



Educational Interventions for Refugee Children

Theoretical perspectives and implementing best practice

Richard Hamilton and Dennis Moore

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Educational Interventions for Refugee Children

By focusing on the education of refugee children, this book takes a rare look at a subject of increasing significance in current educational spheres. Highlighting the many difficulties facing refugee children, the editors draw upon a wealth of international research and resources to present a broad, informative, and sensitive text.

The book identifies school-based interventions, whilst suggesting methods and measures with which to assess the efficacy of such programmes. It also develops a useful model that provides a standard for assessing refugee experience, offering diagnostic indicators for:

- evaluating support services for refugee children;
- future avenues of research;
- practical implications of creating supportive educational environments for refugee children.

The need to identify and prepare for the education of refugee children is an international issue, and this is reflected in the broad outlook and appeal of this text. The editors have developed an overall model of refugee experience, integrating psychological, cultural and educational perspectives, which researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in education will find invaluable.

Dr Richard Hamilton and **Associate Professor Dennis Moore** are co-directors of the Research Centre for Interventions in Teaching and Learning at the University of Auckland.

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Edited by
Richard Hamilton and Dennis Moore

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To the memory of my father, Gordon Hamilton

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Preface

The impetus for reviewing the literature on refugee education was a New Zealand Ministry of Education contract related to the evaluation of educational services to Kosova refugees entering the country in 1999–2000. The comprehensive review was focused on theory and research (both national and international) on the education of refugee children. We felt that while there was a large and diverse body of international literature around refugees addressing social, medical, political, linguistic and educational issues, there is a paucity of material specifically concerned with refugee children, and only a small proportion of this is about school-based interventions and programmes.

As we sifted through the research we started to see the possibility of deriving an overall model that would not only help in our evaluation of the specific Kosova refugee initiative but also other educational interventions for the education of refugees. In addition, we felt that we could contribute to the overall understanding of the plight of refugee children by integrating multiple diverse theoretical and research perspectives.

Within our initial literature review and in this expanded book, we have adopted an ecological model to impose some order on the wide array of contextual factors to be considered. Bronfenbrenner developed such a model, which illustrates the influence of the environment, or context, on child development. This perspective contrasts with others that could have been employed (for example, medical, psychiatric, psychological, sociological) and provides a useful and integrative conceptual frame in which to consider theory and research originating from these other perspectives. A review of this work has allowed the identification of what we believe are key indicators of both the resilience of the refugee child and his or her family and community, and the supportive qualities of the school system in which the refugee child is placed. Our intent in reviewing a broad array of research literature from a variety of disciplinary perspectives was to create a model which would apply across different refugee populations and host country education systems. Within the context of this ecological model, the intent of the book is to describe school-based interventions to help refugee

children, to present a framework which integrates psychological, cultural and educational perspectives to assess the efficacy of such interventions, and to inform future best practice and research.

Acknowledgements

This book was born through an evaluation contract supported by the New Zealand Ministry of Education and we would like to thank them for their support of the literature review and their valuable suggestions and comments along the way. Clearly without this initial support and impetus, this book would not have come to fruition. However, I would also like to acknowledge that what developed and nurtured the literature review into the present edited volume was the spirit of collegiality shared by the contributors to this volume. We could see the value and the potential contribution that such a volume could make to the education of refugee children. Over never-ending meetings and discussions, we fine-tuned the model and ideas which we hoped would capture the complexity of the development and change of refugee children as they migrate and enter into a new educational environment. I would like to acknowledge, therefore, the importance and the value of collegial efforts as they help us shape our own individual ideas about education and its impact, as well as in shaping our collective ideas and those within the discipline of education.

I, Richard Hamilton, want to thank the rest of the Hamilton clan (Leslie, Megan and Marcus) for their endless support and for their penchant to make my life interesting and ever-changing.

I, Dennis Moore, want to thank my parents and family (Allen and Neila, Gail, Gareth, Caleb and Oliver), friends and colleagues (Angelika Anderson, Don Brown, Ted Glynn, Lottie Thomson, Joanne Walker) for their wisdom, good humour and support. A special thank you also to Richard Hamilton for his insightful and critical collaboration in this and other of our projects.

