



Conference: **SEEING BEYOND PICTURES?**

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HOW CHILDREN'S BOOKS INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING BEYOND THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES

Topic of Paper:

Refugee children exist in all areas of the world today. They are in our schools and in our communities. Their experiences do not often reflect those of the children they find there. As teachers, librarians, and parents what can we do to help these children find peace with what they have experienced and, at the same time, influence the understanding of those children who have not had the refugee experience?

For this paper we will look at two areas of the world where schools are impacted by child refugees – Europe and North America.

Setting the background.

Child refugee numbers have soared according to a new Unicef report. Children represent a disproportionate fraction of the world's refugees. They made up less than one-third of the global population, but accounted for 51 percent of the world's refugees in 2015. The number has grown nearly 80% in just five years. Today, 1 in every 200 children in the world is a refugee and nearly 1 in 3 children are living outside the country of their birth.

Europe.

Among the 1.3 million people who sought asylum in Europe in 2015, nearly one hundred thousand were unaccompanied children. Most were from Afghanistan and Syria and thirteen percent were younger than fourteen years old. Unaccompanied minors in Europe now represent the greatest migration of children since the Second World War.

North America.

The number of unaccompanied minors attempting to enter the United States, most of them from Central America, has also dramatically increased in recent years. Almost 26,000 unaccompanied children have been apprehended at the U.S. border in the first six months of 2016, according to Unicef. Most of these minors do not have access to lawyers and about 40 percent are sent back to their countries. This fate can be a "death sentence" as many flee their countries to avoid being recruited or targeted by gangs.

How does this impact our schools?

With so many news stories about families fleeing Syria and other war-torn places, our children may be asking questions about these heartbreaking situations. It's important to

protect our children from traumatizing images and information, but we also want to encourage empathy for those who are struggling and to empower our children to know they can make a difference. Children's books can provide an important avenue for building this understanding.

On the other hand, we may have refugee children in our community and in our schools who need to heal from their experiences. Child refugees are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children. Even those in school are likely to suffer discrimination, including unfair treatment and bullying. Many are the prey of human trafficking groups. Many live on the streets, sleeping on sidewalks and in traffic medians. Many come to schools, both in Europe and the U.S., after experiencing the murder of family members, war, starvation, and the loss of home.

The power of books and reading.

Real life calls for books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life's difficult times. Children's books can provide an avenue for healing. They can have a powerful impact on a child's life. Books can offer readers of all ages the opportunity to find solutions through the characters and conflicts within a story, and thus within themselves. They can provide a window and a mirror to life. In books, children can experience a "window" to the outside world, "looking out" at experiences of other children different from their own experiences. Books can also provide an important "mirror" to look inward and reflect on experiences in which characters in the book mirror their own experiences and how the characters are able to cope with and learn from their experiences.

Through books a child can see how others have confronted and solved similar problems, have encountered anxieties, frustrations, hope and disappointments, and applied these insights to real-life situations with the support of the helping person, to gain understanding of alternative solutions to their problems (Marion Baraitser, 2014).

Books can be excellent resources in a whole class setting or can be used with individual children or in a small group setting in the classroom or library. They are also excellent resources for parents requesting assistance during hardships. Parents and educators cannot always take away the pain and anguish a child feels when dealing with a crisis. However, we can provide a resource for healing and coping through books and reading. (Roberts and Crawford, 2008).

Reading aloud to children as well as assigned and shared reading of stories has the effect of not only providing information, but also of stimulating discussion about what is troubling the young people, airing new values and attitudes, and allowing the group to realize that others have similar problems and the realistic means of solving them. Appropriate stories also offer the young reader a basis for moral judgment that helps them to tell the difference between right and wrong. They provide models for identification.

Books about refugees and immigrants are universal. They depict the experiences of all races, cultures, and creeds and can promote positive attitudes in readers, eliminating common prejudices and stereotypes. As parents and educators, we have a responsibility to lay the foundation for tolerance and acceptance, in hopes of eradicating discrimination.

These traumatized children often feel that they have lost their ability to feel and they, especially, need to hear, to tell and to write stories so they may think about what they feel. Reading, telling and writing stories are extremely useful tools for traumatized children: they help them to release emotions, provide possible solutions to their own problems, encourage them to talk about their own problems, allow them to witness cultures different from their own, provide them with other interests to follow and give them grounds for self-reflection. As a teacher or parent, your willingness to discuss their feelings and experiences with them reassures them that, “we can talk about anything” and that it is okay to share thoughts and emotions. (Dreyer 1984).

It is important that a selected text presents complex emotions, thoughts, character development, morals about the dilemmas of being human under great grief, and always includes an element of hope. It should be literary, in the sense that the book itself as a structure and a work of art moves us with the quality with which it is composed and written – in itself a courageous and moral act that reinforces a sense of life humanely lived. The books should be about universal values: fairness, moral choices, a belief in freedom and the value of each individual and the ability of characters who live by these values to survive.

The selected text needs to encourage the stories the young traumatized person wants to tell, but bear in mind that many of the young people find self-expression too frightening, or their cultural mores do not encourage this form of dealing with trauma. The story in each book should encourage a sense of the possibility of survival in new circumstances, empowerment and hope, despite the difficult odds. It is also important that they realize the telling of their stories is purely for them or for those in similar situations, and to reassure them that no one is going to judge, ignore or deride the writing they do from these books. (Marion Baraitser, 2014).

