

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



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LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

## LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

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## **SERVING LOW LITERATE IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE YOUTH: CHALLENGES AND PROMISING PRACTICES**

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### *1 Introduction*

In the US and elsewhere, we see increasing numbers of first and second generation immigrants with comparatively low levels of education, limited English language and literacy skills, and limited attachment not only to school, but to work or job training as well. Many are young people 16 – 24 who are no longer in the public school system or may never have been part of that system because they either were too old to enter high school when they arrived or because they realized their chances of graduating were slim and therefore never chose not to enter school. Still others have to work to support themselves and their families. A surprising number of young immigrants live on their own. In addition to the multiple educational and economic needs of this group, there are cultural challenges that confront young immigrants in transition, particularly those whose lack of educational opportunities and subsequent limited literacy skills put them at the margins of society.

Young immigrants often see themselves as neither an integral part of their home culture nor as a valued part of the new society. Most are oriented not to their parents' pasts, but to their own futures, futures that are made possible in large part through access to quality education. These young immigrants may enter adult literacy programs to get a high school diploma or its equivalent, a GED. Some simply want to further develop their skills to increase their job prospect or to gain access to higher education.

In some cases, young immigrants over 16 attend adult ESL classes because they have been mandated by the courts to attend classes as a condition of probation after run-ins with the criminal justice system. In the US, many prisons also offer ESL and GED classes for young offenders in correctional institutions. In fact, all incarcerated individuals who are limited proficient in English must take these ESL courses so that they can communicate in English with staff and other inmates and to help them succeed in GED courses, a requirement for anyone who has not completed high school.

The most vulnerable group among out-of-school youth are those who have had only minimal schooling and therefore are not yet proficient in print literacy, either in the home language the language they are trying to learn. Some in this group may have only a few years of education but have acquired some literacy on their own, while others may still have difficulty expressing even simple ideas and opinions in writing. Still others may be altogether new to literacy and may never have held a pencil before.

This paper explores the special characteristics of young immigrants and provides an overview of the challenges in serving low literate immigrant and refugee youth who are learning the language of their new country<sup>6</sup>. The paper highlights some of the key challenges facing both in-school adolescent second language learners and out-of-school youth and presents exceptional programs and promising directions in serving these populations.

## *2 Educational Contexts*

In many countries, young people who are out-of-school may participate in free adult literacy classes designed to improve reading and writing skills. But the slow pace and redundancy of many of these classes - particularly those that have rolling enrollment - the emphasis on conversational language and life skills, and the lack of integration with a "next step" program that can move them into training or higher education often leads to high dropout rates and disengagement from formal learning.

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<sup>6</sup> While North America refers to foreign born residents as "immigrants", Europeans tend to use the phrase "individuals with migrant backgrounds" for residents of one country who have immigrated from another. Although the term "refugee" can be subsumed under the larger category of legal immigrants, I have chosen to use "immigrants and refugees" to highlight the special needs of individuals from war torn countries who have fled political persecution, natural disasters, or civil strife.

For the most part, adult education classes that mix older adults with adolescent learners have not been very successful in integrating the two groups. It has been difficult for young immigrant youth, particularly those with little formal or with interrupted schooling, to find programs and places that engender a sense of belonging and give them a voice that can be heard over the stress and confusion of resettlement. As adolescent newcomers try to forge a positive identity that spans languages and cultures, lack of attachment to a positive peer group or to family can make this process of adaptation and integration even more challenging. Gender roles may need to be redefined and new roles within and outside of the family structure may need to be renegotiated. In cases where spouses, families or friends see the wish to become educated as a betrayal of traditional cultural norms, deeper rifts may ensue. In many cases young people without strong social support simply choose the path of least resistance and give up on their educational goals.

Reattaching out-of-school youth to courses within the adult education system has been a challenge because few places exist for youth who don't have a solid foundation in literacy in their home language and who are now attempting to develop these skills in a second or third language (Whiteside, 2009). The goal for many of these students is to "finish school" and get a credential that allows them to enter college or a vocational program. However, few can invest in the many years that it might take to develop the school-based literacy skills that would allow them to gain a diploma. Even in-school youth who start school speaking only the home language require an estimated five to seven years of study to be at par with their native speaking peers (Collier, 1995; Hakuta et. al., 2000). For out-of-school youth who are still acquiring literacy in a new language, the prospect of acquiring such proficiency is daunting. As a result, motivation to persist tends to be low as young people feel discouraged and overwhelmed. For those who start with slightly stronger literacy skills, the academic subject matter that needs to be learned (math, science, social science, English literature and poetry) has little relationship to the language and literacy that are important in the lives of young people who are more apt to want to hear, read and write about peer relationships, new media, technology and social networks. Yet few adult language teachers are trained to make connections between the interests of young immigrants and the knowledge and skills these students are asked to acquire.

