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Exploring the Needs and Challenges of Adults from War Affected Backgrounds

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Abstract: This research explores the literacy challenges of adults from war-affected countries, and highlights the changing role of literacy educators working with adults escaping war zones. Strategies designed to reduce learning barriers as well as an analysis of the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of literacy learning will be explored.

The landscape of immigration continues to change, and in recent years North American urban and rural centres are receiving immigrants and refugees from war affected countries such as the Congo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. These changes impact all structures and institutions of society, including education. Citing figures from the United Nations, Marton (2002) writes that while civilians comprised 10 percent of all casualties in the First World War and 45% during the Second World War, they now make up as much as 90% of casualties caused by war. Civil war, drought, and other disasters have forced thousands of individuals to live in refugee camps where normal life is severely interrupted. Li (2005) notes that the roots of war—poverty, oppression, human rights violations, competition for control of resources, persist but new factors such as globalization, environmental deterioration, and rapid technological changes are creating more numerous stress fractures. These fractures contribute to the internal and external displacement of thousands of individuals who seek a new homeland elsewhere. Jones (2007) observes that modern warfare today “creeps up in an arbitrary fashion, village by village, first through rumours, then through the arrival of refugees in flight and with tales of atrocity, then warnings and threats from various armed factions” (*Globe and Mail*, March 3, 2007). The task of rebuilding “shattered lives” in a society incongruous to the one they are familiar with requires resilience, ingenuity, and courage

Adult refugees entering North American educational institutions present new challenges to teachers, administrators, and other school personnel providing educational and psychological services. In many cases, the adult learning centre or community college can function as a critical stabilizing force and “safe haven” for newcomers and refugees who may feel displaced and disoriented. Educational institutions can be a central point where housing services, career and employment links, counselling, mentoring programs, and literacy and ESL services can be available. While it is important not to pathologize or generalize about the effects that war may have on individuals, it is vital not to underestimate the impact that war can have on individuals and their adjustment to life in a new culture and society. Dr. Marlinda Freire (1990) emphasizes that the consequences of sustained violence and trauma can impact the individual at psychological, physical, and social levels. She notes that many victims of war have witnessed or experienced social unrest, torture, disappearance, death of family members, forced labour or environmental disasters, and that while each person has unique coping skills, a climate created by on-going violence increases the likelihood of individuals experiencing chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. Freire states that “if one considers the massive losses, acute separations, possible traumatic encounters with repressive forces, the exhausting processes of resettlement (that may have involved more than one country, more than one language) refugees more frequently than

not, are in an acute state of psychological disorganization and negative self-evaluation” (19990, p.5). Herman (1992) similarly asserts that traumatic events like war can overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning to life. The individual’s basic sense of trust, identity, and confidence may have been threatened by the war and subsequent displacement. Researchers like Hamilton and Moore (2004) note that the severity of the symptoms (i.e. anxiety, insomnia, memory difficulties, etc) individuals may experience and their ability to adapt successfully to a new culture depend on the constellation of numerous pre and post migration factors such as: the age of resettlement, personality factors such as hardiness, resilience, and optimism, cultural perceptions of stress, gender and culture, educational level and knowledge of English, the degree of trauma, and the external supports and networks available to individuals once they are resettled.

Purpose of the Study

The present qualitative study explores the experiences and challenges of 10 adult learners from war affected countries in Winnipeg, Canada. The adult learners were either completing their high school diploma or had already started college. In addition, 10 literacy teachers who work with adult refugees at adult learning centres and colleges were interviewed. Through in-depth interviews, learner autobiographies, questionnaires, and narrative inquiry, this study explored the experiences and challenges of both teachers and adult students. What barriers have adult learners experienced? Individuals forced to flee situations of violence need time to resettle, make new connections, and find ways to establish a meaningful and productive life. How has war impacted their ability to learn and acquire literacy skills? How is literacy linked to personal, social, and cultural awareness? How do literacy teachers envision their role and responsibilities?

Barriers to Literacy and Participation

Patricia Cross’s (1981) *Chain of Response Model* provides a useful conceptual framework that can help understand the factors that influence an adult’s participation and involvement in educational systems. For Cross, participation can be viewed as a dynamic interplay of social and psychological factors that include: a) self-esteem, b) attitudes towards education, c) the importance of goals and the expectation that participation will meet their goals, d) life transition (i.e., a move, job loss, trauma), e) opportunities and barriers, and f) information. Cross asserts that once an individual is motivated to participate in some form of learning activity, barriers and opportunities play a key role (Magro,2001). If an individual is highly motivated, they may be more likely to seek out opportunities and overcome “modest” barriers. Individuals who lack motivation, on the other hand, may allow modest barriers to form impediments against seeking out information and educational opportunities. Cross emphasizes that educational institutions need to find new ways to break down barriers impede learning. Language difficulties, a lack of literacy in the individual’s first language of origin, and cultural clashes can also contribute to feelings of isolation, but these may be modified if the individual is given opportunities to learn literacy skills in a supportive environment. Other theoretical perspectives that helped gain insight into both the teachers and adult learners’ experiences were Paulo Freire’s (1997) critical theory of literacy education and Jack Mezirow’s (1981, 2000) theory of transformational learning. Literacy education, for Freire, should go beyond teaching functional skills and move toward helping individuals gain a critical awareness of the systems that may undervalue or oppress them. The curriculum is built around the needs and interests of the learners. “The teacher’s conviction that they can learn from their students’ experiences is an important cornerstone in understanding Freire’s ‘problem posing’ process of critical education” (

