

Teaching Diversity: Helping Newcomer Students Adjust Academically

Mohammad Ali Bakhshi
Hua Que
Xuemei Li
Memorial University
mab228@mun.ca

“If kids come to us from strong, healthy functioning families, it makes our job easier. If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important.”

--Barbara Colorose (Bam Radio Network, n.d.)

The province's five-year action plan to attract more immigrants into the province (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.) indicates an increase in the number of newcomer students in our education system. Most of these students come from war-torn regions with diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Many of them had been living in the refugee camps for years with limited or interrupted schooling, which makes it more challenging for educators to help them succeed in the school.

This paper presents some strategies for teachers on how to support newcomer students to adjust and flourish in the Canadian education system. These strategies were developed based on the findings of a qualitative research project on newcomer students' integration in Newfoundland and Labrador. Data were drawn from a semi-structured focus group discussion of 12 educators, five newcomer students attending high school and university, and seven staff members from community organizations serving newcomers in December 2016. The authors believe these strategies could be helpful for the work of teachers and educators who provide educational services to the newcomer students.

Getting to Know Newcomer Students

One strategy that the research participants considered important in helping newcomer students thrive academically was that teachers try to know their newcomer students well. As Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011) and Roxas (2011) highlighted, in order to improve the academic performance of the students, it is crucial for teachers to obtain some basic and permissible information about their newcomer students. However, many of our teacher participants lacked such information on their newcomer students' pre-resettlement life and educational experiences. For instance, one teacher stated, "A lot of time, I don't know where they come from, I don't know them regarding the trauma or PTSD or what triggers may be." Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should be given preparation time and resources to get to know their incoming newcomer students. This includes information about their home country situation, cultural values, first language, family situation, and prior schooling. This basic information about the newcomer students would help teachers identify their needs and adjust teaching plans and methodologies to

help newcomer students achieve better academic outcomes (Hamilton, 2004). More importantly, in order to prepare for the arrival of newcomer students and their families, the Education Department, School District, school administrators, counselors, and settlement workers should provide teachers with necessary information.

Enhancing Knowledge about Second Language Teaching and Learning

The second strategy emerging from the discussion was that teachers need to acquire knowledge about second language acquisition to be able to make instruction more comprehensible to newcomer students at various stages of language learning. Lack of language skills has been frequently identified in the literature as a substantial barrier to integration faced by newcomers (Bolloten, Spafford, & Little, 2008; Deters, 2006; McBrien, 2005). With regards to the newcomer students, language, as a means of learning and communication, plays a critical role in achieving academic success. That said, the research participants highlighted that teachers should be aware of language teaching strategies and how to use them in their classes to improve newcomers' language ability as one teacher participant emphasized, "They [teachers] need to be aware of strategies that assist language learning." Teachers can help newcomers understand the topic better by simplifying language and repetition, using visuals, giving time to newcomer students to ask questions or respond to the questions, and giving clear instructions and notes (Li, Doyle, Lymburner & Ghadi, 2016). Engaging newcomers in the routine class activities and English speaking groups such as art, soccer, choir, and music since conversation does not only help the newcomer students enhance their social skills but also improve their language proficiency. An example of such initiatives was described by a teacher saying, "We have Canadian students as mentors, and they hang out a bunch of hours to help improve [newcomers'] English language, and Canadian students get credit for volunteer hours." Another example is the creation of the Open Studio which provides a publicly accessible space for newcomer youth to help them develop a sense of belonging to local community through art-making (Lewis, McLeod, & Li, 2018).

Advocating for Refugee Students' Educational Needs

In addition to the language needs, many newcomer students are in need of the academic bridging program to fill their educational gaps. The Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) program was considered by our participants as a good practice to help refugee students catch up and transition to mainstream classrooms. However, many of them were concerned over the absence of this program in the elementary schools across the province. Given that the school leadership support, especially the principals' strong support for their refugee students, is vital to the implementation of the specialized programs and policies (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012), it is suggested that the principals in the elementary schools advocate for newcomer students to incorporate the LEARN program into the elementary school activities as well. One LEARN teacher argued, "LEARN depends on that principal at that particular school, so it could be really great but could also ... be problematic, depends on how much experience they have with ESL students." More importantly, the provincial government should purposefully allocate resources to the schools requesting the LEARN program to eliminate school administrators and teachers' concern over resource constraints.

Matching Local Students with Newcomer Students

Additionally, teachers should also be aware of positive social and academic impacts of pairing local students with the newcomer students. In fact, peer mentoring is another effective strategy for facilitating newcomer students' successful transition to a new educational environment. A teacher described peer mentoring as a teenage-to-teenage level instruction through which Canadian students re-explain subjects to the newcomer students in plain language. Mixing locals with newcomer students is essential for integration because it makes both groups feel connected with students around them. Mentoring programs also assist students in socializing and engaging in the community (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003; Yeh, Ching, Okubo & Luthar, 2007). The mentoring program seems to be a success in some participants' schools. For instance, a participant shared her school story about mentorship in this way; "We have a mentoring program...I love watching two lovely students who you would never expect them to become friends and all of a sudden, they are best buds, and it's beautiful to watch." Therefore, establishing such a program is highly advised for other schools with newcomer students.