### *2.1 The Need for Cognitive Academic Skills*

Even in cases where students have developed good L2 conversational skills, they often face difficulties acquiring the cognitive academic skills necessary for school or for success in vocational programs that rely on lectures and textbooks. These challenges are compounded when youth don't have exposure to age appropriate texts written at the students' proficiency level or when there is limited opportunity to participate in discourse that uses the more formal language of academics. Limited knowledge of the vocabulary and concepts that are part of content-based instruction in academic or technical courses can seriously hinder progress of adolescent newcomers who may know the everyday language needed to

negotiate life in the streets but don't yet have an understanding of relatively common words such as analyze, process, observe, reduce, justify, etc. – all part of a set of words that appear in “A High-Incidence Academic Word List” (Coxhead, 2006; 2000), a list that could be helpful to teachers and learners alike. Research tells us that L2 learners with lower vocabulary skills and limited L1 literacy have much greater difficulty comprehending written texts and that even L2 learners with higher proficiency levels face greater challenges making sense of and interpreting print than native speakers (Francis et al., 2006; Calderon et al., 2005).

### *2.2 Socio-cultural Context: Whom Do We Serve?*

Immigrant and refugee youth, like all migrants, differ in their languages, countries of origin, newcomer status, and age and gender. Differences in life experiences are highly significant as well: Young immigrants who come from stable communities at home and now are part of strong families still may have language and literacy challenges due to lack of prior education, but they are very different from youth who have fled violent conflicts or brutal wars. Some refugees in their teens and twenties have suffered unspeakable violence – they often have been victims of such violence, but in some cases, may have inflicted violence on others as well, as was the case of the boy soldiers from the Sudan (Beah, 2007; Deng, Deng, Bernstein and Ajak, 2006). Not surprisingly, young refugees who have experienced trauma may have trouble concentrating, may find sitting for hours at a desk physically stressful, and may not be able to fully participate in the educational experience that literacy programs are trying to provide. Only in the last few years have programs recognized the signs of depression caused by the traumatic experiences that young people may suffer, signs that often manifest themselves in acting out or drawing inward, behaviors that few literacy teachers are prepared to understand and address in a positive manner (see also Isserlis, this volume).

### *3 Out-of-school and Out of Mind*

Among low educated young immigrants, refugee youth are not the only group who deserves special consideration, although the level of turbulence they have experienced far exceeds that of other uprooted groups. In the US, at least, we have large numbers of immigrant students who are uneducated but whose lives go largely unnoticed since they are no longer in the school system. The most vulnerable among out-of-school youth are students who come in late adolescence and had limited or interrupted schooling as families moved to harvest crops and teenagers helped in the fields. To help these students build the strong academic skills so they can be on par with their English speaking peers and graduate from high school is a challenging task and many schools are unsuccessful in doing so. As a result, we find thousands of youth who share LESLLA characteristics. Although they are outside of the formal system, they nevertheless have a strong need continue their education so as to create a better life for themselves, move out of poverty, and find work that can sustain themselves and a family.

The numbers of out-of-school immigrant youth are particularly high in places like California – where it exceeds a quarter of a million. A report by the Public Policy Institute of California (Hill and Hayes, 2007) reports that immigrant youth who do not attend school fare poorly on many standard measures of well-being; they have lower educational attainment than their in-school counterparts, speak English less fluently, earn lower wages, and are more likely to lack health insurance and live in poverty. They are much more likely to live away from home. Significant numbers of younger immigrants (age 3 to 15) live without their own parents (52%), compared to 9% of in-school youth). They also tend to become parents themselves at a younger age (3 times more likely than their in-school counterparts). Among the older group of youth (16-22), young men predominate (nearly 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s are male). Although poverty rates are high among this group, access to services is limited and state and federal funds that are spent on youth generally do not reach these young people because the dollars go through educational institutions they do not attend. Clearly, these young people face difficult prospects and the cost of not serving them are high, not only in personal terms but in societal terms as well, as the economy increasingly depends on high skilled workers and opportunities to find well-paying work without strong English language and literacy skills are low. Despite the challenges they face, the out-of-school youth interviewed and surveyed in California expressed a great deal of interest in improving their education. More than 80% are interested in English language instruction and more than one-third would like to gain a high school diploma or the GED (high school diploma equivalent).

