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United by Language, Literacy and Learning: Creating Spaces in Schools to Support Refugee Literacy

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This paper discusses the Refugee Action Support program, which is a program of literacy support for newly arrived refugee high school students in Australia. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that while some refugee students do achieve success in schools, many refugee students arriving in Australia under the humanitarian program fail to attain a level of education that will give them access to and allow them to participate in tertiary education. Severe disruptions to education are a consistent feature for these students making current levels of support inadequate to meet the needs of refugee background students who are still on their language learning journey as they make the transition from primary school to secondary school. The Refugee Action Support program is an example of a service learning initiative that facilitates spaces where refugee youth can negotiate language forms and practices in consultation with pre-service teachers and experienced teachers and explore the application of language-in-context through the scaffolding and situated practices arranged by a competent English Second Language instructor.

Australia has a long history of welcoming refugee communities into the broader social fabric and likewise of benefiting from the contributions made by these communities to Australian society. However, there are many barriers that can negatively impact the successful settlement of refugee youth, particularly of those individuals arriving as unaccompanied minors. Schools have the potential to provide valuable and safe spaces where students of refugee background can develop to participate fully and successfully in the Australian community. Many families and/or students hold high aspirations of educational and employment success, and there is evidence to indicate that young people demonstrate independence and resilience, despite direct or vicarious experience of trauma (Matthews, 2008). Nevertheless, refugee students represent a “high risk group which faces great challenges in terms of adaption to the school system, acculturation, social adaptation, English language learning, and eventual academic success” (Brown, 2005). It is consistently recognized that support with English language and literacy skills is a vital area in which refugee youth require additional assistance (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). This includes basic skills in reading and writing as well as the socialized reading and writing skills required to learn and communicate within social practices. This paper will discuss the Refugee Action Support program (RAS) as a case study. RAS is a school-university- community partnership with principles that recognize the specific barriers that refugee high school students face in education access. Pre-service teachers in RAS are engaged as literacy tutors so that refugee students can map a career path. RAS also provides resources for the engagement of staff (universities and schools) to implement the strategies necessary to maximize retention of refugee students in secondary schools. The aim of this paper is to present a model which can be used by others to jointly construct and support refugee students’ learning

in high school classroom contexts.

Literature Review

Refugee Education:

While there is a large and diverse body of literature on refugees there is limited material concerned with school-based interventions and programs for refugee school students. However, it is possible to draw on several independent studies conducted on refugee education in the UK, Australia, Canada and the USA. Sidhu and Taylor (2009) found that English Second Language (ESL) teachers were 'bearing the brunt' of the insufficient funding in supporting the growing numbers of refugee students. The empirical findings of Sidhu and Taylor (2009) support other Australian research which has reported that teachers often feel ill equipped and under resourced to meet the complex needs of the increased numbers of new arrivals (Naidoo, 2009a; Naidoo, 2009b). Arnot, Pinson, and Candappa (2009) in a case study of three secondary schools in the UK, asserted that schools and teachers can create an environment of compassion that will lead to confidence and self-esteem among refugee learners while Bolloten and Spafford (1998) suggest that schools in London "identify an experienced member of staff to liaise with outside agencies and refugee communities, make available information about refugee communities and ensure a consistent approach is shared by all workers, including ancillary and non-teaching staff." Kanu (2008) identified the need for teacher preparation institutions in Canada to better equip teachers to respond more successfully to an increasingly diverse student population while Kaprielian-Churchill (1996) in writing about the trauma and loss of Canadian refugees felt like the USA researchers (Berry, 1987; Berry, 1995; Ogbu, 1995a; Ogbu, 1995b) that the voluntariness of the cultural contact will predict outcomes for refugee students. Since refugee migration is involuntary an oppositional cultural frame of reference develops in the subordinate, disadvantaged minority group that includes attitudes, behaviours, and speech styles which are stigmatized by the dominant group.

Literacy Development

Following Street (1984, 1993, 1995), literacy is defined as an ideological practice (rather than an "autonomous" or neutral set of skills) that is grounded in and influenced by social, historical, political, and economic factors. The research indicates that the primary need for refugee students in classroom is additional time which involves targeted learning activities that lead to the application of literacy in a new language as a competent decoder, user and participant (Freebody & Luke, 2003). This requires classroom teachers to extend their pedagogical skills to include knowledge and teaching of both second language learning and literacy alongside subject content area for refugee students (Dooley, 2009; Woods, 2009). Creese (2005, p. 188) found that "language work in the content classroom is given little status when set alongside other knowledge hierarchies supported by societal and educational agendas". Professional development of current and pre-service teachers is therefore essential to establish a language-based approach to learning that reinforces the needs of second language learning in acquiring the language forms and practices (Gee, 2000). This pedagogical skill could elevate the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rowe, 2005). Other research studies show that students who are in classrooms with teachers who have knowledge of literacy practices experience

greater success (McCutchen, Green, Abbot, & Sanders, 2009; Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009) and that those teachers who are able to support their students emotionally increase the students' motivation and academic achievement (Rudasill, Gallagher, & White, 2010).

