

Literally speechless? Refugees to Canada overcome preliteracy and trauma through a literacy of the heart

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This article examines how teachers can draw on the arts as effective examples of preliterate communication in order to meet the needs of primary-age refugees with trauma while in their most vulnerable stage of arrival as well as facilitate their critical steps toward developing a sense of belonging.

Spoken language is our most forceful means of communication, not only because it allows us to convey meaning, but also because it simultaneously carries complex nuances and emotion. To be mute is to be silenced, as well as to have one's identity taken away. However, in many Canadian classrooms, newly arrived refugees lack basic English and experience invisibility on multiple levels. When writing is also not an option due to interrupted or no schooling, these refugees are considered "preliterate", lacking literacy even in their own language.

Encouraging all students to engage in the arts provides holistic educational opportunities where children can authentically learn from one another as well as explore who they are while they work out real world problems and find meaning in their experiences (Barber 2019). This is even more crucial for young children who have been forced from their homes, lost loved ones, migrated to different countries, and may have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Approximately one quarter of refugees in Canada have directly experienced trauma or witnessed violence towards others (Field 2016).

The meaning conveyed by language can go beyond the literal and is not restrained by what sounds are uttered; rather, it is determined by what the mind can comprehend (Eisner 2003). For example, art forms such as dance, music and the visual arts produce parallel languages that uniquely deliver messages through both affective and cognitive stimulation. The arts also organize meaning so it can be experienced on a conscious level and shared with others. Perhaps most astonishing, the arts can go beyond verbal language, and impress meanings on us that are in the realm of the ineffable. Through their beauty, subtlety, deep insight, and innovation, the arts can also produce emotions that are so profound that an intense feeling of love for the human race seems to be the only way to describe it. Even refugee children, within a community of peers creating art, experience something akin to an aesthetic understanding of others that unlocks the door to a 'literacy of the heart'.

In this article, Susan delves into her work with pre-service teachers in Language Arts, and her research which involves interviewing in-service teachers in Greater Vancouver who have taught refugees since the 2015 influx into Canada. Lorna frequently teaches refugees at elementary schools and is also a teacher educator who uses the arts to inspire creativity and critical thinking through multiliteracies. We both believe in the importance of art as a pathway to meet others in their place, share ideas about self and world, and explore new identities and possibilities.

Difficult beginnings

For teachers assigned preliterate refugee students, important questions arise, such as:

- Where is the best place to begin?
- Do I focus first on settling refugees into the classroom or start with basic literacy?
- Should I just give them time to get used to things and allow them to set the pace?

Given the fact that refugee students can lack voice at the very time they need it most, teachers themselves may face challenges due to a lack of knowledge. For instance, refugees mostly have come from rural areas, have had little to no schooling, perhaps never have held a pencil before, and their disruptive behaviour in the classroom is but a tip of the iceberg in terms of their symptoms of trauma. Yet these same young children are also resilient; they can learn how to learn, and time is on their side.

First step: How ‘intense’ is the classroom?

When we visit classrooms, we often see vibrant places with materials for a variety of activities. Typically, shelves are packed with books, writing materials, baskets of toys, games, manipulatives, and puzzles. Walls are decorated with student work, posters, and brightly coloured pictures of the alphabet, representative images, word walls and charts. There may also be plants, a class pet, small work tables, carpet area and much more. Knowing this, we must consider that due to previous trauma, when refugees enter a classroom with too much stimulation to process, they may enter “survival mode” due to perceiving possible threats in the environment. When children become “triggered”, the rational, high functioning area of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, or “learning brain”, cannot be accessed. Rather, in this state, their sense of self-preservation dominates, and all attention is redirected to the more primitive brain stem and the amygdala. As their fear increases causing more erratic behaviour, no amount of verbal explanations, commands or arguments can get through (Field 2016). We feel sometimes it could be helpful to lean toward more neutral colours, natural light and bare space on the walls and floor, if possible.