#### *4 The Question of Immigration Status*

The educational options available to young low-literate immigrants are constrained by the lack of appropriate high quality education available to this group. But in the US, at least, a second barrier constrains not only educational success but access to work, training, and higher education, since access to these opportunities are tied to a young person's immigration status. In the US, young people who were born outside of the US and who came to the US illegally (most with their parents, but some on their own) have the right to go to public school (and must go to school while they are of compulsory school age). Although these students may work hard and obtain a high school diploma, they remain undocumented and live outside of the law in the shadow of society. In most states, they are barred from getting a driver's license (as is anyone who is in the country without proper documentation), and they may not legally work. In states, such as Arizona, that stipulate that only youth and adults who have legal status may participate in adult education programs, undocumented adults and out-of-school youth are not allowed to attend adult ESL classes. As a consequence, thousands of young people end up working in dead-end jobs in the grey economy, where the danger of exploitation is high, or if they are apprehended, may be sent back to countries they barely know.

There have been various attempts in US Congress to regularize the situation of these students who remain in legal limbo. Bills have been and will be introduced to grant “*conditional* legal status” to young undocumented immigrants. Requirements however are stringent: Only those are eligible who have entered the US before age 16, who have been continuously present in the US for at least five years, have graduated from high school or received their GED, and have demonstrated good moral character.

*Permanent* legal status can be achieved for those who attend college or join the military service six years after having received conditional status. These stipulations are unprecedented in US history since educational choices or military service have never before been a pre-condition for legal status. The Migration Policy Institute<sup>7</sup>, a think tank in Washington, DC, estimates that 360,000 undocumented high school graduates would immediately be eligible for conditional legal status if such a law were to pass and 715,000 unauthorized youth between 5 and 17 would become eligible sometime in the future. The fate of undocumented students who have dropped out of school remains unclear. While some may feel driven to return to school and graduate from high school in order to qualify, others may lack the language, literacy and academic skills needed to meet high school graduation requirements. Others may need to work or face family responsibilities that make it difficult to persist in an adult literacy program until they obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent. Moral concerns arise as well when receiving legal status is conditioned by volunteering for military service, thus delivering recruits with few choices to the Armed Forces. Many would like to see other options such as apprenticeships or community service in the conditions for eligibility. There is strong support in the Obama administration for passage of the Dream Act and on many college campuses where young advocates rally around the legislation in solidarity with their undocumented peers. However, strong anti-immigrant forces who see any attempt at legalization as a reward for lawless behavior and an effort to weaken rather than strengthen the country may win out in the end.

#### *5 Education Profiles: Language and Literacy Proficiencies*

The professional futures and economic opportunities open to refugee and immigrant youth are shaped in large part by prior schooling and current language and literacy levels. Compared to their more educated peers, young adults who have had limited or interrupted formal schooling may languish in adult literacy classes where the majority of the students possess literacy skills in the native language although their L2 proficiency may still be limited. Even under the best of circumstances (well designed and well run programs, well trained teachers), it may take those with very limited formal education in the home country and no L2 literacy years before they attain a proficiency level that will allow them to enter college or succeed in job training that leads to a marketable certificate.

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### *5.1 Proficiency Profiles*

The language and literacy abilities of immigrants and refugee youth exist along a continuum ranging from non-literate in any language to literate in a language that uses a script different from that of the target language. The literature of the last 20 years has proposed various taxonomies for classifying second language learners by their literacy proficiencies. Some suggest a continuum from pre-literate to non-literate to semi-literate to literate. One such taxonomy frequently used and cited includes those who are literate in a non-Roman alphabet (Khmer, for example, or Russian) and those who can write using a logo-graphic system (Japanese or Chinese) under the rubric “literacy learners” – learners who are likely to have difficulties developing alphabetic print literacy because of their lack of L1 foundation skills available for transfer.

