

## **Grade Level Placement for Refugee Students: Determining Appropriate Placement**

Suzanne Fitzpatrick  
suzannefitzpatrick@nlesd.ca

As a university student and teacher in Toronto I studied, lived, worked with and taught refugees from almost all over the world. In the mid-1990s I had a pivotal conversation with a colleague who confided, “I lost my surname and aged five years,” when he entered Canada as a university student in the late 1960s from South Asia. Upon returning to my hometown I have worked as a Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) teacher in St. John’s. Since then, I have realized that, like the case of my colleague, errors may exist on refugees’ documentation for various reasons. In this discussion, I will explore the context, challenges, and felt experiences of grade level placements for refugee children through integrating my personal experience as a teacher, experiences of diverse newcomers to St. John’s, and international literature.

### **Students from Refugee Background in My School**

The LEARN program exists to address the academic deficits of recently arrived refugee youth in Newfoundland and Labrador, by closing educational gaps and successfully transitioning students to the prescribed curriculum (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.). LEARN was modelled on Toronto’s Literacy Enrichment Academic Program (LEAP) (Toronto District School Board, n.d.) and was piloted in 2008, with the current program beginning in January 2009 at two St. John’s schools. Over the years, I have had students about whom staff members inevitably ask, “How old is that kid?” followed by, “They look like they belong in elementary/high school.”

Given the considerable range of student sizes at junior high, physical stature is not always a problem – even if it is noteworthy – but having students who are socially and emotionally mismatched with their peers may cause social discord, isolation, alienation, and disruption in the classroom. For example, a Grade 7 student who said he was really two years younger, reacted accordingly whenever there was discussion of teenage relationships and romance, and became disruptive when exposed to the intermediate sexual health curriculum. When we attended an Association for New Canadians (ANC) Health Fair for Youth, which included a presentation on how to use a condom, his behaviour at the event geared for junior high and high school students presented as awkward and uncomfortable for everyone involved.

### **Reasons for a Shared Birthday**

Initially, I was puzzled that a disproportionate number of students were born on January 1st until Greg Simmons, the other original LEARN teacher who had previous experience working with the ANC, clarified that this indicates a date of birth (DOB) assigned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency. UNHCR Guidelines in

Determining the Best Interest of the Child states, “Expertise required of a child welfare officer includes: ...ability to assess age and maturity” (UNHCR, 2008, p. 52). UNHCR observations on the use of age assessments in the identification of separated or unaccompanied children seeking asylum cites a 2009 publication by the agency: “Age assessments are conducted only in cases when a child’s age is in doubt and need to be part of a comprehensive assessment that takes in account both the physical appearance and the psychological maturity of the child” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 3). This document also quotes The Separated Children in Europe Programme Position Paper on Age Assessment in the Context of Separated Children in Europe (2012):

... no method can determine age definitively. Most experts agree that age assessment is not a determination of chronological age but an estimated guess. Scientific methods currently available, including medical examinations based on dental or wrist bone x-rays, can only estimate age. Hence, there will always be a margin of error. (p. 8)

I also learned from my colleague that he did not know his actual birthday. He vividly remembered, as a small child, sitting on wooden crates at the Delhi station, waiting for the train to take him, his mother, and siblings to safety during the partition of India. His father never managed to join them before the border was shut, and his mother died a few years later. Although his elder brother remembered the year he was born, no one knew his birthdate. And although it is impossible to generalize about refugees, being a very diverse and eclectic group, many students have shared similar stories, with a lack of identification documents, including birth certificates. Many come from communities which lacked governmental services, or for some, in the rush to flee, it was impossible to obtain copies of vital personal documents. As a result, the date of birth (DOB) stated on papers of refugee children registering for school may be far from accurate. Sometimes it could be the result of “an estimated guess” of a UNHCR child welfare officer, which may be influenced by the individual’s country of origin, knowledge, culture and perception. Sometimes it is “an educated guess” of the child’s parents if they are from communities with low literacy levels or cultures that place little importance on record keeping. One student relayed that his mother – who had never been to school until she arrived in Canada – did not know the birthdates of any of her nine children. She told him, “You were born on a sunny day.” Or, due to tumult and chaos, documents may be misplaced or lost (Separated Children in Europe Programme, 2012; Stewart, 2012).