Education of refugee children

Theoretical perspectives and best practice

*Angelika Anderson, Richard Hamilton, Dennis Moore,
Shawn Loewen and Kaaren Frater-Mathieson*

Refugees are a legally and constitutionally well-defined group of people. While individual countries might have particular laws and regulations concerning refugees, there is an internationally agreed definition of 'refugee' contained in the Geneva Refugee Convention which was approved at a special United Nations conference held on 28 July 1951. This definition states that a refugee is

A person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there for fear of persecution.

(UNHCR 1993: 6)

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are approximately 12 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2002). Children represent more than 50 per cent of these refugees, are among the most vulnerable of any refugee population and are often separated from their families as well as deprived of education. Refugee students are special because they have typically experienced both displacement and trauma and now face the task of adapting to a new environment, frequently involving the simultaneous acquisition of a new language.

With the world on the move in a way it has never been before, refugee children are becoming an identifiable and increasing group in today's schools. Refugee children share common refugee experiences of traumatic separation from their homeland and multiple experiences of loss, which contribute to a complex psychological, emotional, and social resettlement process. The effects of these experiences are further challenging for young people, who face these traumatic transitions into a new culture at critical times in their own psychological and social development. Thus, the struggle to preserve a sense of social and psychological stability at a time when there is a simultaneous need to acquire a new language and adapt to a new culture,

places refugee children and young people potentially at risk of developing learning difficulties, behavioural problems and psychological distress. These populations of children, ranging from pre-school age through adolescents, represent groups potentially at risk for less than optimal outcomes at school.

Although some countries have experience in accommodating the special needs of refugee children, many education systems currently do not have special support systems in place to assist schools, refugee families and students in the process of adapting refugees to their new schools. It is crucial to know how to address their needs and how to create schools which are better prepared to meet their needs. To that end the aim of this book is to present a model for better understanding the psychological and educational needs of refugee children. In addition, the book will identify school-based approaches to help this population, and identify methods and measures to assess the efficacy of such interventions with a view to evaluating current practice and informing future 'best practice'.

Key issues identified in the literature

While there is a large and diverse body of literature on refugees that addresses social, medical, political, linguistic and educational issues, there is a paucity of material specifically concerned with refugee children; of this, only a small proportion is about school-based interventions and programmes. Much of the literature that is available focuses on culture-specific issues and effects, which the evidence suggests may not be generalizable across cultures (McCloskey and Southwick 1996). For example, cultural differences appear to exist in the interpretation of trauma, and in ways of coping. The same event, therefore, may have disparate effects on different groups of people and the same intervention may not be equally successful with all cultural groups. In addition, there are significant between-group differences that could affect outcomes, including the particular circumstances around the flight of the refugees, the time spent in refugee camps, and the cultural and geographical distance between the refugee group and the host country. Given this divergence of contributing factors and their potential effects, one of the purposes of this book is to provide a conceptual framework which can capture similarities in the changes in refugee children's learning and development across the different contexts and settings within which they live. With a more comprehensive framework for describing refugee experiences, we may be better positioned to use information from diverse refugee populations in forming general principles which guide the development and assessment of instructional interventions for all refugee children.

Bronfenbrenner contributed significantly to the field of developmental psychology by drawing attention to the importance of contexts in human development. His theory captures and illustrates the influence of the

environment, or context, on child development (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1999). Given the diverse nature of refugees' experiences, the significance of contextual events past and present on refugee children and the need to impose some order on the wide array of contextual factors to be considered, we have adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development as an integral part of our model. Bronfenbrenner's theory is outlined in more detail in the following section.

An ecological approach

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, development occurs in contexts, and can therefore only be properly understood in contexts (Brooks-Gunn 2001). In Bronfenbrenner's words, the essence of his theory is as follows:

The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded.

(Bronfenbrenner 1992: 188)

Bronfenbrenner's model separates aspects of the environment according to the immediacy with which they impact on the developing child, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

First there is the microsystem, which, according to Bronfenbrenner's updated formulation, is:

... a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the person in a face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality and a system of belief.