Inclusion within LESLLA of learners who are literate in one or more language but lack familiarity with alphabets is likely to mask the vast differences between those who are fully literate but need to learn how alphabet-based languages work and those who still struggle understanding how oral language maps to written language regardless of the writing system used. Taxonomies that fail to be explicit in making these distinctions run the danger of minimizing the contribution that L1 literacy makes to the development of L2 reading and writing. Such an undifferentiated view often has the effect that students who have no or low literacy in any language are taught with the same curriculum used with literate students who come from a non-alphabetic script. Our experience has shown (Condelli and Wrigley, 2009) that although students from logographic systems may need a bit of time before they internalize the alphabetic principle and grasp the notion that each letter is associated with distinct sounds, they nevertheless tend to progress much faster in their literacy development than their peers who may know the alphabet but have only minimal experience with reading and writing. As a result, true literacy learners often fall behind and fail to thrive in programs that combine literate and non-literate learners in a single class without the necessary differentiation.

### *5.2 Cognitive Challenges*

Increasingly programs serving low-literate immigrants and refugees are concerned about students who not only have difficulties using and interpreting print but also face other cognitive challenges that make any kind of learning difficult. In their extensive report on Provisions for Refugee Youth with Minimal/No Schooling in the Adult Migrant English Program, written for the Australian Government’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Moore, Nicholas, and Deblaquiere describe teachers who indicated that incidents of learning disabilities seemed to be highest among students who had experienced trauma. Many of these teachers reported feeling helpless in light of the difficulties that kept their students from progressing in their studies at a normal rate.

In the past (and in some areas still occurring), learning difficulties in L2 students have often been confounded with *language* difficulties. Assessing students in a language they have not yet mastered can lead to misdiagnoses that find evidence of reading challenges that exist because of incomplete knowledge of the language not because of underlying gaps in phonological processing or insufficient reading comprehension. Professionals concerned about the over-diagnosis of learning disabilities in students who speak a language other than the school language at home, often suggest that only assessments that use the dominant language of the student and administered by a competent bilingual assessor should be used.

As researchers in LD (learning disabilities) have pointed out, the identification and remediation of LD in second language learning is a complex process depending on many factors. Variables to be considered in determining LD in English language learners include native language and literacy skills, English language and literacy skills, cultural factors that may influence test and school performance, family and developmental history, educational history, and the nature of previous reading instruction (Spear-Swerling, 2006). As a general guideline in the classroom, Robertson (2007) suggests that teachers see their students in the context of other young people in the same educational environment: If the progress being made by the student is similar to that of his/her peers with similar language proficiency and literacy profiles, then the student probably does not have special education needs. If, however, the student progresses much more slowly than others with similar backgrounds, some first steps in diagnosis and evaluation should be undertaken. In many cases, meetings with family members and discussions through a bilingual interpreter can help identify important factors such as brain injuries and/or significant learning difficulties in native language.

## *6 Exemplary Practices and Promising Directions*

### *6.1 Dual Language Models*

Within the in-school population, late entry students - those who enter middle school or high school upon arrival, - face the greatest challenge. Not only do they need to learn to read and write in the target language, they need to acquire the relevant subject matter knowledge in the content areas (history, sciences, literature). As a report (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007) on the challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English language learners suggests, immigrant learners are expected to master complex course content, but have fewer years to master such knowledge than their native born peers. In addition, these students are enrolling at an age where most schools no longer teach literacy explicitly, assuming instead that reading and writing skills that are needed to understand lectures and textbooks and compose essays have been acquired in previous grades. Students who have below grade level literacy skills in the native language face severe challenges since they lack both the underlying text processing skills needed to access informational text written at the high school level and the background knowledge needed to understand and manipulate abstract concepts. Students with few years

of schooling in the home country may need additional time to acquire academic skills and subject area knowledge and to become accustomed to the school structures and classroom routines common in the new country.

Students who have had some schooling in the home country should be able to build on the knowledge they have gained and receive credit as well. In the United States, the University of Texas at Austin, through a bi-national cooperation with Mexico, offers services designed to reduce the challenges immigrant students face. These services include obtaining transcripts from Mexico, interpreting transcripts to provide individual graduation credit analysis, and developing diagnostic assessments in Spanish that allow US schools to place students in the appropriate grade level and in appropriate courses. To provide academic support for Spanish speaking English language learners, the university has aligned Mexican online courses with Texas academic standards so that students progress in their education in their dominant language while they learn English and integrate into their new communities.

