

“Let Me Help You Find Your Way Home”

Including the Refugee Experience in the English Language Classroom

By Janine J. Darragh

University of Idaho

President Trump’s recent executive order temporarily prohibiting the entry of all refugees into the country has made the topic of refugees a hot-button issue in both local and national news. Scrolling through headlines and social media sources, stories about refugees abound. Refugees make up a large component of the English language learner population. In the Fiscal Year 2016, for example, communities in the United States welcomed 84,995 refugees from 79 countries (US Department of State, 2016). WAESOL communities in particular have some of the largest number of refugee populations. Washington state ranks number ten of all states in number of refugees (16,504 between 2010-2016), with nearly two-thirds of the state’s refugees living in King County, and 18% living in Spokane (McDermott, 2016). As English language teachers, there is a large possibility that our students will have experienced or know someone who has experienced being a refugee, a fact that yields unique considerations for teachers, students, and the classrooms in which they learn. For example, research shows us that refugees often feel isolated and alone. Iraqi refugee Zahraa Naser, currently living in Boise, Idaho, explains:

My friends are mostly refugees. I also have American friends, but I only talk to them at school. I think for Americans, if they talk to you once, if they see you out somewhere, anywhere else outside of school, they just act like they don’t know you. I know; I’ve tried it a lot (Mosle, 2016).

Accordingly, what can teachers do to help not only their refugee students to not feel so alone, but also to help the other students in the classroom to better understand their refugee peers? Children’s and young adult literature portraying the refugee experience might be one answer.

Incorporating children’s and young adult literature about the refugee experience into the language classroom can yield dual benefits. Bishop (1990) writes about how literature can act as a window or mirror for its readers. Seeing one’s own life reflected (like a mirror) in stories can help children to not feel so alone in the world. Reading about characters who are similar to them can help children to feel validated through the literature that their lives are interesting, important, and matter to others. Conversely, reading about characters with lives different from one’s own can serve as a window into the experiences of others, and in turn help readers to gain

knowledge, understanding, and empathy for those who are different (Parsons & Rietschlin, 2014). In thinking specifically about texts with protagonists who are refugees, incorporating these books into the classroom can offer readers knowledge about different cultures, different countries, and different histories, as well as provide a vehicle for them to vicariously live through the characters portrayed. This first-hand experience can help students in gaining empathy and understanding about the long-standing complexity of the refugee issue and the challenges their classmates who are refugees might have faced and still be facing. Second, students who are refugees can see their lives and experiences represented in the literature, and, as such, might not feel as isolated from their classmates, as refugees often do (Finnerty, 2015; Mosle, 2016). Of course, in all cases,

care and sensitivity must be taken when including literature about refugees into the classroom. Students who are refugees may have experienced trauma and not be ready to participate in class discussions and activities that might trigger painful memories.

However, if teachers are ready to fully represent the diverse society in which we live, there are a plethora of quality resources available that can assist them in developing units of study that include the refugee experience. Below are a few I have found particularly useful.

Electronic Resources

<http://www.unhcr.org/teaching-about-refugees.html>

This wonderful website from The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is full of teaching resources as well as a “teaching tool kit.” The resources are offered in a variety of languages, so they can easily be provided in a student’s primary language if desired. Lesson plan ideas, interactive awareness games, as well as videos sharing personal refugee stories are just some of the many resources on this site.

<https://www.learner.org/resources/refugees/>

This site, from the Annenberg Foundation, also has a plethora of resources for teaching about refugees. The resources provided are separated into curriculum/resources for teachers and curriculum/resources for students, so teachers can choose what will be most helpful to their individual needs—whether that be informing themselves about the refugee crisis or explaining it to their students. A refugee exhibit, photos, statistics, and maps are all provided in teacher and student-friendly formats for easy use.

<http://brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Immigrant-Refugee-Awareness-Instructional-Materials.cfm>

The Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services site has a variety of teaching materials, including activities focused on bullying, websites, podcasts, and video links, as well as links to other sites that offer teacher resources for learners of various age levels.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32057601>

On this website, the BBC News Services provide an activity called “Syrian journey: Choose your own escape route.” Participants take on the role of a refugee and must make a series of impossible choices that refugees unfortunately too often have to make. At the end of the simulation, students learn if they were successful in their journey to safety.