A Selected List of Books About Refugee Children.

Books about refugees and immigrants can depict the experiences of all races, cultures, and creeds and can promote positive attitudes in readers, eliminating common prejudices and stereotypes. As parents and educators, we need to lay the foundation for tolerance and acceptance, in hopes of eradicating discrimination.

See presenters recommended list of books published in the United States.

Sharing of books about Refugee Children.

For the time I have for this presentation, I have selected two of the recommended books to share today. One is set in the Middle East and Europe and the second is set in North America.

The Journey by Francesca Sanna. Flying Eye Books, 2016.

Told through the eyes of a young girl, the story explores the unimaginable decisions made as a mother and her two children are forced to flee their home and everyone they know to escape the turmoil of war.

This book's inspiration came when the author-illustrator, Francesca Sanna, met two girls in a refugee camp in Italy. She then began interviewing more refugee families in Europe, and created this book as a tribute to their plight and strength.

Somos como las nubes/We Are Like the Clouds by Jorge Argueta. Illustrated by Alfonso Ruano. Groundwood Books, 2016.

An eloquent and moving account of the tragic migrations of thousands upon thousands of children who are leaving their homes in Central America, often alone, to seek refuge in the United States, saying goodbye to everything they know because they fear for their lives.

We Are Like the Clouds is a moving collection of bilingual free verse poems. The collection of poetry begins with poetry depicting the experiences and sights of the children's home countries. It then shifts to the journey that children take to get to the United States.

Suggested Activities for Sharing Books with Children:

The reading of a book can be followed by discussion and interaction, together with other activities such as creative discussion and role-play.

In working with children, along with structured activities, the important skills of drawing out necessary responses by asking questions is an important activity. Questions should be ones that are open-ended, encouraging self-reflection.

Conversation Starters for Books About Refugees.

1. Together, imagine arriving in a new country without knowing the language or customs. Help your children "walk in the shoes" of a refugee child by asking:
 - a. What would it be like to have to leave home so quickly and suddenly?
 - b. What would you pack if you had just as little time?
 - c. What would you miss?
 - d. How would you feel?
 - e. What could help make a refugee feel more comfortable and less scared in their new home?

2. Always reassure children that they are safe and focus on positive ways to make a difference rather than on despair.
3. With older children, explain what “refugee” means. (possible definition: Someone who is forced to flee their home because they fear they will lose their lives or freedom if they stay.)

Pre-Reading Discussion (setting the stage for a particular book)

1. What is the title of the book?
2. Who and what do you see on the cover of the book?
3. What do you think the book is about?

Post-Reading Discussion (going deeper; identifying with the characters and the story)

1. What was your favorite part of the book and why?
2. What did you notice in the book that showed aspects of the family’s culture?
3. What do you think was the message of the book?
4. Does this story have any similarities to your experiences? Experiences of your family? Experiences of friends and/or classmates?

As a class, talk about some of the reasons people emigrate. Are any of you from migrant families? Ask them to speak to their parents or grandparents about what led their families to emigrate and then share their findings with the class. What do their stories have in common? What are the differences?

1. What are the migration patterns of your own family?
2. Where is your family from, and why did you migrate?
3. Does your family include refugees, who fled violence or famine?
4. Was anyone in your family forced to migrate against their will?
5. Who in your family moved in the hopes of finding new opportunities, adventure, or a better life?
6. As you research your own family history, pay special attention to the challenges your family faced, and how they persevered in spite of these challenges.
7. Who were some of the people who helped members of your family along their journeys, or welcomed them to their new homes?

Other Suggested Activities :

1. Have students create their own art to illustrate a scene from the book or a scene from their own refugee experience if appropriate.
2. Using a map, track the migration of the children in the book. In the class.
3. Create a map honoring the geographic diversity of your family and community. Where have you lived? Where are your ancestors from?
4. Show students age-appropriate photos or videos about life in a refugee camp. Brainstorm ways in which their lives are similar and different from those of children in a refugee camp. Organize the items using a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer to show the similarities and differences.

5. Have students look for magazine or newspaper articles about refugee children. Compare these examples of non-fiction with books of fiction written about refugees. Talk about the difference between fiction and non-fiction.
6. Draw a picture or write down words to express how you would feel if you had to leave your home and travel to a strange country to start a new life.
7. If you had to leave your home and take four items with you, what would you take? Why? Create a diorama of the possessions you have chosen, and include hints about what sort of journey you are about to take.
8. Select a favorite scene from the book and have the students act it out, either working as a whole class or in small groups. If possible write out a dialogue for what the main characters and others might say or use the actual dialogue from the book. Assign different scenes to small groups of students and then act the whole book out as a play.
9. Through guided discussion, write a short drama or reader's theater about the book.
10. Have students think about something that is important to them, something that they want to change in some way, something that they think is unfair or unjust either in their own life, their school, their community or the world. Write a letter about it to their parents, school, etc. Have students read their letters aloud.
11. Research the groups and organizations that are most active in your community focused on immigration policy, advocacy, or providing legal, financial, and social support to immigrants and refugees.
12. As a class, brainstorm things that all students can do to resolve or avoid conflict among themselves. Compile the suggestions on a chart and have students sign it.