

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

## **Trauma-informed Teaching Practice and Refugee Children: A Hopeful Reflection on Welcoming Our New Neighbours to Canadian Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Given the Canadian government's focus on refugee resettlement in light of global crises, many schools are receiving increased enrolment of students who have experienced the trauma associated with living in, and fleeing from, regions experiencing armed conflict. As well as the effects of complex trauma, children from these backgrounds will likely have experienced disrupted schooling during the migration process (e.g. in refugee camps), and as a consequence lack literacy in their first language. The authors assert that given the numbers of such students entering Canadian classrooms, it is important that educators have at least some knowledge of trauma-informed teaching practice. Illustrated through the journal entries of a student teacher, the implementation of Blaustein & Kinniburgh's (2010) ARC Framework is described, as applied in one Canadian high school, in a classroom of newly-arrived refugees from war-torn countries. The effect of trauma on key areas of attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competence are considered, alongside illustrations of classroom intervention strategies. While acknowledging the challenges inherent in trauma-informed teaching practice, the article encourages a move away from a deficit perspective on children from refugee backgrounds, toward one of hope, befitting the resiliency such children bring to their new country.

### **Introduction**

According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, our country admitted a total of 26,172 refugees between November 2015 and March 2016. While the majority of these were settled in Ontario (41%), 13% and 9% were bound for Alberta and British Columbia, respectively (IRCC, 2017). While British Columbia on average receives 1,600 refugees annually (Government of British Columbia, 2017), the total number of Syrian refugees alone resettled in the province was (as of December 2016), 2,100 (ISS BC, 2016). Syrian households are typically larger than the Canadian ones, with BC arrivals reporting an average of six household members (ISS BC, 2016, p. 8). The relatively young age of Syrian refugees (60% of BC's resettled refugees are under 19, for example) implies that growth in school enrollments is expected, and

the Alberta Education Annual Report for 2015-2016 indicates an enrollment of 1,250 resettled students with refugee experiences into Alberta schools (Government of Alberta, 2016). The numbers of such students arriving in our schools, in a compressed time frame, highlight the need for teachers to consider teaching practices which support the learning needs of children from refugee backgrounds.

Though the circumstances endured by many children with refugee experiences prior to entering our schools may seem crippling, the authors assert that we do well to avoid adopting a “deficit” lens through which to view these new students, who bring “strengths, abilities and qualities to share, with hope of thriving in a new country” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 13). It is with this hopeful outlook that we as authors explore, through experiences shared in a student teacher’s reflective journal, how educators might build learning communities that support our newly arrived neighbours from refugee backgrounds.

**Entry from a student teacher’s journal<sup>1</sup>.** *February 8, Period 4. Today the class of refugee kids are studying heart idioms in preparation for Valentine’s Day, a celebration which for most of these teenagers, will be another one of those “Canadian firsts” in a year that will have seen so many. Have a heart, heartache, a change of heart, wear my heart on my sleeve, learn by heart, cross my heart, warm-hearted, all heart... The students each choose a heart idiom, and use their beginning English literacy skills to write the idiom on a heart-shaped cut-out, which will then adorn the classroom bulletin board for a follow-up reading activity. As I circulate among the desks, observing, and giving spelling help when asked, I’m struck by how much care goes into the formation and placement of each letter, with colours carefully chosen—no one’s racing through this activity. As with every lesson in this class of new arrivals (most are from Syria), there’s that one poignant moment, when we chatty teachers look at a student’s work, and—very uncharacteristically—have nothing to say. One student has chosen, aptly, the idiom heartbroken for his card. “I am heartbroken,” his sentence reads, “because I haven’t seen my brother for 6 years.”*

### **Refugee Arrivals: Meet Our New Neighbours**

Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, of which Canada is a signatory, defines a refugee as someone who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2007, p. 14).

The above circumstances make it important to distinguish refugees from immigrants, a distinction sometimes lost in the perception of the general public. Though both groups will experience the many challenges of settling in a new place, immigrants are likely to have

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<sup>1</sup> On condition of anonymity, permission has been granted by a student teacher to use excerpts from a reflective journal, submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of a teaching practicum field experience course.

developed familiarity with their new country before arrival, often precipitated by pre-move visits. This period of preparation for immigration means that their children are less likely to have interrupted schooling, as arrangements for basic needs are often made in advance of the move to Canada (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015).