<https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/rochelledavis/refugee-video-project/>

Professor Rochelle Davis has a blog entitled “Teaching about refugees: Curriculum units and lessons.” Aimed at secondary students and inspired by her own field research in Jordan and Lebanon in 2013, this site provides lesson plans and other resources that teachers who want to create a unit on forced displacement and refugees will find valuable.

Children’s and Young Adult Books

As a former high school teacher, I know just how overwhelming it can be to find quality books to offer to students and incorporate into units of study. Teachers are busy; days are short; and the amount of new children’s and young adult books published each year makes the task often feel overwhelming. Over the past year I have been reading almost exclusively children’s and young adult literature that portrays the refugee experience. Below, you will find my in-progress consolidated booklist with author, title, genre, and identified level (primary picture book, intermediate chapter book, young adult book). The titles have come from a variety of sources including the National Council of the Social Studies’ Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People booklists, the NBGS (Notable Books for a Global Society) booklists, the OIB (Outstanding International Books) lists, the Jane Addams Peace Association Children’s Book Award winners, as well as any and all suggestions from colleagues, students, and librarians. The books included represent a variety of genres and age levels, as well as span multiple time periods, with many portraying refugees from World War II, the Cuban Revolution, Sudan, and the Middle East. Reading about refugees from different time periods may allow students to analyze the similarities and differences among the refugee experience throughout the decades, and the variety of sources, formats, and styles can appeal to students’ reading preferences. If anyone has resources to add to this list, please feel free to contact me at janined@uidaho.edu with your suggestions.

Author	Title	Genre	Level (Primary, Intermediate, Young adult)
Applegate, K.	<i>Home of the Brave</i>	Fiction, Novel in verse	Intermediate, Young adult
Barakat, I.	<i>Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Borden, L.	<i>Journey that Saved Curious George: The True Wartime Escape of Margret and H. A. Rey</i>	Nonfiction, Picture book	Intermediate
Carleson, J.C.	<i>The Tyrant’s Daughter</i>	Fiction	Young adult
Choi, Y.	<i>The Name Jar</i>	Picture book	Primary

Dau, J.B., & Akech,	<i>Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan</i>	Nonfiction	Intermediate, Young adult
DePrince, M.	<i>Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Eire, C.	<i>Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Eire, C.	<i>Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Ellis, D.	<i>The Breadwinner</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Ellis, D.	<i>Parvana’s Journey: Breadwinner #2</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Ellis, D.	<i>Mud City: Breadwinner #3</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Ellis, D.	<i>My Name is Parvana: Breadwinner #4</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Flores-Galbis, E.	<i>90 Miles to Havana</i>	Fiction based on author’s experiences	Intermediate, Young adult
Gleitzman, M.	<i>Now</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Gonzalez, C.D.	<i>The Red Umbrella</i>	Fiction	Young adult

Gruener, R., Gruener, J., and Gratz, A.	<i>Prisoner B-3087</i>	Fiction inspired by author’s experiences	Young adult
Hoffman, M.	<i>The Color of Home</i>	Picture book	Primary
Jacobsen, R.	<i>Rescued Images: Memories of a Childhood in Hiding</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Asgedom, M.	<i>Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy’s Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Cole, T. C.	<i>Wall</i>	Picture book	Primary, Intermediate
Friedman, D. D.	<i>Escaping into the Night</i>	Fiction	Young adult
Harlow, J. H.	<i>Watcher</i>	Fiction	Intermediate
Heuvel, E.	<i>Family Secret</i>	Fiction, Graphic novel	Intermediate, Young Adult
Kobald, I.	<i>My Two Blankets</i>	Picture book	Primary
Kuntz, D.	<i>Lost and Found Cat: The True Story of Kunkush’s Incredible Journey</i>	Nonfiction, Picture book	Primary
Lai, T.	<i>Inside Out and Back Again</i>	Fiction inspired by author’s own life, Novel in verse	Intermediate, Young adult
Macdonald, M.	<i>Odette’s Secrets</i>	Fiction	Intermediate
Marx, T.	<i>A Boy from Kosovo</i>	Nonfiction	Intermediate
Matthews, J.	<i>Children Growing Up with War</i>	Nonfiction, Photo journalism	Young adult