Service Learning Pedagogy

Sullivan (1991) found that pre-service teachers who had completed community service internships had a great degree of success in their student teaching experience, noting specifically ease in planning activities, communicating with parents, and using the interpersonal skills necessary to deal effectively with adolescents. Similarly, other researchers noted that pre-service teachers engaged in service learning work with, rather than for, communities and can better relate to culturally diverse groups (Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000) and develop interpersonal skills and social responsibility (Eyler, 2001).

The Refugee Action Support Program

The Refugee Action Support program is a partnership project between the University of Western Sydney (UWS), the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation and the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training. It engages pre-service teachers from the Master of Teaching secondary program at UWS and refugee high school students in small group in-school and after-school tutoring. Greater Western Sydney where UWS is located is a community in transition, with a very diverse population culturally, socioeconomically, and ethnically. The aim of service learning programs like Refugee Action Support is to deliver effective and sustainable support to schools in the West and South Western regions of Sydney, so that refugee students and other disadvantaged high school students can feel safe and begin to learn. Refugee Action Support provides targeted literacy support to humanitarian refugee students who have transitioned within the previous two years, from Intensive English Centres (IECs) to mainstream secondary schools. In the case of newly arrived African refugee students, their literacy development may be below expected age-level since many were unable to attend school for any continuous period of time in their homeland due to war and unrest. Therefore, functioning successfully in school and obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary in making a satisfying life may be difficult for many of them.

Many have had no formal education and may never have held a pencil, read a book, or have had access to any other educational resources even in their first language. Cranitch (2010, p.259) says that these students may have problems with their ability to concentrate or focus on a task; lack appropriate social behaviour; and have difficulty with simple tasks such as cutting and pasting – due to a lack of opportunities to develop their fine motor skills. Matthews (2008, p. 36) says that one of the reasons for her concern for the education of African and Middle Eastern refugee students is that, “English Second Language pedagogy is itself culturally specific and based on teaching European and Asian migrants from literate backgrounds.” However, Matthews (2008, p.40) quotes an English Second Language teacher saying that “the thing with working with refugee youth is that they are resilient and strong survivors, they have a lot of strategies and strengths ...They come to school every day, sometimes they have a long journey. They don't give up – they never give up... they really work hard.”

In Australian schools, refugee students with little or interrupted schooling have several

“key gaps” in their knowledge such as “gaps in cognitive development, little or no age-appropriate experience of literacy, numeracy, use of print and multi-modal texts, limited content knowledge of the world and little experience of problem based learning” (Cranitch, 2010, p. 257). It is therefore important that teachers/educators understand the significantly different needs of refugee students and that they employ the “correct strategies and approaches’ that best assist them in their learning” (Luizzi & Saker 2008, p.1).

The Master of Teaching (secondary) is an eighteen month post-graduate qualification, within which there are three professional experiences or practicum. Two of these, Professional Experience 1 and 2 are traditional student teaching placements, where the focus is to instruct pre-service teachers in the art and the mechanics of teaching, and to gain some understanding of the daily functions of schools. The third professional experience (PE3) is essentially a community-engaged practicum comprising 60 hours, which requires pre-service teachers to extend their knowledge and experience beyond the classroom, using their pedagogical and inter-personal skills to support young people in different ways. Refugee Action Support is one such strand in Professional Experience 3. Intensive training including small group instruction, language and scaffolding literacy teaching strategies, deconstruction, analysis and resource creation, is provided to the tutors by the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. For the refugee students, tutorial support is provided every Thursday over a twelve week period for three hours a week. The first hour is spent in class with the class teacher and the refugee student, and a further two hours are spent providing face-to-face tutoring in tutoring centres at the school. Tutoring Centres are co-ordinated by Department of Education and Training qualified teachers who supervise the school students, provide support to the tutors where necessary, and monitor the tutoring sessions. Pre-service teachers are obliged to complete several formal assignment reflective tasks related to their Refugee Action Support experience, including participation in a networked discussion board.

In 2007, the Refugee Action Support program involved four schools, 36 tutors, and an estimated 60 students; in 2008 over 80 tutors provided support to 216 students across nine schools; and in 2009 and 2010, there were 96 tutors for 239 students across ten high schools. In 2012, there are 28 schools, 291 tutors and 530 refugee students receiving support. The problem at the centre of the Refugee Action Support program is the social and academic ‘needs’ of a disadvantaged group of people (newly arrived refugees) who may, due to a lack, be unable to complete high school successfully, and in effect may not contribute to the country’s economic growth. The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation were initially approached by the Sudanese community members about literacy problems that young Sudanese high school students faced in secondary education. The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation then approached the regional university, who set up a meeting with the Dean of the School of Education representatives to discuss the problem and generate interest. As a result of discussions between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, the regional university and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, (the latter was represented by regional refugee support officers, school principals, Refugee Action Support teacher coordinators and a community liaison officer), the Refugee Action Support Program was accepted. It met the needs both of the school and of the refugee students, who otherwise would be enrolling in high schools without the necessary language and literacy pre-requisites to be successful.

