

Chapter 11

Facilitating Linguistic and Academic Success for Newcomer English Language Learners: Essential Knowledge for Educators of Refugees

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of peoples in need has changed dramatically and appears to grow more complex. For today, leaders and citizens in the United States must decide how best to address the needs and aggregate issues related to the very large numbers of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, Iraq, Bhutan, Somalia, Syria, and numerous other nations fleeing persecution owing to their political or religious beliefs. Complicating the challenges encountered by newcomer English language learners (ELLs) and their teachers is the wave of xenophobia that has once again had a global impact. Gleaning lessons learned from previous United States refugee resettlement programs about the societal adjustment and educational achievement experienced by refugees from Southeast Asia, from the Cuban Haitian program, from the resettlement of the Karen and Chin Burmese, and others will empower teachers to facilitate greater academic achievement among newcomer ELLs.

The preparation of teachers for classrooms defined by changing demographics and increasing diversity represents a major challenge for teacher educators. Determining the dispositional aims necessary for teaching all students requires addressing the intellectual, political, and ethical question: What kind of program is required for the preparation of teachers if schools are to achieve the educational aims of a democratic society defined by difference? Teacher educators also must address another question:

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What kind of teachers will society have if they are prepared to achieve the educational ends desired and possess the dispositions that lead to teaching for difference and democracy? (Jenlink, 2015, pp 15-16)

INTRODUCTION

Refugee resettlement is neither new nor unique to the United States. Persons enduring the refugee condition have existed since before there was a term for their circumstances (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The U.S. has historically contributed more resources to The United Nations Refugee Resettlement Program and resettled more refugees than any other nation (Connor, 2017). Refugee English language learners (ELLs) regularly add to the cultural and linguistic montage of U.S. public schools (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014; Krogstad, 2017). When new global challenges such as the intensifying existence of terrorism throughout much of the world emerge, world leaders regularly reconsider policies and protocol for resettling those who are displaced because of harsh, frequently life-threatening conditions in the homeland. The overarching goal is to protect the citizens within receiving/resettling nations while providing humanitarian aid in the form of resettlement for the refugees. The United States is not alone in the decision to recurrently revise and improve the refugee resettlement program (Krogstad, 2017). When the appraisal and revision of the refugee resettlement program and other programs for legal immigration into the United States, such as the program for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, who follow the path of refugees, and Unaccompanied Alien Children, who follow the path of asylum, is complete, policies, processes, and procedures may change. However, the reform itself impacts newcomers only in the numbers allowed to enter the country and places of origin from which they may arrive. For comparison, the refugee ceiling in FY 1980 was 231,700 (Capps & Fix, 2015) while the ceiling for 2018 is 45,000 (Cepla, 2018).

Two basic needs shape the newcomer's experience once resettlement in the United States has transpired: the need to learn English as a second language and the need to acculturate and integrate into U.S. American society. An exploration of the complexities of second language acquisition, acculturation and the interplay between the two points to several supplementary questions: What information would be most helpful to educators of newcomers? What has been learned from a long history of refugee resettlement in the United States? What knowledge will be most useful to teachers of newcomer ELLs from cruel and unforgiving places? What awareness will better equip educators with appropriate compassion, empathy, and dispositions about immigration and immigrants to help the refugee ELL to embark on the journey to becoming an active, independent learner? Discovering the answers to these questions will enable the informed educator to select appropriate materials and strategies for correctly targeting instruction where it is needed most while simultaneously possessing expectations of students and parents based on facts rather than assumption and stereotype.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, a demographic overview of refugee resettlement in the United States will be examined. Second, the unique aspects of the refugee career and their impact on second language acquisition (SLA) and acculturation will be explored. Finally, an assessment instrument that was developed with the dual goals of utilizing lessons learned about the needs and characteristics of refugee ELLs and assisting educators in identifying potential cultural, linguistic, affective, and academic challenges that require attention during SLA and acculturation will be presented. The assessment was designed to succinctly inform teachers and administrators about newcomers who come from punishing places and bring diverse and frequently unknown or misunderstood cultures and languages to the classroom.

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