Helping late entry students succeed in middle and high school is a daunting undertaking that cannot be accomplished in the classroom alone. Policies need to be established that take into account the special challenges faced by language minority students who have limited L2 language and literacy skills, while at the same time offering an academically rigorous curriculum that prepares students for transition to training and higher education. Schools have to be organized in new ways so that students have learning opportunities that engage them. Teachers have to have special training to meet the language, literacy, and academic needs. Programs have to be designed so that students' personal, social, and cultural experiences are not only recognized but built upon. Approaches to teaching and learning must reflect what we know about academic language and literacy development and must be built upon "how people learn" (National Research Council, 1999).

### *6.2 Soccer as a Means of Social Integration.*

Engaging refugee youth across nationalities and integrating them into the larger community is often a tremendous challenge. One community, Clarkson, an American town in rural Georgia, illustrates how young people's interest in sports can be harnessed to provide opportunities to shine and excel not only on the playing field but in academics as well. Under the innovative leadership of a Jordanian immigrant, a soccer (i.e., football) team was formed and took on the name of "Fugees" – short for refugees and sometimes used derogatively by others (it is also the name of an American hip hop band of the 90s).

The Fugee Family consists of young men from 24 different countries speaking 10 different languages who play both home games and away games and in their wins are bringing fame and glory to themselves and to the wider community (in Clarkson, 1 out of 5 residents is a refugee). Playing on the team is closely linked to academic achievement – students must attend school, stay out of trouble and maintain a passing academic grade average.

Enthusiasm for the game is what attracts the kids' participation, and, once involved, they are impelled to excel not only on the field but off. The Fugees Family, established as a non-profit in 2006, is one of the few groups in the US whose focus is uniquely and exclusively on refugee youth. By tapping into soccer as a starting point, the project was able to build a community based on common interest and develop trust among young people whose disparate backgrounds could easily have led to distrust and hostilities (the group includes Africans and Asians, Northern and Southern Sudanese, Christians and Muslims (including Shia and Sunni). Much of the credit for the program goes to the founder and coach of the team, Mulah Mufleh, an American-educated immigrant woman from Jordan whose father had disinherited her when she chose to stay in the US. Ms. Mufleh has since started a school, the Fugee Academy, and saw her first refugee graduate from college (see also St. John, 2009).

### *6.3 International Network of Public Schools*

The International Network for Public Schools develops and supports a network of small public high schools that successfully educate and graduate late-entry immigrant students from more than 90 countries around the globe who speak over 55 native languages. Unlike many of the international programs operating around the globe, schools in this network overwhelmingly serve families whose income is below the poverty line. The three international public schools (operating in New York City, Oakland, and San Francisco) are student-centered small schools offering a family-like environment, designed to provide a level of personalization that is not possible in large urban school districts.

The schools utilize a learner-centered, project-based curriculum that incorporates performance-based assessment. Heterogeneous groups of students work collaboratively on content-based tasks in a language-rich environment guided by instructors who are both teachers of language and teachers of content. The schools adhere to a philosophy where every adult accepts full responsibility for the total development of the immigrant student (linguistically, culturally and academically). The network itself helps build and maintain the capacity of each school to serve immigrants and refugees by offering a coherent model that includes teacher training, performance based assessments, rubrics, and new teacher toolkits. The network also advocates on behalf of the schools as part of a broader movement for quality.

### *6.4 Meeting the Needs of Out-of-School Youth*

Developing the higher level literacy skills needed for transition to higher education and for work that pays a living wage remains one of the key challenges for refugee and immigrant youth. Those with only a few years of education often have little experience reading textbooks, analyzing passages or synthesizing information, skills that are increasingly important in a knowledge-based society, not only for in-school students but for out-of-school youth as well. Programs focused solely on life skills often fail to prepare youth for