Contrast this with the situation of many children from refugee backgrounds. Prolonged time periods in refugee camps may have led to interrupted schooling, with the consequence of illiteracy and innumeracy in their first language (L1), and the effects of trauma from war and involuntary displacement (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014). These reflect the reality of forced migration for refugees, juxtaposed with the choice of destination and timing of settlement exercised by immigrants.

Canada has been recognized for its leadership in providing protection for refugees (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2016), and Canadian educators have acknowledged the crucial role of teachers and schools in the resettlement process. The literature includes explorations of issues surrounding refugee education across a range of Canada's provinces: Prince Edward Island (MacNevin, 2012); Ontario (Feuerverger, 2011); Manitoba (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2012); Alberta (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016; Wilkinson, 2002); and Newfoundland (Li & Grineva, 2017); as well as from a diversity of research methodologies such as case studies (e.g., Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian, & Rousseau, 2017) and narrative inquiries (e.g., Kovinthan, 2016).

**Entry from a student teacher's journal.** *February 6, afternoon. Heavy snowfall today, with -20 C weather coming out of nowhere. All the buses were late, and when they did finally come, were packed full and so didn't do any pick-ups at bus stops where kids from our class were waiting. Got word that one refugee student from our class had been taken to the hospital - severe frostbite while waiting for the bus. His winter clothes were the same as the Canadian-born kids (read: underdressed for the weather) but students who grew up here knew to find somewhere indoors to wait after the first bus passed without stopping. My mentor teacher threw out the lesson plan that morning and taught everyone the "skin test": seeing pale yellow or white means one's skin is in the early stages of frostbite.*

### Trauma-informed Teaching Practice

The impact of war and its aftermath on children's well-being in the areas of health, mental health, and cognition has been well-documented (e.g., Williams, 2007; Wolmer, Hamiel, & Laor, 2011). Teachers typically rely on school psychologists to support children's particular mental health concerns (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011), and such supports may be effective when two or three refugee children from war-torn regions enter a classroom. But when *the entire class* consists of children who have experienced the horrors of war first-hand (as is the case in some Canadian classrooms at present), it is important that teachers have at least some awareness of trauma-informed teaching practice.

In traumatic events, "the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force," which may "overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1997, p. 33). Terr (2003) distinguished one-time traumatic incidents (Type I)

from Type II events (also known as repetitive or complex trauma) which recur for an extended period of time, typically making recovery more difficult (Courtois & Ford, 2014, p. 11).

**Entry from a student teacher's journal.** *My mentor teacher quote of the week:*  
"Teaching this class requires a lot of emotional stamina."

Complex trauma affects cognition in children, which can directly impact success in the classroom. Growing up in conditions of constant threat, with all resources focused on survival, may result in an adolescent who has difficulty thinking clearly and working reasonably through a problem to consider multiple alternatives. Over-responses to sensory stimuli are a result of growing up under extreme stress, and an adolescent who has experienced complex trauma may be hypersensitive to sounds, touch, or light. When experiencing what would be considered ordinary levels of stress in a Canadian school, children with refugee experiences may exhibit the physiological effects of extreme stress, even "shutting down" entirely (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Downey (2013) identified four characteristics of complex trauma which have direct impact upon academic performance: reduced cognitive capacity; sleep disturbance; memory difficulties; and language delays (pp. 12–13). Reduced cognitive capacity through hyperarousal may lead to difficulties retaining information and maintaining attention on a task. Exposure to the trauma of war while growing up may have developed a sleep avoidance pattern, with the child fearing what will happen if they go to sleep, or recurring nightmares as trauma is relived may prevent restful sleep. A student retaining these sleep patterns in their new Canadian environment will inevitably be drowsy during lessons, often sleeping in class and thus missing learning opportunities. With respect to memory difficulties, children who have experienced complex trauma may be overwhelmed with memories of traumatic events, which impact upon their ability to "hold" one set of information while working on another, a skill required, for example, in solving mathematical problems. Finally, given that complex trauma restricts the ability to "listen and retain information, to understand complex concepts and to express ideas and thoughts" (Downey, 2013, p. 13), refugee children may be developmentally behind their peers in regard to their first language, let alone the challenges of acquiring proficiency in a second.

