How Literacy Level Is Related To The Refugee Backgrounds

Exploring the relationship between literacy and students of refugee backgrounds in high school

This annotated bibliography showcases the connection between best literacy approaches for students of refugee backgrounds in high school. In 2019, the total number of refugees worldwide was 26 million. (UNHCR, 2019). The NSW Department of Education has noted that one in 100 students in NSW schools is a refugee. Many of these students are in Sydney, in the western and south-western suburbs (Watkins, Noble & Wong, 2018). The selection of articles explores the challenges of inclusive education and students' commitment to learning, interactive and dialogic pedagogy to promote critical literacy, refugee support programs with homework assistance, approaches to teaching low literacy students, and how to best support teachers in literacy planning. The literacy approaches and practices outlined in these articles inform good teaching practices of students of refugee backgrounds in high school.

Taylor, S. & Sidhu, R.K. (2012). Supporting refugee students in schools: what constitutes inclusive education?. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16(1), 39-56. doi: 10.1080/13603110903560085

Context Schools face significant challenges in providing an inclusive environment for students of refugee backgrounds. Australian literature to date fails to consider the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of refugee students. For example, treating students of refugee backgrounds as a homogenous group. Students of African origins, for example, have had varied schooling experiences, with some having little or interrupted schooling mixed with episodes of trauma due to civil war. It was also noted that improved English language support was especially important for those refugees with limited (or no) basic education to assist them to transition into the mainstream curriculum.

Theoretical approach, aims, and methodology

This paper explores how schooling may lead to social inclusion for refugee students in school and in the broader community. The authors refer to Arnot & Pinson’s holistic model which recognizes the complex needs of students of refugee backgrounds with their learning, social and emotional needs. The authors’ conducted interviews and research in four Australian schools and studied their approaches in how they met the needs of students from refugee backgrounds. Using these findings and other research they outline a model for good practice in refugee education.

Core arguments and findings With reference to literacy, one of the pillars of the model was “support for learning needs”. Outcomes such as a whole school approach to learning assistance were noted. If students were withdrawing from learning in class, then it was found there was adequate intensive support for refugee students. The resources available fostered the integration of these students into mainstream classrooms. Integrations were also

implemented with the support of EAL/D teachers and their contribution to key learning areas. For example, they co-taught with the teacher instead of withdrawing the student from class, building trust while still addressing the individual needs of the student. There was also a strong commitment to social justice in how these students were treated and how these issues were addressed through the curriculum.

Dooley, K.T. & Thangaperumal, P. (2011). Pedagogy and participation: literacy education for low-literate refugee students of African origin in a western school system. Language and Education, 25(5), 385-397. doi:10.1080/09500782.2011.573075

Context The appropriate form of literacy education for low literate students of refugee African backgrounds was explored. The challenge highlighted how to balance instruction in basic literacy capabilities while also realizing the benefits associated with interactive and dialogic pedagogies. Both ideas have a place in literacy education and need to be considered when teaching students who have no (or limited) literacy levels due to interrupted schooling.

Theoretical approach, aims, and methodology

An interview study was conducted in Australia in an Intensive English Centre (IEC) and three high schools. All the interviews touched on students' opportunities for social, linguistic, and academic development. The author's used Brian Street's 'ideological model' of literacy in their study; literacy not only encompasses technical skills of reading and writing but also as social and cultural ways of knowing that are embedded with relationships in power.

Core arguments and findings The data conveyed that teachers were providing highly controlled instruction in basic literacy and genre analysis which has strong links to requirements of national testing. Whilst the effectiveness of highly controlled pedagogy for basic literacy instruction is well documented, there is also a need to prioritize transformative critical literacy in each context.

The data also illustrated the treatment of students in oral interaction within the classroom. Many students recounted being laughed at for their accent or that teachers spoke too quickly or became angry when students could not respond in a timely manner. In this example, teachers should use transformative critical literacy in addressing the reality of linguistic discrimination and equity before moving onto analyzing texts.

The data further suggested that teachers, where possible, should work transformatively from the experiences of the refugee students. For example, a teacher linked the lesson on Animal Farm to student's own experience of civil war; students were then able to co-construct knowledge, 'Oh, that's what happened in Rwanda'. By drawing on an experience important to the student, this pedagogy enabled students to acquire critical metalanguage and then transformative literacy about the meaning of texts that relate to equity, power, and social justice.

Naidoo. L. (2011). What works?: a program of best practice for supporting the literacy needs of refugee high school students. Literacy Learning: The Middle Years, 19(1), 29-38.

Context High school students of refugee backgrounds face challenges in transitioning to mainstream classes. It is apparent that schools are unable to meet the needs of literacy and learning support unless there is additional assistance. The south-western Sydney after-school

program called Refugee Action Support (RAS) began in 2007 in collaboration with the University of Western Sydney (UWS), Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), and NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). This program gives targeted literacy support for humanitarian refugees who have moved from an Intensive English Centre (IEC) into mainstream high schools.

Theoretical approach, aims, and methodology

The research focused on the structure, effect, and value of the RAS program in a south-western Sydney secondary school. The program was supported by pre-service teachers from UWS to help them become critically aware of the limitations of traditional classroom education practices and the need for an individualized program for these students. The program's principles center around (1) providing specific assistance through a learning support teacher and UWS RAS tutor; (2) students commit to attending support classes once a week over the school year to build a strong academic foundation; (3) address social acculturation and learning needs with the aid of the community.