the rigour of even a Level 1 training curriculum (those that provide a certificate but not academic credit). In the US and in Canada, programs and initiatives are underway to fill the gaps between the skills and knowledge that immigrant youth bring to the learning process and the expectations of training institutions and places of higher learning. These efforts seek to accelerate the process of language learning and literacy development through contextualized courses (courses that teach basic skills while also teaching subject matter knowledge in demand occupations such as health care, information technology, accounting or transportation). Most of these efforts recognize the important role of “coaches” that help youth not only understand and navigate the system, but better understand themselves, their dreams and their circumstances so they can make informed decisions about their future. The new initiatives also recognize that the path to education and training is not a linear one for youth who don’t have stipends or other support to allow years in school. In an effort to allow these students to “stop out” for a time to work or raise families, some programs articulate courses across institutions (basic ESL, non-credit training, training in higher education) so that credit and certificates gained on one level will count on another. Through an articulated system, students are able to gain “stackable certificates” that add up to a degree over time, even if schooling is interrupted. While few of these efforts are focused solely on immigrants and refugees, most include non-native speakers of English in their programs. Unfortunately, there is very little data on how foreign-born low-literate youth are faring in these programs, compared to their US born peers who are low-literate but grew up in an English speaking environment.

#### *6.5 Team Teaching to Integrate ESL and Technical Skills: I-BEST for Youth in Washington State:*

The US has been experimenting with various models seeking to build language and literacy skills while students are in training, rather than expecting those with limited skills to go through years of classes focused on every day life skills before they can enter a training program. A program that shows particular promise is the I-BEST program in Washington State. The program has language and literacy teachers teach side-by-side with technical instructors in the same classroom. This team teaching approach allows the second language teacher to illustrate key concepts during the lesson (by drawing a graphic organizer, for example), explaining vocabulary that students might not know through examples and paraphrasing, and summing up the point of the training in language the students understand. Crucial to the success of the training is intensive case management that seeks to address the socio-economic barriers that students whose lives are full of turbulence factors face – these might include the support in finding reliable child care, transportation vouchers so they can get to school, access to financial aid, along with peer support and mentor support by faculty.

#### *6.6 The Bridge Program at Bow Valley College*

Recognizing the need for a bridge program for refugee and immigrant youth who may be too old for high school, Bow Valley College in Calgary, Canada has developed a comprehensive program serving low literate refugees, including literacy learners (see Leong and Collins, 2007). The curriculum integrates theory and practice, stresses the acquisition of cognitive and metacognitive skills and draws on instructional methods such as explicit teaching and project-based learning, an approach that helps learners create collaborative projects to be showcased Through a process that includes research, production and presentation of a project, students learn to bond as a group and take on leadership roles, all the while developing the skills and strategies needed for 21st century work (Condelli and Wrigley, 2006).

The Bow Valley program is informed by two key processes: A learner needs assessment at the beginning (repeated through a continuous improvement process) and an analysis of the learning opportunities and essential knowledge that refugee youth need to gain in order to actualize their potential. The program is designed to respond to the needs of a diverse youth population whose past experiences and present circumstances make them vulnerable (see also Isserlis on trauma in this volume). The program has implemented a solid case management approach that helps students negotiate systems. Counselors help to address not just the linguistic needs of refugee youth, but their personal and social needs as well. The program has published a handbook called *Bridging the Gap: A Framework for Teaching and Transitioning Low Literate Immigrant Youth* (Leong and Collins, 2007), designed to guide other programs serving refugees and immigrants with few years of schooling in the home country and who are not yet prepared to enter training or transition to academic work.

#### *6.7 Addressing Social-Emotional Skills Through Counseling and Art: New School Canada*

In Surrey, British Columbia, outside of Vancouver, the National Literacy Secretariat funded a demonstration program for disengaged youth who faced significant literacy challenges. The project, which included immigrants as well as First Nations students sought to address not only the academic literacy needs of 15 to 16 year olds, some of whom read at a 3rd grade level and below, but their social emotional needs as well. Recognizing that alienated youth, many of whom had interactions with the criminal justice system, needed the opportunity to learn in new ways in an environment that both challenged and supported them, the program, called New School Canada, implemented practices that had been found to be promising through studies with out-of-school youth. These included a full time counselor who spent time alongside teachers in the classroom, strategies adapted from First Nations cultures, such as non-judgmental listening to thoughts and feelings of others and activities, and conversations focused on developing empathy and building community (for details, see Wrigley and Powrie, 2007b). The program also adopted a response to student irresponsible behavior called “restorative action,” an approach that asks an individual to own up to behaviors that hurt others (hurtful remarks as well as physical violence) and to make amends to the group to restore trust (see also Hogeveen, 2006).

