Thus, teachers must be aware of the different linguistic skills possessed by refugee students in order to best diagnose their linguistic levels and needs.

These linguistic and cognitive challenges are heightened by the fact that many refugee students have experienced significant disturbances and interruptions in their education (Bond et al., 2007; Dooley, 2009). Such interruptions often put refugee students extremely behind in areas such as literacy and even classroom etiquette. Some students have been described as not even knowing how to hold a pencil, “sit at a desk,” or “listen to the teacher,” in addition to not knowing how to read or write even in their native language (Feuerverger, 2011, p. 12). Such students pose special challenges for language teachers, as they now are tasked with teaching basic learning skills and strategies in addition to the subject matter material. However, students who have experienced such gaps in their education, while at many times frustrated with their plight, are often increasingly motivated to catch up and build a better life despite the odds (Feuerverger, 2011).

Probably one of the greatest challenges to motivation and academic success among refugee students is negative self-perceptions (McBrien, 2005). Students who are ridiculed or discouraged by peers or teachers for poor academic performance are not only more likely to exhibit a low self-perception of academic ability, but also more likely to drop out of school (as cited in McBrien, 2005). Such discouragement includes “negative spotlighting”, which occurs when a teacher draws special attention to students who are struggling academically, oftentimes unintentionally (Oikonomidou, 2010, p. 5). Such attention, even if intended to assist a refugee student, may result in feelings of alienation and estrangement from peers (Taylor & Sidhu,

2012), which will only further inhibit the establishment of social support systems so crucial to academic success (O'Tool Thommessen & Todd, 2018). Racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination resulting in negative experiences also have a negative impact on refugee students' self-perception, "academic goals and career aspirations," (McBrien, 2005, p. 23). When self-perception, academic goals and career aspirations weaken, students will have a harder time finding the motivation needed to improve and progress academically. Therefore, students who do not feel strengthened, encouraged, and supported by their social environment often experience negative self-perceptions which, in turn, severely inhibits academic success (O'Tool Thommessen and Todd, 2018).

Other academic challenges may arise due to familial pressures and attitudes. Refugee students may feel special pressure to succeed academically due to parental hopes that they will establish a better life for themselves. In Gibson's interview of refugee students, one interviewee described this burden to succeed:

*They're relying on us...we're the main reason they brought us into this country to do something with our lives that they hadn't had a chance to, so, um, I guess, I don't want to disappoint them....They work for us all their life, right, they raised us properly and everything. I think it's about time we give them something back. (2002, p. 11)*

While some parents put pressure on their children to succeed in school, others discourage their children from school work altogether due to religious or cultural expectations. This was found as a particular problem for Syrian girls whose parents "ridiculed and discouraged daughters from doing school homework" and told them that "husbands are not looking for women who are enlightened by schooling and education, husbands instead are looking for malleable girls whom they can train according to their wishes," (Hattar-Pollara, 2019, p. 6). Such

cultural and religious perceptions of female education or education in general imposed by a student's family may prove to be a severe hindrance to academic growth and progress. While teachers may be unable to respectfully challenge such cultural and religious restraints on education, they should at least be aware of such possibilities and take cultural and familial expectations into consideration when assessing and addressing academic needs.

### **Meeting Academic Needs**

In their 2019 study, Panter-Brick, Wiley, Sancilio, Dajani and Hadfield tracked certain biomarkers among refugee and non-refugee youth in order to determine if there was a correlation between physiology and experienced levels of stress, mental health and cognitive functioning among refugee students. In other words, they wanted to determine if the refugee experience and the exposure to trauma had direct physiological effects on refugee students, or if their symptoms were a result of other variables. What they found was that there was no direct correlation between the levels of certain biomarkers to mental health difficulties, post traumatic stress, or cognitive functioning. The researchers pose that although their “results add to a body of literature indicating that stress biomarkers are not always straightforward indicators of health-related vulnerability,” further research is needed to determine how “life history...and sensitivity to environments can influence biological variation in response to life adversity,” (Panter-Brick et al., 2019, p. 8). Thus, cognitive disorders and academic challenges are not a direct, physiological result of trauma, but rather the product of innumerable emotional, psychosocial, cultural and environmental variables. Such evidence suggests that there is no student incapable of rising to the academic challenges of the host country if their other needs are met. Thus, while seeking to address academic needs of refugee students, teachers must also bear in mind the other factors that contribute to academic achievement, and understand that oftentimes the solution to academic

struggles is found outside the realm of academic support, but in the areas of social and emotional support.