(Ibid.: 227)

The microsystem thus describes the relationship between the individual child and the immediate settings which impact on the child (family, neighbours, peers and so on).

In contrast, the next two aspects – the mesosystem and the exosystem – describe the relationship between the different settings which may impact the child. The mesosystem, which Bronfenbrenner refers to as a series of microsystems, describes relationships between proximal settings in which the individual is directly involved (for example, the relations between home and school, and school and work place). The exosystem describes

the relationships between more distal systems, at least one of which the individual is not directly involved in (for example, for a child, the relation between the home and the parent's work place; for a parent, the relation between the school and the neighbourhood group).

Finally, the macrosystem constitutes the broad ideology, laws and customs of a society. It represents the consistencies evident in all the other settings within a society or culture, such as how all schools within one country share a number of features and are different in consistent ways from schools in other countries. The macrosystem is the overarching pattern of micro-, meso- and exosystems, which characterize a given culture, subculture, or broader social context. In particular it determines the belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, patterns of social interchange and so on, which influence development. The macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context (Bronfenbrenner 1992).

Bronfenbrenner visualized these interacting systems as nested one inside the other. Two important implications to be derived from his theory are first, that development is a process of mutual accommodation, characterized by reciprocity (that is, the person is not only influenced by his or her environment, but also influences that environment) and second, that the environment of interest is not a single, immediate setting, but incorporates several settings and the interconnections between them.

Bronfenbrenner's theory is thus a tool for describing human development which takes into account the role that environments play in the process. According to Bronfenbrenner, evidence that development has occurred requires not only an enduring change in the individual, but also a generalization of this change across settings.

Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a useful conceptual framework for considering the needs of refugee children as it allows us to consider the impact of personal and environmental factors on the development of refugee children. This is because at its core the theory conceptualizes development as the interactive life-long process of adaptation by an individual to the changing environment. For most individuals, environmental changes are gradual ones, or only affect some aspects of their lives, whereas refugees need to adapt to abrupt and major changes in almost all aspects of their lives. However, the processes by which this adaptation occurs are the same. Finally, the ecological approach allows us to look at a variety of divergent refugee populations through the same lens and get a better understanding of how the different overlapping and interacting systems influence the refugee child's development.

Relevant theoretical perspectives and related research

Bronfenbrenner's ecological conceptual framework helps organize the different influences on refugee children's development. Within this framework, we can draw on several independent but related fields of research to enrich our description of how the process of migration influences refugees as well as how we can best support refugees during the migratory process. The research falls into five broad categories: mental health literature related to grief, loss and trauma; the literature on displacement, migration and acculturation; literature on needs of linguistic and cultural minorities; literature on resilience; and inclusive education and special needs literature.

From these diverse sources of literature, a number of areas of research have been identified, the most relevant of which are discussed in the following sections. We have selected these areas because they help us to identify similarities and differences in refugee experiences across the different refugee groups. In essence, they give us a rich set of constructs with which to describe the refugee experiences as well as helping in the assessment and development of different educational interventions. When these constructs are paired with the ecological theory of child development, it helps identify the areas where educational interventions are needed for refugee children and whom the interventions should involve (for example, teachers, peers, family, or service providers).

The mental health perspective

Several reviews describe the refugee experience in terms of trauma and loss (Beiser *et al.* 1995; Fox *et al.* 1994; Kaprielian-Churchill 1996). Others discuss the applicability of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) construct for refugees as a group and describe associated symptoms in children (McCloskey and Southwick 1996; Pfefferbaum 1997). Much of this body of literature is situated in clinical contexts, with a focus on therapeutic interventions for individuals following identification and diagnosis. Though this particular body of literature largely describes pre-migration stressors, it also considers the ongoing trauma of adaptation to a new environment, and the issues of grief and loss associated with displacement. It is a useful and necessary approach to consider as it provides methods of identifying, supporting, and treating individuals for whom the stresses exceed their personal or contextual resources to cope, and who need intensive individual therapy.

Migration and displacement

In contrast to the mental health perspective, theories concerning displacement and migration largely concern themselves with post-migration