To allow these students who struggled with literacy and who had become disconnected from school an opportunity to shine, the New School devoted a full 25% of instructional time to the visual arts - painting and photography and installed 10 computers in the classroom (a 1:2 ratio of computer to students). Visual arts and technology were used to reinforce and deepen literacy skills and allow students to come to processes such as composing and interpreting texts with an eager mind and a fresh perspective. For example, to prepare for the reading and writing of biographies (a grade 10 activity), students created self-portraits and life maps, depicting high and low points in their young lives. Discussions about sharing life events through powerful language and vivid images followed and students wrote autobiographical essays. The teacher highlighted literature concepts such as character, plot development, hero and antagonist, story climax and denouement, using key events in their lives that students had shared. Only then did students move to the literature component of the provincial curriculum. As they read biographies and short stories, they used the concepts they had gained from writing about their own lives to help them understand the writing of others.

For the students whose self-confidence had been hurt by their inability to read, painting and photography became entry points into academics as they saw themselves and their classmates as becoming “smart in art.” In several cases, the work that students created reflected both an increased sophistication in rendering self-portraits and a growing confidence in their own abilities to engage texts in various forms.

The series of self-portraits below shows the progression over one semester of a student from Libya. There is less than six months between the first crude drawing of his father and himself and the final fully rendered self-portrait. When students reviewed their work, the art teacher asked: “What do you think happened with the person who did these drawings over the past six months? Do you think he might feel differently about himself?” A lively discussion ensued.



## 7 Conclusion

The practices discussed above make it clear that providing conventional language and literacy services to low literate immigrant and refugee youth is not sufficient to effect meaningful differences in their lives. The myriad needs of youth who have been uprooted and may now be alienated by a system that does not take their past experiences and current circumstances into account require thoughtful programmatic responses carried out over long periods of time. The deep rooted problems that make social and economic success difficult to achieve for youth and adults with few years of schooling and limited skills are not amenable to quick fix approaches.

The examples outlined above speak to what it takes to provide pathways to a sustainable future for this vulnerable group: Opportunities to engage in tasks and activities that matter outside of school (e.g., sports and technology); opportunities for self expression that are not limited by L2 proficiency; and opportunities to learn marketable skills through programs that combine language and literacy development with training in technical/vocational skills. In addition, young immigrants and refugees who have had only a few year of schooling need to a chance to fill in gaps in knowledge and acquire the academic literacy skills necessary for transition from basic and functional literacy to the literacy required for continued learning in and out of school.

### 7.1 Implications for Working with LESLLA Adults

Although most of the Promising Practices above were drawn from programs serving in school immigrant and refugee youth<sup>8</sup>, the lessons inherent in them also speak to educators and researchers serving out of school youth and adults. Similarly, the issues that confront immigrant and refugee youth and the challenges they face in trying to maintain a positive identity and integrate into a new society are not that different from those facing low educated adult second language learners. Lessons that LESLLA educators may take away from the research and literature on youth include the importance of recognizing various subgroups among the immigrant population - including youth and the elderly - and meet the special needs of marginalized populations through differentiated programming. Many of the insights gained from studies on with youth transfer directly to our work with LESLLA adults: the need to provide safe and supportive environments for everyone, but particularly those who have suffered the trauma of war and violence; to allow for alternative ways of teaching and learning through drawing and other visual media and to take into account the multiple intelligences that both youth and adults exhibit when creativity is encouraged. Equally important will be instruction

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<sup>8</sup> Most areas in the US do not have separate programs for out of school refugee and immigrant youth. Out of school youth are served alongside adults with low levels of English in conventional adult ESL programs. Refugee youth receiving stipends as part of resettlement may be served in employment focused adult ESL program.

that fosters collaborative learning by inviting students to both draw on existing background knowledge and build new knowledge.

### *7.2 Implications for policy and research*

Serving low literate refugee and immigrant youth and adults requires not only services that are culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate. It also demands policies that speak to the unique emotional, social and cognitive needs of a vulnerable group of individuals whose potential has not yet been realized. As Van Ngo (2009) suggests in his powerful study “Patchwork, Sidelining and Marginalization” it is now time to shift from the discretionary funding in place in Canada, the US and other countries to an approach that treats meaningful education and training as a right and not a privilege. LESLLA educators and supporters can be instrumental in documenting the specific needs of this population, conducting research with in-school and out-of-school youth as well as with adults who have had few educational opportunities in their countries and in calling for targeted comprehensive services that are sustained over time.

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