There are, however, several practical ways that teachers can assist refugee students academically in the language learning environment. The first is to simply label classroom objects (Lerner, 2012). Full language immersion is an overwhelming experience, and may be a significant contributor to culture stress. Something as simple as labeling classroom objects with the appropriate vocabulary word will not only help reduce this initial stress by providing an easy way for students to become familiar with a substantial vocabulary base, but will also contribute to a more welcoming and familiar classroom environment. With classroom objects labeled, refugee students will feel more confident referring to items in the classroom and building sentences when the objects are already labeled for them. This could be an especially useful tool in a beginner level classroom, as it will encourage fluency practice early on without the stress of memorizing vocabulary.

Another tool teachers can incorporate into their classroom to help reduce the stress of language learning for refugee students is to utilize simple sign language (Lerner, 2012). Associating vocabulary or language features with movement may be an effective way to help students better remember such features (Madan & Singhal, 2012), as well as give students a physical outlet for expression. Teachers may even allow students to each come up with their own motions for vocabulary words and then teach their motions to the rest of the class.

As in any language learning setting, teachers must also make an effort to speak slowly and simply, as to not overwhelm students. While this may seem obvious, language teachers are especially prone to speaking faster and more complex than oftentimes appropriate, which may only further overwhelm and discourage students. Learning to speak slowly and with a simple

grammatical structure is one of the best things teachers can do to assist language learners and boost their confidence in the classroom (Lerner, 2012).

Another way that teachers can support refugee students academically is by incorporating group work into daily lessons (Lerner, 2012). Students often benefit from working with their peers and hearing the material described in a different way, but it is also important for students to establish a social support system in the classroom as well. As noted before, certain academic challenges may be best addressed through non-academic means, and the reassurance of peers may serve to encourage and motivate students in their learning, even more so than special academic support from the teacher. After-school and tutoring programs may serve in the same way, as refugees may not only benefit from the extra academic support found in these environments but also the social interaction they experience. Employing tutors or volunteers from the same cultural background as refugee students to help them with their homework may also benefit them socially, by providing mentorship and guidance for refugee students as they establish themselves in a new country and set academic and career goals. Such personal and social support is vital to academic success, as students who do not feel encouraged personally will not find the motivation needed to succeed in the academic environment. As Taylor and Sidhu note, “There is that beautiful balance between being integrated in the classroom and feeling welcome in that sense, and also having that extra support at both a personal and academic level,” (2012, p. 13). Thus, students need the social and personal support of peer groups, after school programs, and individual tutors just as much as they need the academic support that they provide.

According to Dooley, one of the most effective ways to support and engage students academically in the language classroom is to assess the cultural background and context of

refugee students and utilize their prior knowledge to contextualize new information (2009). For example, one teacher in Dooley's research made "explicit links to students' prior knowledge," while explaining the Russian revolution to refugee students from Ethiopia (Dooley, 2009, p. 10). By the end, the students exclaimed, "Oh yes, that's what happened in Ethiopia, (Dooley, 2009, p. 10). Though refugee students may not have explicit background knowledge in the language of the host country or in a certain subject area, if the new information is presented in such a way that it may be linked to student prior knowledge, students will not only be able to learn the material faster but they will also feel a sense of connection with their past. Such a connection may not only encourage refugee students but also contribute to the establishment of a healthy cultural identity.

In addition to contextualizing new information to refugee's prior knowledge and culture, teachers must also understand the importance of acculturation to the academic success of students. According to McBrien, academic success is directly linked with acculturation success, and therefore if teachers are able to assist students in the acculturation process, they will also be able to help students academically (2005). One way teachers can help with proper acculturation in the classroom is by not forbidding the native languages of their students. Language is linked to culture, and thus, when refugee students are asked to speak only in the language of the host country, they are simultaneously being asked to give up a part of their native culture. As McBrien notes, "English language teaching should supplement,...not replace, a child's first language and culture," (2005, p. 26), as "newcomers acculturate best if they are able to retain cherished values of their homeland while adding the language and some customs of their new home," (McBrien, 2005, p.3).

Another way teachers can help refugee students not only in the acculturation process but also academically, is by encouraging students to envision their future lives in the host country. Refugee students have many high vocational and academic ambitions, and if teachers are able to recognize those ambitions and help students develop them, such aspirations may become a potential source of motivation for students. According to their study among refugee students, Bennett and Adriel found that “despite war, disrupted education, and economic difficulties,” refugee students “were driven by a search for a safe future, including high vocational aspirations,” (2014, p. 1). Thus, if students begin setting goals to establish themselves and obtain success in the host country, and they see that teachers are willing to help them obtain those goals, refugee students will not only find more motivation in the classroom but will also be more willing to trust their teachers and build relationships with them.