Core arguments and findings The case study illustrated how literacy teaching and learning occurred in context, leading to success at the high school. Key success factors included (a) a structured setting for assistance with academic work, (b) well-planned whole school teaching and learning support program for students with a commitment of teaching teams (c) family and community involvement. RAS tutors used evidence-based techniques such as scaffolding and modeling to assist students in structuring and breaking down assessment questions and to incorporate student experiences and interests that relate to their everyday lives. Surveys conducted by RAS illustrated that speaking and listening skills were the first areas to improve, whereas reading and writing skills improved gradually over time.

Windle, J. & Miller, J. (2012). Approaches to teaching low literacy refugee-background students. Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 35(3), 317-333.

Context Many low-literacy refugee backgrounds (LLRB) students have experienced an interruption to their schooling and therefore have low or no literacy in their first language. Many LLRB students are unfamiliar with the routines of school and have not had the opportunity in developing social and cultural understandings that are assumed of high school students in addition to prior subject content. Furthermore, due to a lack of competence, can lead to students withdrawing from social interactions and classroom learning.

Theoretical approach, aims, and methodology

The authors investigated language and literacy approaches used by 61 high school teachers working with LLRB students in Victoria via a survey. The authors referenced Freebody and Luke's framework, and Gibbons with the current approaches of explicit teaching of academic language (scaffolding as text producers and through discussion), using students' prior knowledge and lesson sequencing as appropriate practices in improving literacy. The authors wanted to see to what extent teachers of LLRB students were aware and are using these appropriate strategies.

Core arguments and findings The study findings illustrated that there is the popularity of

discussion over scaffolding through written resources and the popularity of teacher-focused activities. The author's hypothesized that this could be due to a lack of availability of text-based resources and time to generate such resources from scratch. It was suggested that providing teachers with additional time, resources, and strategies, that could lead to building student autonomy. For example, some supports could include models, glossaries, and visual dictionaries where students could follow automatically and then move on or ask for support. It was also noted that there is a heavy reliance on the discussion by teachers which raises the question about how involved the students are in participation. The authors suggested varying classroom discussion by referencing the 'instructional conversation' technique by Tharp and Gallimore and explore higher-order questioning techniques to ensure all students are challenged and student talk occurs at higher rates than teacher talk.

Miller, J., Windle, J.A. & Yazdanpanah, L.K. (2014). Planning lessons for refugee-background students: challenges and strategies. International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning, 9(1), 38-48. Doi: 10.1080/18334105.2014.11082018

Context Lesson planning and the strategies teachers adopt is crucial for student learning outcomes, however, it becomes more challenging when working with students of refugee backgrounds. Low literacy refugee-background (LLRB) students receive up to 12 months of instruction at Intensive English Centres (IECs) and then they move to mainstream schools. Many enter high school with reading and writing levels similar to those of lower primary school students. The study identified a large gap between teacher planning practices and the approaches to planning promoted in academic research.

Theoretical approach, aims, and methodology

The authors draw on current literature that informs good teaching practice for LLRB students which includes integration of language and content and the key to a successful lesson is identifying teacher objectives at the planning stage. The author's site Gibbons who highlights that teachers should recognize the language demands of the lesson, in terms of generic structure, vocabulary, grammar, and language which needs to link through to assessment tools (student performance, teacher-student interactions, and what the student can or cannot do with language). The author's research was undertaken in three Victorian high schools and interview and observation research techniques were used. The author's aim of the study is to develop pedagogical strategies combining language, literacy, and academic content in classes designed for LLB students.

Core arguments and findings The research revealed four interrelated themes: (1) tensions between planning for content and planning for language; (2) intuiting objectives and finding the level; (3) planning for multi-level classrooms; and (3) informal observation and feedback. It was noted that teachers struggled with balancing the demands of content and explicit language focus. Teachers are continually under pressure to get through the content of the curriculum. Also, it was observed that when students did not understand vocabulary and concepts were difficult, teachers would resort to lengthy explanations which were unhelpful. There was weak integration of language and content, and almost no formative assessment to inform students or the planning process. The planning process was also viewed by teachers too difficult due to the diverse range of student competencies and heavy workloads.

Usefulness

The theme of ‘additional support for this student group and their teachers is a priority in addressing literacy requirements of education. Students of refugee backgrounds undergo significant trauma and have limited or interrupted schooling prior to settling in Australia. As such, inclusive practices that focus on social, emotional, and learning support are necessary to achieve an equitable education. Integration of an EAL/D teacher supporting the student’s learning needs within the classroom alongside the main teacher instead of withdrawing the student from the classroom is one example highlighted by Taylor and Sidhu. This group also needs extra support with their literacy needs, especially when transitioning from an IEC to a mainstream secondary school. The homework support that RAS offered to students was effective in supporting their literacy development. This program is also important for teachers and pre-service teacher participants in that it gives them exposure and an understanding of the learning needs of students of refugee backgrounds. Additionally, it is vital for teachers to have adequate time for planning content, language, and assessment strategies to meet student needs as noted by Miller, Windle, and Yazdanpanah.

Evidence-based teaching practices were highlighted for effectively teaching literacy to this group. It was suggested by Dooley and Thangaperumal, that in order for transformative critical literacy to occur, technical aspects of teaching need to be supplemented with interactive and dialogic pedagogy. Cultural meanings that are embedded within the notion of power need to be looked at through the lens of the past experiences of these students. Improvements in literacy in LLRB students can similarly be achieved through less teacher-led discussion enabling student autonomy as stated by Windle and Miller.