



Practitioner Researcher

The complex needs of refugee background children in early childhood education: A brief review of the literature

Olivia Paul

New Zealand Tertiary College

This review of the literature on refugee background learners (RBLs) has been prompted by the recent crisis in Syria, and seeks to highlight important issues relevant to the successful transition of RBLs and their families into a new culture and learning environment. It includes a brief overview of the present situation in Syria and how the New Zealand Government has pledged to help by increasing the annual quota of refugees to accommodate Syrians currently displaced by civil war. The aim of this article is to distil from available literature the most significant factors affecting the successful transition of RBLs and their families into a new culture and learning environment. With a particular focus on the *Aotearoa*/New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) context, suggestions to facilitate the inclusion of RBLs within ECE will be made.

Introduction

Refugees are a legally and constitutionally well-defined group of people. The 1951 *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* defines refugees as those who are “outside their country of nationality and who are unable or unwilling to return to that country because of well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (as cited in Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Mathieson, Loewen, & Moore, 2000, p. 2). Presently, the civil war in Syria has displaced more than 11 million refugees to date; more than 50 percent of these are children (Mercy Corps, 2015). The magnitude of this crisis has compelled the New Zealand government to accept an extra 750 Syrian refugees over the next two years, with the first 250 to arrive in New Zealand in three groups expected in January, March and May 2016 (Woodhouse, 2015). In anticipation of providing a welcoming and inclusive environment in ECE for these new arrivals, it is therefore timely to generate a greater understanding of RBLs and the complex needs they have.

Throughout the literature, adapting to a new country and culture has generally been acknowledged as a stressful process involving several interrelating cultural, social, economic, language and environmental factors (Broome & Kinson, 2008; Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Stewart, 2011; Hayward, 2007; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011). The aim of this article is to distil, from available literature, the most significant factors affecting the successful transition of RBLs and their families into a new culture and learning environment. With a particular focus on the *Aotearoa*/New Zealand



ECE context, suggestions to facilitate the inclusion of RBLs within ECE will be made.

Trauma

Much of the literature makes mention of past trauma and loss experienced by RBLs and the effect this has on their ability to adapt to a new culture and learning environment (Stewart, 2011; Hayward, 2007; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006). Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the need for teachers to understand the impact of these diverse traumatic experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of RBLs. Strekalova and Hoot (2008) assert that such an understanding will strengthen the commitment of teachers to assist RBLs in the classroom. Other literature exercises caution in this approach. For example, Hayward (2007) acknowledges the significance of being aware of RBLs' past experiences so educators may be responsive and sensitive; however, she stresses that knowing the difference between empathy and sympathy is imperative. The approach in Hayward's (2007) report advocates being respectful and supportive of refugees whilst at the same time discovering and enhancing their strengths. This approach reminds educators that refugees are survivors who have incredible strength, resilience and courage, and encourages them to resist the disempowering discourse of trauma and pity.

Increasingly diverse languages

Literature suggests the single biggest barrier for refugee background families trying to enrol their children into ECE is language oriented. Language is a barrier for non-English speaking parents' and children's communication, and parents also experience difficulty in finding ECE centres for their children to attend while they go to classes to learn English (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011). Within the literature based on focus groups of refugee background parents with pre-school aged children from multiple ethno-cultural backgrounds, language was reported by all participants to be a significant barrier to ECE enrolment (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Broome & Kindon, 2008).

Cultural misunderstandings

Culture shock and a lack of cultural understanding by ECE educators are also prevalent themes throughout the literature (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Broome & Kindon, 2008). In studies based on focus groups of refugee parents with pre-school aged children from multiple ethno-cultural backgrounds, participants reported varying experiences with the reception of their children in ECE centres and in having their culture acknowledged there, including some very good examples of inclusive practice (Broome & Kindon, 2008). However, this was not universal, and some specific challenges identified in this and other literature include the physical environments of New Zealand's ECE facilities. For example, taking children outside for play in cold weather is a cultural norm in New Zealand that could differ from the beliefs of refugee background families, especially if they come



from a hot country and are struggling to adapt to New Zealand's colder climate (Broome & Kindon, 2008; Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011).

Social and economic issues

Much of the literature around RBLs identifies a low socio-economic status, often due to displacement, which means families are not able to afford fees, as being a significant barrier to ECE enrolment. The location of centres, transport issues and an overall lack of understanding of the benefits of ECE are also reported within the literature to be challenging aspects of inclusion (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Broome & Kindon, 2008; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006).

Strategies for educators

According to Hayward (2007), including RBLs in ECE requires a holistic, refugee centred, constructivist approach that empowers learners to become co-constructors of their own knowledge. Moreover, several sources refer to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to emphasise the wide array of contextual factors that affect the well-being and sense of belonging for RBLs (Hamilton et al., 2000; Hayward, 2007). The preservation of culture and language is also a major theme throughout much of the literature (Mitchell & Ouko, 2010; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Broome & Kindon, 2008; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2003). Furthermore, the literature specifically emphasises the importance of establishing positive teacher/parent relationships with refugee background families, highlighting this aspect of teaching and learning as the most vital for the inclusion of RBLs (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Broome & Kindon, 2008; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006).

Conclusion

From the literature, it is clear there are many challenges to providing a welcoming, warm, safe and inclusive environment for RBLs and their families. ECE educators must consider how trauma, language barriers, diverse cultures, as well as social and economic factors can affect the inclusion of refugee children. Much of the literature echoes the principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) when offering strategies for inclusion. Concepts such as empowerment, relationships, holistic development and community are all identified as being crucial elements to pedagogy. The challenge for ECE educators is to apply these principles with a critical multicultural approach, as it seems clear that the preservation of culture and language for refugee children is paramount to their successful transition into New Zealand society.

References

Broome, A., & Kindon, S. (2008). *New kiwis, diverse families: Migrant and former refugee families talk about their early childhood care and education needs*. Wellington, New Zealand: Families Commission.



- Dachyshyn, D., & Kirova, A. (2011). Classroom challenges in developing an intercultural early learning program for refugee children. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 57(2), 220-233.
- Hamilton, R. J., Anderson, A., Frater-Mathieson, K., Loewen, S., & Moore, D. W. (2000). *Literature review: Interventions for refugee children in New Zealand schools: Models, methods, and best practice*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- Hayward, M. (2007). *Applying post-critical approaches to refugee-centred education*. Retrieved from <http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz>
- Mercy Corps. (2015). *Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis*. Retrieved from <http://www.mercycorps.org>
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mo ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2003). *English for speakers of other languages: Refugee handbook for schools*. Auckland, New Zealand: Author.
- Mitchell, L., & Ouko, A. (2010). *Living in New Zealand: Congolese refugee families' aspirations for children and early childhood education*. Retrieved from <http://www.waikato.ac.nz/earlyyears>
- Strekalova, E., & Hoot, J. L. (2008). What is special about special needs of refugee children? Guidelines for teachers. *Multicultural Education*, 16(1), 21-24.
- Stewart, J. (2011). *Supporting refugee children: strategies for educators*. University of Toronto Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.nz/books>
- Szente, J., Hoot, J., & Taylor, D. (2006). Responding to the special needs of refugee children: Practical ideas for teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(1), 15-20.
- Woodhouse, M. (2015). *New Zealand to take 750 more Syrian refugees: Media release*. Retrieved from <https://www.national.org.nz>