Another way teachers can assist students academically is by acknowledging different learning styles. First, it is important to understand the variations in learning style as a result of cultural differences (McBrien, 2005). For example, while completing a TESOL internship at an international English camp in Varna, Bulgaria, our team from Southeastern University noticed that our Chinese students were very good at memorizing vocabulary, likely due to the fact that the characters used in the Chinese language must be memorized from a young age. In fact, we realized that our students learned best when we structured our classroom instruction around memorization. Once the information was memorized, then the students would be willing to use the new vocabulary in more western styled activities. Because of this cultural observation, we were able to restructure our classrooms to accommodate this cultural learning preference for the benefit of our students.

Another way teachers can address different learning styles is by understanding the implications of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Reiff, 1996). As in any classroom, students from any cultural background will display signs of different intelligences, whether it be linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, or existential intelligence, (Medley, 2012; Reiff, 1996). It is important to note that these different intelligences do not limit students in their ability to learn different subject matters, but rather provide insight for teachers into how they can most effectively approach material in a way that will make the most sense to their students. As Medley notes, "trauma-affected learners...like all the other learners...can process new language better if they are able to draw on the intelligences that work the best for them," (Medley, 2012, p. 6).

Unfortunately, however, western education in particular is especially susceptible to placing excessive importance on the logical and linguistic forms of intelligence, especially in the language learning classroom (Medley, 2012). One way to combat this is to incorporate different types of activities to discover and further develop the different intelligences of students, and provide them with different avenues for learning and for self-expression (Medley, 2012). Some examples of activities provided by Reiff include riddles and tongue twisters for linguistic learners, color-coding material for spatial learners, using manipulatives such as blocks or clay for kinesthetic learners, rehearsing skits with interpersonal learners, and assigning personal journal entries for intrapersonal learners (1996). Other activities may include creating a song for new vocabulary words with musical learners, having class outside for naturalistic learners, and asking existential learners the global or eternal significance of a theme or idea. While these are just a few suggestions of how to engage different intelligences, the possibilities are endless, and teachers should take the opportunity to create engaging and diverse activities for their students.

Lastly, but most importantly, in order to encourage students and meet their academic needs, teachers must establish trusting relationships with students and help them set academic and career goals. As Taylor and Sidhu explain, “If you spend enough time building up personal relationships with kids in informal ways...the more likely it is that you’re going to be able to help them academically,” (2012, p. 11). In order to build trusting relationships with refugee students, teachers must respect the culture and native language of their students, actively listen to their students, and not negatively spotlight students who may be struggling academically (Allen et al., 2016; McBrien, 2005; Oikonomidou, 2010). In addition, a trusting classroom environment may be established through creating a safe, cohesive, involving, and task oriented learning environment which “is necessary to reduce learning anxiety, give the students intellectual confidence, and lower their fear of negative evaluation (Saeed, Iqbal, Saleem, & Islam, 2015). In addition, teachers should help refugee students set academic and career goals and hold them accountable to those goals, as it has been shown to encourage positive self-belief, as well as help refugee students stay motivated throughout the challenges of day to day (McBrien, 2005).

Although the opening of this section on meeting refugee needs described the importance of emotional, psychosocial, cultural and environmental support in laying the groundwork for academic success, it is also important to note how education and academic achievement also greatly contribute to the rehabilitation of refugee students in these other areas. According to the UNHCR, “Education is not only a fundamental human right but also an essential component of refugee children's rehabilitation,” (as cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 2). Research also indicates that “education is crucial for restoring social and emotional healing,” (as cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 2). Lastly, McBrien concludes that “educators and the school environment are key in facilitating socialization and acculturation of refugee and immigrant children,” (as cited in McBrien, 2005,

p. 2). Thus, while teachers may seek to address specific needs of refugee students, it is important to remember that any need is more complex than how it appears on the surface. Because of this, teachers should seek to address refugee students' needs in a holistic manner, considering all the factors that may contribute to their overall well-being. A teacher's role is not just to instruct, but rather to mentor and support students holistically throughout the difficult process of adjusting to a new life in a new place.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by the literature, meeting the needs of refugee students in the classroom is no simple task, as innumerable variables contribute to highly complex issues among refugee students. In addition, the solution to such issues often requires a holistic approach, with interventions in multiple areas. Because of this, meeting all the needs of refugee students in the classroom may prove overwhelming for many English teachers who feel ill-equipped to deal with such complex issues. However, meeting the basic needs of refugee students in the classroom does not have to be so complex. Across the literature, several themes have emerged which may serve to simplify this overwhelming task of meeting refugee needs. The themes include listening and observing, establishing trusting relationships, getting help, and empowering refugee students. If language teachers can master the elements of these four themes, they will not only be able to better meet refugee needs, but will also contribute to the healthy establishment of refugee students in the classroom and society.