Creating Safety & Trust:

- consistent routines
 - notice which stimuli trigger reactions
 - preview books, videos, etc. for upsetting material
 - plan for fire drills, bells, or chaotic moments
 - active listening
 - set boundaries with clear expectations
 - offer choices when possible to create feelings of power
 - encourage attachment with a teacher or another adult
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Second step: Connect with parents

Although we may not be able to communicate through words, this can be an opportunity to practice other means of delivering information. Smiling and gesturing for parents to enter our room is a positive sign of welcome to newcomers. Take them on a tour. Show them where their child should hang their jacket, store their lunch, and leave their shoes. Be enthusiastic about books, puzzles, flashcards and other learning materials. Point out the toilet, sink, soap and towels. Show other objects, and model their use. Do not take for granted the parents know about fundamental school activities. This is a first chance to build an important relationship and let the parents know we are on the same team; everyone wants what is best for their child.

Third step: Establish safety

Schools and classrooms are often unpredictable, especially to newcomer children. For example, a refugee may be overwhelmed by sensory overload; they may panic if they are not prepared for fire drills or other sharp, loud noises. Keenly aware of their vulnerability, their levels of fear and anxiety rise, and they may believe that previous experiences of trauma are somehow happening again, right now.

What safety looks like in a classroom are consistent routines. For example, each day, meet refugee children at the door, usher them to their locker, guide them to the carpet for circle time, help them choose a picture book for read alouds, and so forth. Also useful is for the teacher to create picture cards with common transitions depicted, such as an image of a child putting on a jacket to indicate it's time for recess, or a child eating food, and a parent framed by the classroom door to take the child home.

If a child becomes overstimulated and not able to regulate, Lorna often takes the child outside to a nearby park or wooded area. Going on a silent "nature walk" draws the child's attention to the sound of birds, squirrels and the rustling of leaves. This natural world soothes the student who responds to the fresh air, light and space. Related to this, Lorna ensures there is a calm corner in the classroom where a child can retreat to have solitude, perhaps with a set of cushions, comfort toys and soft light. Here, sometimes Lorna replicates the nature walk indoors by setting up the child with an iPad to watch YouTube videos, for example, with recorded sounds of a meadow, rain forest or ocean.

Fourth step: Trust

Creating a Sense of Belonging:

- include refugee in all class activities
 - do not use “pull-outs” for individual instruction (outside the class)
 - look for openings to discuss culture, interests
 - avoid asking direct questions about their traumatic experiences, but always show caring through being available and close listening, especially when they show readiness to disclose
 - model acceptance, interest and sensitivity for other students in the class.
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Trauma in refugee children impacts their attachment to other people and their ability to self-regulate due to high levels of stress and uncertainty. Forming an emotional attachment to a teacher or other school caregiver with whom the child has established trust will enable them to find their calm centre and sense of self in the present. Strong attachment can reduce the impact of the loss of a family member and fears of abandonment, which require time. These children are learning how to manage their responses to stimuli, yet the emotions that can easily spiral out of control (Barber 2019).

In the early weeks, it may be possible for the teacher to bond with the refugee, determine their level of tolerance for certain activities and observe students’ interests. The teacher may also be able to discern if there is ‘a buddy’, another child in the classroom or school who has the right temperament to join the refugee in parallel play or guide them on the playground. As more time passes, the trusted teacher can transfer the refugee’s trust to

another adult, perhaps the school counsellor or an educational assistant in the classroom.

Offering both safety and trust, Lorna sometimes directs a child to the school’s computer room which can also provide the desired calm and solitude. One refugee student Lorna worked with had multiple health issues and fragility prevented participation in many physical education activities. At those times, under the supervision of another trusted computer and resource teacher, the student explored safe websites. Further, this led to forming other reliable relationships and making new friends who also often sought computer time. This space became an emotional safe haven for the refugee when there were trying times and sudden meltdowns in class.