**Entry from a student teacher's journal.** *February 10, Friday. Everything seemed to be going well in the weekly quiz: students were engaged in the task and for the most part the classroom of newly arrived refugee adolescents (mostly from Syria) was unusually calm. Then, out of the blue (at least to the teachers), sobs erupted from one student, and the calm suddenly disintegrated. Two of the boys became fiercely angry and announced they were going home. One of the girls spoke to the sobbing student in a threatening tone, then closed her book and resolutely refused to work. Another student who'd been engaged in the task suddenly appeared panic and needed "fresh air", and this set off a flurry of requests for washroom and water breaks. My mentor teacher tried valiantly to get the quiz back on track, but emotions were now running high across the room. She circulated among the desks, trying to identify how to best help the sobbing student, while attempting to calmly diffuse the rising tide of anger. So much for "summative assessment" ...*

It is tempting, when considering the devastating impacts of complex trauma, to envision only a bleak picture of what a classroom of children from refugee backgrounds might look like, and, like the student teacher quoted above, feel woefully inadequate for the task. Yet, there are many teachers across Canada who are refusing to accept a “deficit” viewpoint—neither of refugee children as learners, nor of themselves as educators—and, despite the many challenges, persist in creating classrooms of hope. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in one such classroom daily for several weeks, and the remainder of this article is devoted to a description of how a team of dedicated teachers are striving to warmly welcome their new neighbours to a Canadian high school, told through the eyes of a student teacher.

### **The ARC Framework—Applied**

The acronym ARC (attachment, regulation, and competency) is used to describe a framework of strategies addressing these three core issues in assisting a child’s recovery from complex trauma (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2007, 2010; Kinniburgh, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2005). The teaching team described in this article utilize classroom practices informed by the ARC Framework, but readers should not infer that the teachers are continually consulting a manual on what to do next—there isn’t time! In fact, the creators of ARC distinguish their framework from other “manualized” approaches, preferring instead to call it a “guideline” to inform practice, while being cognizant of the uniqueness of each context (Kinniburgh et al., 2005, pp. 425–426).

**Entry from a student teacher’s journal.** *As a student teacher, I feel discouraged today - by my estimate, I currently have about 10% of the skills required to teach in this program. :(*

#### **Attachment**

Attachment (the “A” in the ARC Framework) refers to the nurturing relationship between children and their caregivers, which when secure, provides a solid base to establish identity and sense of self (Main, 1996). Children living in, or fleeing from, the inherently insecure conditions of war zones may experience disrupted or severed attachment and its consequences. Key to countering the effects of insecure attachment is the establishment of predictable and structured routines, in an environment where a sense of safety and security is paramount. Predictable classroom routines and rituals help to restore a sense of stability for children whose lives have been characterized by “extraordinary chaos and unpredictability” (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010, p. 38).

**Entry from a student teacher’s journal.** *February 22. School fire drill scheduled for 2 pm today. My mentor teacher is really concerned that the fire drill might be a trauma trigger for the students from refugee backgrounds. How could I not have thought of that??? Am I ever going to get it??*

*Following the completion of the drill she put everyone in a circle, and led the students in describing their feelings when they heard the alarm, and then when we all lined up outside in the snow for a head count. “I want everyone to feel safe,” she kept saying.*

*I hope all that I'm observing here is somehow "going in" by osmosis—I can't read from a manual while teaching ...*

### **Self-regulation**

Children who experience complex trauma often, as a coping tool, learn to disassociate from their experiences, both emotionally and physically. Danger, experienced repeatedly in a war zone for example, will "activate" physiological and psychological survival resources, but "de-activate" higher cognitive functions (Kinniburgh et al., 2005, p. 428). These students may then have difficulty monitoring their emotions at school when (even relatively mild) stressful events occur; some children who have had traumatic experiences "shut down" when encountering the daily ups and downs of school life, while others seem to explode. Learning to identify and regulate emotional responses is a key focus of trauma-informed teaching practice.

**Entry from a student teacher's journal.** *March 1. Intense debriefing session today. My mentor teachers spent their lunch hour and the first period in the afternoon sorting out a simmering conflict. Some of the Syrian boys sit in the hallway during lunch hour, laughing and joking (probably too loudly) in Arabic. A group of Canadian-born kids passing by interpreted the Arabic talk as aggression, and some threats were exchanged. Rumours of an impending brawl spread through our class, and emotions reached a fever pitch. The lesson plan for the afternoon was ditched—again—and the teachers spent the first afternoon period with the class in a circle. Ms V. focused on getting the students to label emotions, using her ultra-calm voice: "M, how did you feel when that happened? .... Oh, M. felt angry. How about you, Y - how did you feel? ... Oh, M felt angry, but Y felt scared."*

