

Book Review

Educating Refugee-Background Students: Critical Issues and Dynamic Contexts. Edited by Shawna Shapiro, Raichle Farrelly and Mary Jane Curry, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018, 264p. ISBN: 978-1-78309-996-2

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Educators, scholars and practitioners whose work intersects with refugee learners' lives and schooling are familiar with the many strengths and challenges these learners bring to and encounter in classrooms and communities every day. *Educating Refugee-Background Students'* 15 chapters bring both commonalities and specific differences between and amongst specific settings and learning contexts into focus in ways that invite readers to understand the particularities of each while considering ways of generalizing this knowledge to the benefit of all.

Contributors identify and contextualize systemic discrimination (including racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia) and its intersections with educational systems and programs' varying abilities to support learners from elementary to adult learning, higher education and employment settings. These generally small-scale—but important—studies, interventions and longitudinal research assert that refugee-background learners know many things, can learn and contribute much, but may also require additional support to help them live with, beside and through experiences of trauma, upheaval, dislocation and radically changed expectations throughout the processes of resettlement.

Shawna Shapiro's introduction to the book articulates the editors' rationale for dividing the book into two parts, *Language and Literacy* and *Access and Equity*, and acknowledges the porous nature of and inevitable overlap to be found in each broad section. Shapiro also lays out the assumptions that contributors and editors bring to their approach as researchers and writers. These key assumptions assert a shift *away* from deficit approaches and understandings of refugees writ large and suggest that the educational work and programs are informed not only by educators and those who make policy for them, but also by political and other intersecting contexts of school and society. Shapiro also states that researchers themselves are not neutral observers (a point that several contributors cede in their own chapters). This framing of purpose and intention suggests that we, as readers, are not neutral, that refugee learners and learning are complex and complicated and that we must be able to understand the strengths and perspectives that refugee learners and communities bring to bear in the work we do. Schooling—be it state-sponsored/funded entities, tiny classrooms in musty church basements, or university-level programing—comprises sites of struggle, bias, support and obstacles, community and conflict. While educators, policy makers and legislators should be working to ensure that educational programs and sites are safe and supporting spaces, too often this work falls to refugees themselves. If we are to be better educators, advocates and allies, we need to understand this clearly, and—as the authors of these chapters implicitly suggest—be prepared to do the work to change inequitable conditions. This work must be done in concert and consultation with communities. The chapters in this text offer ways and means of addressing this work and these tasks.

Contributors offer specific ways in which refugee learners encounter and address bias and discrimination through self-advocacy, through resourcefulness, determination and agency: some young refugee learners shrug off anti-Islamic taunts (in the wake of 9/11); while other learners find community and commonality through online networks, through art and story-telling, through gaining digital skills and abilities; older learners contemplate higher education and its benefits; teachers confront their own understandings of trauma and learning; young men and young women tell their stories as well.

Chapters address language learning and settlement issues for refugees in Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and the US, broadening perspectives for English-language practitioners and further complicating the work of language learning for those refugees being settled into countries using both their own national languages as well as English as a lingua franca. Throughout the chapters, the text is strongest when the voices of refugees are heard, when their aspirations, frustrations, small and larger triumphs are articulated.

Within the text, writers utilize a similar format, providing an abstract, literature review (often indicating the paucity of research in the areas of refugee learning), methodology, exemplars, discussion and conclusion. (Almost to a person, authors conclude with a statement of the need for larger and longer-term studies.) Quotes, tables and visual images further serve to illustrate particular points within each chapter.

Most, though not all, of the research is small-batch qualitative (often ethnographic) research, drawing on observations of learners over extended periods of time. While the *ns* (the numbers of participants, research subjects and collaborators described in the book's chapters) might be small, they are mighty. Contributors frame their work around assets-based perspectives of both daunting challenges *and* possibilities. Christopher T. Browder's first chapter does provide a quantitative view of ethnic Chin high school refugee students from Myanmar resettled in the US, offering a sense of the ways in which school systems themselves inform and influence educational practice through both spoken and tacit means. Throughout the book, authors repeatedly—not redundantly—echo the ways in which refugee learners are isolated, find common cause with one another, find allies, find means of community through online sources, straddle home and host-country cultures, seek further learning and work daily to adjust to the seemingly endless array of changes encountered in new circumstances.

While the authors' repeated calls for more and better research validates the need to be able to account for demands for funding, resources and the like, the work that is presented is valuable precisely because of its specificity and the lines drawn, connections made from one particular set of occurrences to broader possibilities for interventions, shifts and new approaches to engaging refugee learners of all ages and abilities across the educational spectrum. Martha Bigelow's afterword highlights and intensifies the oft-repeated assertion throughout the chapters that systems, structures, host communities and policy makers need to understand the multiple needs, abilities and strengths of refugee groups in order to support their learning and engagement more fully and effectively. This collection moves the needle well in the direction of furthering collective wisdom, offering solutions and possibilities in a time of darkness around the world.

(overview of the text)

<https://onteachingenglish.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/shapiro-et-al-1.pdf>

(copy of the introduction)

<https://onteachingenglish.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/shapiro-intro.pdf>

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