The coordinator of the RAS program at the university is also coordinator of the Mas-

ter of Teaching subject 'Diversity, Social Justice and Equity' and has participated in the process of transforming the way pre-service teachers think. Through teaching content she tries to empower pre-service teachers by providing them with opportunities to experience themselves as active participants in the world, who can effect transnational transformations. In the Refugee Action Support program, the pre-service teachers and their identities are invoked through the "Refugee Action Support guidelines" document produced by the Department of Education and Training in which the question of 'How can we improve refugee literacy?' is indirectly addressed. This document guided the pre-service teachers in their interactions with refugee students during the tutoring process.

The RAS program has been replicated at other universities in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory in both rural and urban contexts. The RAS programs at the new sites are being brought into line with the original program even though they operate on a much smaller scale. At the regional university, the reflective task for pre-service teachers is based on a case study of ONE high school student using the ESL Scales as the structure whereas in the original program it is based on a reflective writing piece at the beginning and at the end of the tutoring session. On yet another rural campus, the RAS program has been renamed Community Learning Support and is offered to both refugee and Indigenous students and is part of their community-based practicum identified under the course heading Professional Experience in Community and Culture. At a metropolitan university, who initially trialed RAS in an elective Action Support Partnerships for their pre-service primary teachers have since extended the opportunity to its secondary pre-service teachers. Secondary pre-service teachers are now able to combine service learning tutoring with their traditional practicum. This brings the transferred program in line with the original RAS program.

Significance of the Refugee Action Support Program

The significance of our project lies in the quality and form of learning and teaching resources it supports in refugee communities, particularly in NSW but more broadly in national and international contexts. While the literature indicates there is no consensus on the best or most effective way of promoting literacy development among refugee students, preliminary research has shown that supplementary literacy and numeracy support outside of formal schooling is making a difference (Naidoo 2009a; Naidoo 2009b). For example, an evaluation of the RAS program has shown that RAS meets the needs, abilities and learning styles of refugee students and provides them with a better chance to succeed at school. Refugee students who participated in RAS were engaged and motivated to learn; successfully completed and submitted class assignments and were given new and diverse learning opportunities. At a time when public schools are forced to make difficult choices in their curriculum to respond to both budget cuts and performance based testing, new research challenges the assumption that support strategies are a useful, but not essential, educational strategy for refugee students and schools. Indeed, this program shows that support strategies may be particularly beneficial educationally for refugees and schools, making it an important, though overlooked, strategy for closing the achievement gap in Australian schools. Because support programs like the RAS service learning initiative represents an "authentic" approach to teaching and learning, the use of service-learning as a pedagogical practice appears to have the potential to help meet both the academic and broader developmental goals of education.

Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) noted the impact on student engagement and achievement when curriculum engages students in the construction of knowledge, ownership of the cognitive work, and authentic connection to the “real world” and community. Support programs like RAS are a primary example of engaging students in such “shared inquiry,” meaningful decision-making, and integration of class work and community life (Zeldin, 2004), all of which work to support refugee students and pre-service teachers in both their academic and community involvements. Initiatives such as RAS question traditional notions of authority within the classroom in that the instructor and the texts are no longer the ultimate arbiters of truth; instead, the student’s lived experience contributes to the attainment of knowledge. This significance links also to the focus on knowledge transfer in both content and process, the manner through which content is accessed and used in the community/school/learning context.

The Refugee Action Support Program has been analyzed using various paradigms such as critical ethnography (Naidoo 2008), Structuration Theory (Naidoo 2009a), Bourdieu (Naidoo, 2009b), and critical theory (Naidoo 2009c). More recently, Actor Network Theory (ANT), which offers multiple perspectives, has provided a promising way to understanding the RAS program as it transfers from one context to another across time and space. While ANT may be a productive way to understand refugee education, it is nonetheless beyond the scope of this paper and could be a possible direction for a future discussion of the Refugee Action Support Program.

Conclusion

As with many service learning initiatives, the Refugee Action Support program has challenged the boundedness of the traditional, formal, university curriculum through experiential learning ‘in community’. Such ‘border pedagogy’ results in a system in which there is a shared understanding of purpose and meaning. The contribution of the Refugee Action Support is to provide a model to learn from, and to offer examples that illustrate how refugee young people learn, what they learn, and how teacher educators should plan a curriculum that fosters transformation of refugee education. At the same time, the Refugee Action Support Program is also a learning model for pre-service teachers because it allows pre-service teachers to acquire new knowledge by way of pedagogy for teaching refugee high school students. Pre-service teachers also learn to work as a team in a tutoring context; obtaining feedback from coordinating teachers, training from the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, and the opportunity to combine tutoring with teaching practice. Finally, pre-service teachers reflect on the experience to understand the lessons of tutoring and teaching refugee students as well as prepare for their roles as future educators.

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