In some circumstances, the birthdates of children may be intentionally altered by refugee parents who, in an effort to keep their family together, may lower ages if they are informed that children eighteen and over are ineligible for resettlement with their family and must be processed as single adults. One father confided the first thing he was told by fellow countrymen upon arrival in a refugee camp was to deliberately lower his children’s ages if he wanted to keep his family together because they could wait ten years for placement in a third country. In other situations, children’s ages may be raised if, for example, a neighbouring country provides asylum based on avoidance of compulsory military service. Two siblings explained that their parents used this strategy and were allowed to remain in a country of asylum when their younger brother’s age was raised to near their home country’s military conscription age.

Sometimes, inaccurate data may be simply due to typographical errors. One student narrated when his documents were being processed to come to Canada, his name was recorded incorrectly by an official. His mother immediately attempted to correct the error and was told, “That’s his

new name now.” Currently, in a class of nineteen, five students have January 1st as their date of birth. Additionally, three others have told me, “That’s not my real birthday,” regarding their data in PowerSchool, the school district’s web-based attendance, discipline and marks program. All related a similar story of how their “paper birthday” is actually when their birth was registered with civil authorities months later.

### **Strategies for Grade Placement**

Adherence to DOBs on refugee documentation may lead to children’s inappropriate grade level placement (Stewart, 2012). How then can Canadian educators determine appropriate placement for newly arrived refugee students if documentation may be inaccurate? Firstly, educators can talk to the families and ask them directly. Usually, when refugee families have initial contact with the school system, they are accompanied in St. John’s not only by a Settlement Worker in the School (SWIS) from the ANC, but also with an interpreter. Thus educators can take advantage of this opportunity to ask the parent(s)/guardian(s), “How old is this child?” Often they know the correct DOB, or approximately when the child was born, and will be quite forthcoming. Sometimes they share stories of how an error was made upon arrival at a refugee camp or by an official processing their papers to come to Canada. They may know exactly when the child was born, and will relate their frustration with the inaccurate data. Or much later, when trust is established, students may explain how the real birthday was altered. Secondly, educators can ask the family member(s), the child, and the SWIS, “What is the best grade for the child to be placed in?” Usually, the child’s supports have a grade in mind, and this decision is best made collaboratively with input from all invested parties, including the child. Refugees often have experienced a loss of personal autonomy and power (Hoeing, 2004). This basic consultation is one small step in recognizing and respecting their personal agency and empowerment, and if the child was indeed born on January 1st – and some are – then this is the time to find out.

### ***The Author***

Suzanne Fitzpatrick first met refugees when she attended elementary school in St. John’s, shortly after the expulsion of South Asians from Uganda by Idi Amin. Since 2009 she has taught refugee youth from Kosovo, Bhutan, Myanmar, Eritrea, Sudan, Liberia, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Colombia, Iraq and Syria as a LEARN teacher in St. John’s.

### **References**

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (n.d.). *Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN)*. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/curriculum/guides/esl/index.html>
- Hoeing, W. (2004). *New issues in refugee research, working paper No. 103, Self-image and the well-being of refugees in Rhino Camp, Uganda*. University of East London: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/40b1f63b4.pdf>

- 
- Separated Children in Europe Programme. (2012). *Position paper on age assessment in the context of separated children in Europe*. Retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ff535f52.html>
- Stewart, J. (2011). *Supporting refugee children: Strategies for educators*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Toronto District School Board. (n.d.). *LEAP Program*. Retrieved from <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/High-School/Your-School-Day/English-as-a-Second-Language>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2008). *UNHCR Guidelines in Determining the Best Interest of the Child*. Retrieved October 23, 2018 from <https://www.unhcr.org/4566b16b2.pdf>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2015). *UNHCR Observations on the use of age assessments in the identification of separated and unaccompanied children seeking asylum*. Retrieved from <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/55759d2d4.pdf>