



“Feeling Our Way in the Dark”: Educational Directions for Students from Refugee Backgrounds Joanne MacNevin, MEd

Over the past six years, the population of English additional language (EAL) students in many schools on Prince Edward Island has increased four-fold. Of these EAL students, approximately 14% are from refugee backgrounds (EAL database, 2011). This is significant because youth



from refugee backgrounds arrive in PEI schools with unique learning needs that extend well beyond language acquisition. Many have experienced war, violence, loss of family members and friends, displacement from home and country, and interruptions in their schooling (UNHCR, 2010). As a result of traumatic past experiences and in order to maximize their present educational experiences, youth from refugee backgrounds often require specialized teaching strategies (Stewart, 2011).

Research purpose and method:

This study explores the challenges and successes of students from refugee backgrounds, and the experiences and strategies of teachers who work with these youth. The methods used in this study are: interviews with seven teachers who worked with youth from refugee backgrounds at the intermediate and high school levels, observations in two grade nine language arts classes taught by one teacher participant, journals by seven youth from refugee backgrounds, and a document analysis of policies from across Canada which focus on teaching refugee youth.

Key Research findings:

- *Teachers* believe that youth from refugee backgrounds deserve safe, comfortable environments in which to learn. Teachers nonetheless report that students from refugee backgrounds experience marginalization within PEI schools.
- *Students* share that they sometimes have difficulty making friends with English-speaking peers.
- *Teachers* report being challenged by how best to provide classroom support to students from refugee backgrounds, meet their emotional needs, and help them find meaningful social relationships given existing language barriers.
- *Students* report classes are easier and more meaningful when teachers use visuals, give extra explanations, and provide books that are linguistically accessible.
- *Teachers* share it is both rewarding and inspiring to witness their students’ courage, resilience, perseverance, and appreciation of education.
- *Students* indicate that learning English remains one of their biggest challenges.

The observations, document analysis, and literature review serve to provide starting points for teacher training and recommendations for policy development. For additional information please contact Joanne MacNevin: jmacnevin@gmail.com

References:

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