Magro, 2001, p. 88). Freire conceptualizes the educator as more of a co-learner, guide, mentor, and challenger. Dialogue, critical reflection, and personal and social empowerment are consistent themes that resurface in the works of Freire.

Building on Freire's ideas, Askov (2000) defines literacy as including "those skills, knowledge, and practices that are needed to function successfully in the society or culture in which the individual is situated or desires (and has the potential) to be situated" (p. 248). Literacy, in this context, is dynamic, lifelong, and varies with individual needs and interests.

Numeracy, problem solving, and the ability to read, write, and speak are critical dimensions of literacy. No less important are emotional and social literacies: motivation, resilience, interpersonal effectiveness, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. The concept of multiple literacies becomes particularly important when considering the challenges that newcomers to North America are faced with.

Transformative Learning Theory and Adult Refugee Experiences

Mezirow's (1981; 2000) transformative learning theory can be a particularly useful lens for exploring and understanding the experiences of adult refugees. The abrupt changes that many of the refugees interviewed for this study faced in terms of abandonment, displacement, and the loss of culture, language, and family can result in many "disorienting dilemmas" that challenge the individual to find new ways to learn in order to survive and adapt in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow, can be viewed as "an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of one's assumptions and particular premises, and an assessment of alternative perspectives" (1991, p. 161). Similar to Freire, Mezirow conceptualizes the educator more as a co-learner, mentor, challenger, and facilitator. Building on the work of writers like Boyd (2000) and Taylor (2000), Leong Kappell and Daley (2004) suggest that transformative learning theory can be looked at from as more holistic and culturally inclusive lens. Leong Kappel and Daley (2004) state that prior experiences and sociocultural factors impact learning. They write that "a unique context composed of a familial and social history and an individual orientation, which includes readiness for change, personal experience, prior stressful events, and a predisposition for transformative experience" influence the nature of change and learning" (p. 459).

Methodology

The methodology used in the present study includes: in-depth qualitative interviews, a check list asking students to identify the barriers that may be preventing them from adapting to their new culture and fulfilling their goals, and autobiographical accounts of their experiences and challenges. The teachers were also asked to complete a "critical incident questionnaire" where they could describe a teaching/learning experience with adult refugees that stood out in their experience as being most memorable, surprising, or rewarding. The interview questions for the teachers centered around their experiences working with adult refugee students, their approach to curriculum design and assessment, and their perception of the strengths, barriers, and challenges that their students faced.

The use of autobiographies and personal narrative as valuable instruments in collecting qualitative data has been studied extensively in recent years (Dominice, 2002; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Dominice (2000) asserts that the use of autobiographies and educational biographies in adult education can help adults deepen their understanding of past learning experiences. He notes that this form of narrative research involves the learner as an active partner in a collaborative inquiry process. In terms of immigration and refugee studies, the themes of

uprootedness, resettlement, issues of identity and resettlement lend themselves to biographical analysis. Kouritzen (2000) further suggests that methods such as life history research could be used to inform policy and practice in adult ESL education. She states that “even one life history could add depth of knowledge to our understanding of social change, yet generations of history are lost because there is no time, ability, or opportunity to record them”(p. 11). Kouritzen notes that studying biographical accounts can be viewed as a “necessary addition to ESL research methodology, one powerful enough to gesture toward recognizing the complexity caused by the intersection of race, class, language, history, and culture that we face in the classroom” (p.31).

Research Findings

The adult learners in this study had unique experiences, but the bond of living in war zone, escaping, migration, and resettling in a new and unfamiliar culture united them. They were very willing to speak about their experiences, their adjustment to life in Canada, motivation for continuing their education, and the barriers that they felt impeded their progress. Loss, suffering, chronic stress, faith, chance and luck, learning amid adversity, and apprehension about the future were themes that surfaced in my interviews with the adult students. Based on their autobiographies and the interviews, the central barriers that interfered most with their academic and personal progress and goals included: developing English language proficiency (as well as the time it takes to become more skilled in writing and speaking English), loss of close family members and difficulty reuniting with remaining family members, poverty and financial burdens, a loss of professional standing, problems balancing parenting, work, and academic responsibilities, not having enough time to complete their studies, and anxiety about the future.