Step five: Relationships

Young children come into schools seeking relationships for comfort, identity development, and support for their learning process (Field 2016). Their desire to form relationships with other children and become an accepted member of their peer group is a large part of their daily lives. For this to occur, these students must feel safe and at ease in their environment which is also tied to healthy development and learning. In this way, all of the above steps are interrelated; specifically, when a child regains control of their responses to the environment and feels safe, then they begin to flourish because they understand the environment is mostly dependable which allows them to turn their attention to forming relationships. Once reliable relationships are in place, the student is motivated to acquire more English to communicate more fluently, and they step more firmly onto the path of curricular learning.

The Role of the Arts

The question still remains: how do preliterate refugees learn to allay their fears for safety, trust and a sense of belonging without language to tell others who they are and what they have been through?

Without inclusion, which is so important to school success, where does the teacher begin to empower them as students and as people? Without a means of communication, a refugee child has no outlet for all the emotions they endure in a school day, and little means to comfort themselves.

Stewart *et al.* (2018) impress upon teachers that it is crucial to listen to refugees' stories and empathize with and respect what they have experienced. All refugees are individuals, no matter if they have come from the same country of origin, the same religion, or the same ethnicity. Some may have trauma while others who prevailed through the same horrors may not.

It is important to let each refugee decide how much they want to share so they do not become overwhelmed. However, when they are still acquiring fundamental vocabulary, stories can also be told through releasing emotions in dance, listening to music, painting and drama that do not involve words.

When encouraged to respond through creative or expressive arts, children naturally act out what they are reliving (Argüello *et al.* 2014; Malchiodi 2015). Each participant becomes a valued member of the group as they cycle through roles in imaginative or dramatic play. Often opportunities occur for refugees to trust their peers and lead within the group. Themes may arise that are of interest to explore, such as safety, self awareness, personal strengths, coping, and patience that all reinforce a sense of belonging. Play is children's work, and they apply

The girl looked up at me while she was colouring a Barbie house picture.
 "Policemen have guns, no?"
 "Yes", I said, "but they are nice and try to help us."
 "Why do they have guns then? Who do they shoot?"
 "No one. Unless they really have to."
 "Will they shoot my family?"
 "No!" I was trying desperately to change the subject.
 "Do they shoot babies?"
 I couldn't breathe. "No. They will never, ever shoot a baby in Canada."
 I could tell she was still not convinced.
 (Primary school teacher and 7 year old girl from Syria.)

themselves to solving problems in their world. St. Thomas and Johnson (2007) state that through play and creative engagement, all young people can enter their inner selves and access voices of imagination to explore multiple versions of stories or events and create new outcomes. If they are able to see things in new ways, they can also reconstruct new or preferred meanings. This is a necessary component in healing.

Personal, autobiographical, and uncensored unconscious material can arise. The content cannot be predicted... In the creative process, anger, fear, conflict, and anxiety may become visible... Conflict is necessary for development to occur... They may grow through conquering their worst fears, seeing themselves now in the role of the survivor, and, importantly, discovering the deeper meanings in tragedies. (St. Thomas *et al.* 2007 pp.22-24)

Lorna suggests that in the early stages, when she shares a picture book with refugees, it is an opportunity for introducing vocabulary while the students are engaged in working out the story. Afterwards, the trusted teacher may join the class and draw or paint a response to the book with them. Refugees will follow her lead, and quickly become absorbed in working with the materials, content to create pictures from their minds. She has also observed students continue exploring ideas out on the playground or in other spaces, still learning, but as a relief from focused or structured learning. Other times Lorna uses clay with its tactile sensation, puppets, found items, or images cut out of magazines for collages that shift refugees to deeper thought. Susan has observed another class where a boy became fascinated by large red plastic picnic cups. Every day for one month, he passionately built large fortresses and other architectural wonders. Clearly, this soothed him as well as gave him great pleasure to explore this interest and permitted him to find his safe place.