The first major theme involves listening and observing. In other words, becoming the learner. Teachers often feel pressure to know all the answers right away and always have the perfect lesson plan, but the reality of teaching refugees is that it will always be a learning

process. Thus, before teachers can fully understand the needs of their students or know how to meet them, they must first learn to simply observe and learn from their students in order to best understand them, as each student and each classroom is different. Through observation, teachers may seek to answer some of the following questions: What are the strengths of my students? What are their weaknesses? What do they seem to be struggling with? What are they excelling in? Do they seem stressed? Are they exhibiting any negative emotions? What types of behaviors are they exhibiting? Do they exhibit disruptive behavior? If so, are there any external causes that seem to be inciting such behavioral responses? How do they interact with peers? Do they tend to isolate themselves or gravitate towards groups? Are they confident or shy? What activities do they seem to like in class? What are the learning styles of my students? Do they prefer hands on learning or rote memorization? Do they like working in groups or alone? In regards to multiple intelligences, what are my students showing me? Do my students like being creative or are they more logically oriented?

These are just a few examples of what teachers may seek to discover through observation, and if the answers are not obvious, teachers may even see it fit to simply ask the students some of these questions. Asking students what they prefer in a learning environment, what needs they have, and how they are feeling not only gives teachers insight into how to best structure their classes, but will also show the students that teachers really do care and desire to serve their students the best that they can. In O'Tool Thommessen and Todd's interview, one respondent explained that "If you just listen to the child, and listen to what they have to say, just ask them...you could have saved a lot of time and even money in the long term," because the immense time and effort it takes to understand refugees and determine their needs could be avoided if teachers would simply ask students what they need (2018, p. 10). Every student and

every classroom is different, and because of this teachers must be intentional about observing and learning from their students before they attempt to meet their students' unique needs.

Another important aspect of observing and learning is to reserve all judgements. Teachers must never assume anything about a student's past, the causes of certain symptoms, or anything based on a student's cultural, ethnic, or religious identity (Lerner, 2012; Szente et al., 2006). In addition, teachers should seek to observe and learn from their students about their different cultures. Asking students questions about their culture will not help teachers understand the context from which their students come, but will also help lay the foundation for trusting relationships between the students and teachers.

The last aspect of listening which has emerged across the literature is simply making oneself available to actively listen to refugee student stories and learn about their experiences. Murray, Davidson, and Schweitzer suggest that letting refugee students share and talk about their experiences may be even more therapeutic than other therapies that are not culturally sensitive or appropriate (2010). In addition, a study among Bosnian refugees in the United States reports that "testimony psychotherapy," or the sharing one's testimony, results in "decreased...PTSD diagnosis and severity...a reduction of depressive symptoms," and improved "psychosocial functioning," in addition to enabling participants "to advance on the path to recovery, accept...new responsibilities and regain...satisfactory functioning in their families, their workplaces, and their new surroundings," (Weine, Kulenovic, Pavkovic, & Gibbons, 1998, p. 4). These findings suggest that even if teachers feel ill-equipped or unprepared to engage refugee students in the classroom, they still have the potential to make a tremendous impact on the lives of their students if they are simply willing and available to listen to student stories and learn about their experiences.

The next theme that has emerged across the literature is the establishment of trusting relationships between teachers and students. Before any progress can be made academically, emotionally, or socially in the classroom, students must first trust their teachers and know that they care about them. While teachers and students may not have much in common at first, as they are separated by age, culture, and language, there are several practical steps that teachers can take in order to establish trusting and healthy relationships with their refugee students.