Reflecting back on his life in the Sudan, a former teacher (working as a teaching assistant now) emphasized that unlike many of his friends, he was not abducted or forced to flee a war zone. He originally left Sudan to study in Egypt but when the war broke out, he could not return. He hopes to work as teacher in Canada one he completes his Canadian professional credentials. He explained the importance of education and language as “gatekeepers” that are needed to advance culturally and economically in North American society. “Language is critical to advance in Canadian society. Education, for refugees, represents hope, a good job, and security. Many of my friends have lost so many things, and it is hard for them to feel hopeful. Some of my friends were doctors or entrepreneurs who owned their own businesses. Now they are frustrated security guards. They do not see a future for themselves but they see a brighter future for their children.” A young woman from Afghanistan expressed frustration when she described how difficult it is to “carve a new identity and a successful life when you have people discounting your skills because you have difficulties with English. You are seen as a refugee and that is hard because you want people to understand a little about the hardship you have experienced. You don’t want charity.” Adult learners who are parents also expressed frustration with the clash in values between North American society and their cultural and religious values back home. A number of the adult learners in this study viewed the refugee camp not as a place of safety, but one of threat and uncertainty. One young woman from Liberia described life in a refugee camp as being in a “state of limbo.” She explained: “I spent almost all my youth as a refugee and never had a normal teen life. All I could do was to find food and think about my family left behind. In a refugee camp, you lose your childhood and become an adult over night. You can only think about what to do to survive. You change your thoughts to fit into refugee life.”

The Role of the Adult Literacy Educator and Future Direction

The teachers wrote and spoke of the way that their role and responsibility in teaching adult refugees has become more complex in recent years. The teachers in this study most often identified their role as being an advocate, resource person, counsellor, cultural mentor, co-learner, and facilitator. Leong Kappel, and Daley (2004) note that supportive relationships are key to transformative learning and “inner city survival” (p. 92). Teachers must continue to find new ways to acknowledge the “hidden learning” that occurs through trauma, and that instead of diagnosing and treating “victims”, teachers and education support providers must find ways to make the learning environment safe and enriching for everyone. One teacher in this study noted: “When we talk about adults from war affected backgrounds, we cannot generalize. We have to look at each individual and at their strengths, goals, and circumstances right now. We have to help our students set short and long term goals. In an ideal world, we would not have wars, child soldiers, refugees, and displacement, but we don’t have an ideal situation. Having said that, I think that more could be done to help our students succeed. We can also learn a lot from our students’ strengths.”

In this study, the teachers balanced creativity, structure, and support to help their students develop personal self-confidence and linguistic competence. The teachers identified personality traits like patience, creativity, perceptiveness, and enthusiasm are part of the ‘essential interpersonal skills’ that adult educators need when working with refugees. English texts were chosen not just for their grammatical content but for fiction and non-fiction selections that would help their students broaden their perspectives about Canadian society and the larger global context. The curriculum content in English was integrated with teaching and learning strategies that included collaborative projects and literature circles, self-directed inquiry, field trips, and technological applications. Topics such as Global Issues, Health, Sports, the Environment, Arts and Psychology framed a holistic curriculum aimed at helping adult learners integrate literacy with cultural awareness and citizenship education. The teachers in this study stressed the importance of working hard to create a “safe haven” where students from diverse cultures could feel valued and included. Kelly, an ESL teacher for over 20 years emphasized the value of “life history” writing as a way for her students to articulate their immigration experiences, explaining that the students’ narratives could be passed down to their children and grandchildren as personal accounts of their resettlement journey in North America. Some of her students included photos and art work with their narratives. “There is not any pressure for my students to include details that may be painful for them to recount. They choose what to include...Despite the horrible events that my students have endured, I am amazed by their gentleness and dedication. I have to honour in some way what they have been through and help them create a new life for themselves.” Another teacher explained, “By being parachuted into a new country, a new culture, a new society, the adult learner will feel that their own identity is being attacked. For me, language acquisition has to be taught within a framework of social awareness and personal development.” Artistic expression was also used by a number of the teachers as a catalyst to help foster creativity and self-expression.

Conclusion

This study suggests that teaching adult refugees is a complex undertaking and that more on the part of governments, sponsoring agencies, and educational systems could be done to coordinate their efforts and maximize funding that would result in creative and effective literacy programs. Li (2005) emphasizes that the future of North America depends, in part, on the

continued acceptance of immigrants from all corners of the world. Learning challenges are facing not only newcomers and refugees but for all citizens who wish to develop a dynamic multi-cultural society built on the unique strengths and capacities of its members. Li writes that “while the immigration debate has many dimensions, in essence, it has to do with whether the existing population defines newcomers as creating a net benefit or a net cost” for the country. Researchers like O’Sullivan (2002) suggest that educational institutions at all levels can promote cultural diversity and cultures of non-violence. Political, environmental, moral, spiritual, and culture issues should be integrated within existing curricula. Understanding adult refugee experiences within the framework of transformative learning theory can provide added insight and direction. In addition, further research examining the learning experiences of refugees over a longer period of time can enlighten and enrich our understanding of their needs and challenges.

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