Promoting Respect for Diversity

To encourage interaction between the newcomers and local students, schools should promote diversity awareness among their students, teachers, and administrators. In particular, teachers play a major role in fostering cultural awareness in the classrooms as they deal with students daily (Morris & Mims, 1999; Montgomery, 2001). However, to promote respect for diversity, the research participants indicated that it should be started from teachers themselves. This means teachers need to meet the needs of their students regardless of their race, colour, faith, or origin. A teacher participant emphasized on this matter by stating that "Teachers themselves [should] accept diversity and respect different cultural values and practices." Therefore, teachers should take the initiative to increase their cultural awareness to develop a culturally responsive classroom. At the same time, collaboration between educators and stakeholders, including policymakers, is needed to build a caring and inclusive school environment.

Collaborating With Other Teachers and Stakeholders

Lastly, collaboration and sharing experiences and resources among teachers can help them to better support newcomer students. This is evident in the teachers' experiences, as an ESL teacher explained that "One of the things we talked about could happen is information sharing, that resource there. One colleague, he didn't know about that...they did some great works, not reinventing necessarily but learn the strategies already there." Stakeholders, including educators, parents of the newcomer students, and community agencies serving newcomers, could meet regularly to share and discuss the challenges newcomer students face and the strategies to overcome those challenges. In a broader perspective, greater collaboration and coordination between teachers, and other community service providers would help newcomers to gain access to vital information and services (Janusch, 2010). More importantly, as one teacher said, collaboration ensures that decisions are not made in isolation. Therefore, considering the limited resources available in the province, a collaborative decision-making process would help address newcomer students' needs more comprehensively and appropriately.

Conclusion

As, on the occasion of Global Teacher Prize 2017 announcement, Justin Trudeau indicated “Teachers are responsible to the future and for the world that will be shaped by children that they teach,” (Global Teacher Prize, 2017, April 7) teachers contribute not only to the academic growth of the students but also to the life of their students who are the future of our society. Teachers achieve this by helping students get through difficult times they have had and find their way to a brighter future. This is the essence of the work of Global Teacher Prize Winner 2017, Maggie MacDonnell, who said “I have had students come to thank me for saving their lives. All of them had gone through difficult times when losing friends and family ... as well as experiencing other traumas in their life” (Global Teacher Prize, 2017, March 19). However, teachers are not able to help their newcomer students unless they know their challenges and employ strategies to address those challenges.

We hope that this research that includes voices from newcomer students, educators, and community service providers serves as a model in terms of making a collaborative effort to help newcomer students become more successful academically. As researchers, we would like to work with all education stakeholders to generate research-informed policies and strategies helping Newfoundland and Labrador to build a more welcoming place for the newcomer students and their families.

The Authors

Mohammad Ali Bakhshi is a Master’s student; Hua Que is a Ph.D. candidate; and Dr. Xuemei Li is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland. They worked together on the SSHRC funded project *Refugee Student Integration: Building Welcoming Communities and Schools for a Sustainable Future*.

References

- Bam Radio Network. (n.d.). *QuotEd*. Retrieved from <http://www.bamradionetwork.com/quoted/aprofile/163-barbara-coloroso>
- Bolloten, B., Spafford, T., & Little, D. (2008). *Shared futures: Supporting the integration of refugee children and young people in school and the wider community*. London: Salusbury World.
- Deters, P. (2006). *Immigrant teachers in Canada: Learning the language and culture of a new professional community*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Global Teacher Prize. (2017, March 19). *Meet the global teacher prize winner*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalteacherprize.org/news-blogs/meet-the-global-teacher-prize-winner-2017>
- Global Teacher Prize. (2017, April 7). *Justin Trudeau congratulates 2017 global teacher prize winner* [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4sSbsKj5sA

- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (n.d.). *The way forward on immigration in Newfoundland and Labrador*. Retrieved from <https://www.aesl.gov.nl.ca/publications/pdf/ImmigrationPlan.pdf>
- Hamilton, R. (2004). *Educational interventions for refugee children*. London and New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Janusch, S. (2010). *Refugee students with limited formal education*. Retrieved from <http://teachingrefugees.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Lit-Review-Refugees-April-2011.pdf>
- Lewis, B. L., Mcleod, H., & Li, X. (2018). The open studio: Exploring immigrant and refugee youth experiences of belonging through community-based arts practice. *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry, 10*(1), 5-21.
- Li, X., Doyle, A., Lymburner, M., & Ghadi, N. Y. (2016). Parental support for newcomer children's education in a smaller centre. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation Comparée et Internationale, 45*(3), 1-15.
- McBrien, J. L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 75*(3), 329-364.
- Montgomery, W. (2001). Creating culturally responsive, inclusive classrooms. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*(4), 4-9.
- Morris, R. C., & Mims, N. G. (1999). Making classrooms culturally sensitive. *Education and Culture, 16*(1), 29-32.
- Powell, W., & Kusuma-Powell, O. (2011). *How to teach now: Five keys to personalized learning in the global classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
- Pugh, K., Every, D., & Hattam, R. (2012). Inclusive education for students with refugee experience: Whole school reform in a South Australian primary school. *Australian Educational Researcher, 39*(2), 125-141.
- Rodger, S., & Tremblay, P. F. (2003). The effects of a peer mentoring program on academic success among first year university students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 33*(3), 1-17.
- Roxas, K. (2011). Tales from the front line: Teachers' responses to Somali Bantu refugee students. *Urban Education, 46*(3), 513-548.
- Yeh, C. J., Ching, A. M., Okubo, Y., & Luthar, S. S. (2007). Development of a mentoring program for Chinese immigrant adolescents' cultural adjustment. *Adolescence, 42*(168), 733-747.