The first practical step is to be a willing listener (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018). When refugee students are given the opportunity to share their past experiences with a willing listener, they gain a sense that they are cared for and valued (Pryor, 2001). According to an interview conducted by O'Toole Thommessen and Todd, adult refugees “expressed how they would have benefitted from being asked questions about their past, and from truly being seen and heard by professionals, especially during times when they were not able to discuss their worries and concerns with their parents,” (2018, p. 7). Refugee students also have been shown to exhibit high ambitions and hopes for the future, despite the many challenges they may face. Teachers should seek to not only make themselves available to hear about these aspirations but to also provide students with the support and practical guidance they need to attain such goals. According to Bennett and Adriel’s study, refugee students “expressed high ambitions,” both academically and vocationally, “despite experiences of school disruption pre-resettlement and language difficulties post-resettlement,” (2014, p. 1). Some students even expressed a desire to “improve their homelands,” (2014, p. 1). As a result of these findings, Bennett and Adriel “urge practitioners to recognize the vocational aspirations of young people,” as they not only serve as a source of motivation for students in the classroom, but also as a point of connection between students and teachers if teachers are willing to listen (2014, p. 2).

Teachers can also begin establishing trusting relationships with students by showing interest and curiosity in the students culture (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018). This shows students that teachers value their culture and heritage, and will give refugee students a sense of legitimacy in the classroom (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018). Teachers may also do this by helping students stay connected with home by helping them with the logistics of staying in contact with family members still in the home country, helping them “preserve...memories of those who have died,” and giving them plenty of opportunities to share about their native culture and home (Pryor, 2001, p. 7). Such interest and care will show refugee students that they are not just valued as students, but they are valued as humans who had a life before entering the classroom. When teachers show such interest and care in their students' lives outside of the classroom, it demonstrates to the refugees that they are seen not just as students, but as humans, which in turn greatly contributes to a trusting relationship.

The third theme seen throughout the literature in regards to meeting refugee student needs in the classroom is getting help. Teachers should never feel like they have to handle refugee students alone, and should not be afraid to ask for help. Other English teachers, counselors, translators, professional therapists, and community volunteers can be great resources for teachers who are feeling overwhelmed by the immense responsibility of educating refugees in the classroom (Szente et al., 2006). In addition, teachers can also connect refugee students with peer tutors who may be older or more established (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018). Such a relationship with a tutor may provide “a helpful personal connection” for refugee students who may feel more comfortable in a one-on-one setting outside the classroom (NCTSN, 2006, para. 2). Refugee students may also benefit from connecting with community groups or organizations outside of the school environment (Bennet & Adriel, 2014), as such connections

have been shown to support “refugee students’ social and emotional needs,” as well as contribute to the “development of responsible citizenship,” (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012, pp. 14-17). Sports leagues, drama groups, language help groups, and community service groups are just a couple examples of where refugee students can get involved in the community outside of the classroom, and also potentially gain additional emotional and social support. By simply connecting students with these opportunities, teachers may be able to alleviate some of the responsibility of meeting refugee student needs, simply by connecting refugee students with extended support outside of the classroom.

Lastly, the fourth theme suggests that the focus of teachers in the classroom should be to empower refugee students with the tools they need to succeed on their own. The study discussed by Brown focuses on refugee communities in West Java, Indonesia that have pioneered a refugee-led and initiated approach to community development and poverty alleviation (2018). The article explains that while foreign aid may provide temporary help, the refugee led approach is more effective because it is more sustainable, cost-effective, and empowering for the refugees. The refugees also have a better understanding of what they need than anyone else, and while foreign support is helpful and many times necessary, empowering the refugees to improve their own community is the best approach (Brown, 2018). While this may seem unrelated to teaching refugees, it reminds teachers of their students’ humanity, as they, just like anyone else, want to take responsibility and ownership for their progress in school. Refugee students have just as much potential as their peers, and in fact are often more mature, strong, and resilient than their peers because of what they have been through (Lerner, 2012; Montgomery, 2011). Because of this, teachers must avoid an environment of condescension at all costs, and strive to create a safe and culturally informed classroom environment where refugee students feel safe, accepted, and

loved by their teacher and peers (Bond et al., 2017; Hart, 2009; Kaplan & Stolk, 2015; Pryor, 2001). Such an environment will be the launch pad from which refugee students overcome the many obstacles they face and become a responsible and contributing member of their new country.

Understanding and meeting the needs of refugee students in the classroom can seem like such a daunting task. However, if teachers keep these four themes at the focus of their approach, the once complex solutions to refugee challenges will be simplified. Because despite one's experiences or culture or language, every human shares the same universal needs: to be heard and accepted, to trust and to be trusted, and to feel supported and empowered. When refugee students are seen in this light, it becomes not a story of understanding specific challenges or meeting complex needs associated with the refugee experience, but rather a story of loving and supporting another human in the same way we all desire to be loved and supported.

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