Naidoo, B.	<i>Other side of Truth</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Pinkney, A.D.	<i>The Red Pencil</i>	Fiction, Novel in verse	Intermediate, Young adult
Polacco, P.	<i>Blessing Cup</i>	Picture book	Primary
Polacco, P.	<i>Butterfly</i>	Picture book	Primary
Railsback, L.	<i>Betti on the High Wire</i>	Fiction	Intermediate, Young adult
Russo, M.	<i>I Will Come Back for You: A Family in Hiding during WWII</i>	Picture book inspired by family's experiences	Primary
Ruurs, M.	<i>Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey</i>	Picture book	Primary
Sanna, F.	<i>The Journey</i>	Picture book	Primary
Shea, P.D., & Yang, Y.	<i>The Whispering Cloth</i>	Picture book	Primary, Intermediate
Short, D., & Tinajero, J.	<i>Journey Home</i>	Picture book	Primary, Intermediate
Shulvitz, U.	<i>How I Learned Geography</i>	Picture book	Primary, Intermediate
Simon, T., & Simon R.	<i>Oskar and the Eight Blessings</i>	Picture book	Primary
St. John, W.	<i>Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team that Changed a Town</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Thor, A.	<i>A Faraway Island</i>	Fiction	Intermediate
Voorhoeve, A.C.	<i>My Family for the War</i>	Fiction	Young adult

Williams, K.L.	<i>My Name Is Sangoel</i>	Picture book	Primary
Wells, R., & Fernandez, S.	<i>My Havana: Memories of a Cuban boyhood.</i>	Fiction inspired by fact	Intermediate
Woodruff, E.	<i>The Memory Coat</i>	Picture book	Primary
Yousafzai, M.	<i>I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World</i>	Nonfiction	Intermediate
Yousafzai, M.	<i>I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban</i>	Nonfiction	Young adult
Whelan, G.	<i>After the Train</i>	Fiction	Intermediate
Williams, K.	<i>Brothers in Hope: The story of the Lost Boys of Sudan</i>	Picture book	Primary, Intermediate
Williams, K.	<i>Four Feet, Two Sandals</i>	Picture book	Primary

Conclusion

There are numerous quality books and resources available for teachers interested in intentionally incorporating the refugee experience into their curriculum, and the benefits of doing so are great for all students of all grade levels. In her novel in verse, *Home of the Brave*, author Katherine Applegate says, “Today, tomorrow, sooner or later, you will meet someone who is lost, just as you yourself have been lost, and as you will be lost again someday. And when that happens, it is your duty to say ‘I’ve been lost, too. Let me help you find your way home’” (p. 253). I truly believe the WAESOL community is full of amazing educators who, in teaching about refugees, can inspire the future generation (refugees and non-refugees alike) to have courage on their own journeys and empathy and strength to help support others, in learning, in life, and to find their ways home.

References

- Annenberg Learner. (2016). In the news: Curriculum resources for teaching about refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.learner.org/resources/refugees>
- Applegate, K. (2007). *Home of the Brave*. New York, NY: Square Fish.
- BBC News Services (2016). Syrian journey: Choose your own escape route. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32057601>
- Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix-xi.
- BRYCS: Bridging Youth and Children’s Services. (2017). Immigrant/refugee awareness instructional materials. Retrieved from <http://brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Immigrant-Refugee-Awareness-Instructional-Materials.cfm>
- Davis, R. (n.d.). Teaching about refugees: Curriculum units and lessons. Retrieved from <https://blogs.commonsworld.org/rochelledavis/refugee-video-project/>
- Finnerty, D. (2015). Migrant crisis: Trauma takes toll on mental health. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35102320>
- McDermott, K. (2017). Where Seattle’s refugees come from and other things you should know. Retrieved from <http://kuow.org/post/where-seattles-refugees-come-and-other-things-you-should-know>
- Mosle, S. (2016). The new high-school outsiders. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/11/magazine/refugee-studentsboise.html?_r=0
- Parsons, L.T., & Rietschlin, A. (2014) Emigrant, immigrant, and trafficked experiences. In C. Hill (Ed.), *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature* (pp. 130-156). NY: Routledge. UNHCR (2001-2017). Teacher resources. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-resources.html>
- US Department of State. (2016). Fact sheet: Fiscal year 2016 refugee admissions. Retrieved from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/10/262776.htm>



A former high school English teacher, Janine J. Darragh is an Assistant Professor of Literacy and ESL at University of Idaho’s College of Education where she instructs courses in ESL, Adolescent Literacy, and Young Adult Literature. Her research interests are sociocultural issues in teaching and learning, children’s and young adult literature, and teacher preparation.