Benefits of the Arts

- reduce stress
- appropriate release of emotions
- non-verbal
- non-academic
- produce pleasure
- holistic learning (draws on both affective and cognitive skills)
- personal expression
- leads to sharing
- test out new identities
- introduction to literacy

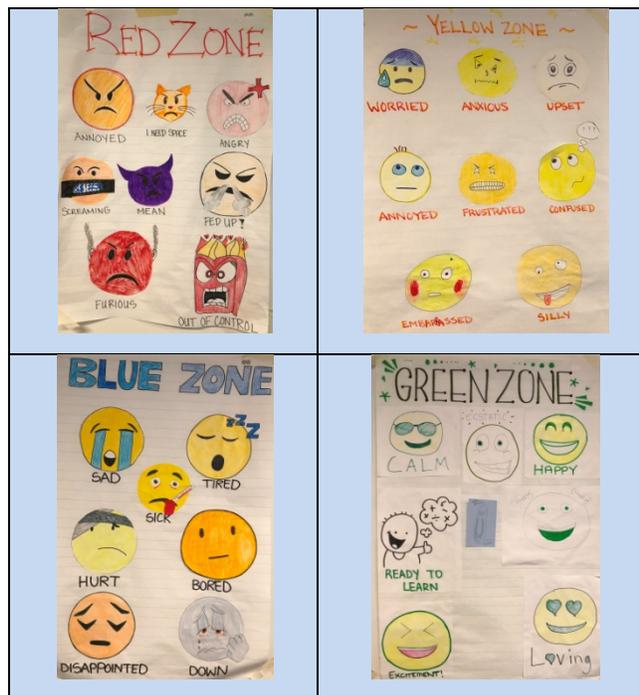
As mentioned above, at times when the whole class takes a nature walk, Lorna will ask students to take photos or make videos while outdoors. Back in the class, with a partner, students are encouraged to add music and phrases, describing the scene or creating a story. As a culminating project, the students painted a classroom mural to accompany their videos.

Another pointed example from St. Thomas and Johnson (2007) was when boys used clay to create cars, then moved on to trucks, to jeeps, and finally with armoured vehicles with guns on top. Some began to discuss how dangerous it was to be out on the streets and how to stay hidden, allowing their teacher and other students to catch glimpses into previous lives. This serves as an important reminder that teachers should not ask direct questions about refugees' pasts but allow memories to emerge as students become more secure in their environments and more trusting. Lorna also found that making art together permitted openings for the teacher to be naturally curious about their place of birth, cultural traditions, and food, while at the same time

appreciating the students' art, ideas and successes in their steps toward early literacy.

Music also reduces tensions in students, and selecting danceable beats encourages participation. Lorna remarks on the inclusivity of refugee students, some with many learning and emotional needs, collaborating tirelessly on rap dance routines. She often extends their interests by finding online music videos from their country, then observing them improvise new dance routines. All the while, language and embodied conversations occur between peers.

Susan has encouraged preservice teachers to bridge activities with their students, helping them to associate colours directly with emotions which in turn can be depicted as emojis, allowing a natural extension into learning the vocabulary and naming specific emotional states (the image on the right displays four examples of the students' work). Here as well are opportunities to name emotions evoked by music such as happy sounds vs. angry instruments and carry them into other areas, such as emotional regulation. In these lessons, it is important to avoid giving the impression, for instance, that students should suppress their anger, frustration, or sadness, but to understand and feel all of them, so as to learn how to control them.



To return to the questions above that teachers may ask themselves, the answers are not clear and simple. Teachers may begin by concurrently addressing all of these steps and continue to develop them over the school year. Refugees will need time and support as they engage in literacy activities. Art will allow them both to adjust socially while working on their internal struggles and discovering who they are now, in this new, hybrid life.

Gradually, teachers will begin to notice change. Single words become phrases, and then sentences; scribbles appear under drawings, followed by letters, and eventually invented spelling of words. Soon, change becomes permanent. If refugees are able to let go of their trauma and grow from a sense of strength and resilience, over time, there is veritable transformation.

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