*After most of the class had named their emotions (it turned out to be a pretty good vocabulary lesson, too!), Ms B. moved the group along: "So how can we solve this problem? What are your ideas? N, what are your ideas to solve this problem?" An hour later, a peaceful calm had settled over the classroom. Another crisis averted - for now ...*

Self-regulation describes "the capacity to effectively manage experience on many levels: cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioural", and requires both an "ability to tolerate a range of arousal and affect", as well as "an understanding of the interconnections among aspects of internal experiences (i.e., sensations, feelings, thought, behaviour)" (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010, p. 111). Clearly, these capacities do not develop overnight, and teachers (or their school leadership) solely focused on getting through the syllabus will encounter inevitable frustration. A patient, nurturing approach, with a willingness to see the ups and downs of daily school life not as interruptions to the real teaching but as invaluable teaching opportunities in and of themselves, will go a long way toward creating a welcoming learning environment for our new neighbours.

**Entry from a student teacher's journal.** *Quote of the week from my mentor teacher: "With these kids, the relationship is the teaching."*

## Competencies

Developmental competencies, representing the “C” in the ARC Framework, reflect the reality that the complex trauma experienced by children in zones of conflict typically interferes with normal developmental stages, and the competencies that accompany them. Difficulties with problem-solving, concentration, attention to tasks, and abstract reasoning (Kinniburgh et al., 2005) are among the developmental competencies impinged upon by the experiences many of these children have encountered.

**Entry from a student teacher’s journal.** *One of my mentor teachers used a what you had for breakfast prompt as a way to create an orderly procedure for putting away readers. When she found out three boys hadn’t had breakfast, she sent them to get some from the Foods classroom. Financial hardship often goes hand in hand with being a newly arrived refugee, and some of our kids come to school hungry. Felt conflicted about how I am often a slave to the lesson plan—get through the agenda at all costs!*

Key to reconstructing these competencies is restoring a sense that children have control over their own outcomes and that an individual decision made today has direct effect on tomorrow’s consequences—something the uncertainty of life in a war zone quickly erodes. Teachers can foster this through deliberate use of the language of choice, decision, and consequence, and through activities that involve students in short- and longer-term planning toward concrete, achievable goals (Kinniburgh et al., 2005). One school utilized the expertise of a nearby retreat centre, which operated outdoor team-building camps focused on challenging activities requiring teamwork and goal orientation. There, students from refugee backgrounds, against the backdrop of Canada’s breathtaking natural beauty, worked together to plan, execute and evaluate activities like the scaling of rock walls or the safe negotiation of creek crossings.

**Entry from a student teacher’s journal:** *My mentor teacher was coming back from a school outdoor activity, walking alongside a student, when a helicopter flew overhead (the city’s air ambulance). The student noticeably stiffened, so my mentor teacher asked, “How do you feel in Canada when you see a helicopter?”*

*“In Syria,” the student answered, “when you see a helicopter—it means run! Run fast! The helicopter will drop ...” The student didn’t complete the sentence, and my mentor teacher avoided supplying the missing word. They walked the rest of the way back to the school in a reflective silence.*

## Teacher Self-care

Many educators report that teaching and learning with classrooms of children from refugee backgrounds is a deeply fulfilling, rewarding, and even life-changing experience. At the same time, however, it requires, as the mentor teacher quoted above notes, considerable emotional stamina. Student work towards the restoration of disrupted attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competence does not take place without many ups and downs, gains and losses, victories and setbacks, often with accompanying tears (on the part of students, and, occasionally, teachers). In the context of such emotional investment, it is essential that teachers cultivate habits

of self-care. Self-care strategies might include: finding colleagues especially skilled at listening; keeping a sunshine file of positive feedback; developing the ability to laugh at oneself; not neglecting hobbies that replenish; learning to breathe deeply in stressful situations; recognizing when one needs a break; custom-made cappuccinos every Friday; long walks; preventative time-outs (for the teacher!) when classroom emotions are surging; after-work chats with supportive colleagues. Such battery rechargers are essential in maintaining the emotional stamina needed for this challenging, but deeply rewarding work.

### Conclusion

This article has described, through the reflections of a student teacher, how the ARC Framework is being applied in one classroom. We argue that a focus on rebuilding attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competencies in children from refugee backgrounds can provide such students a strong start to their Canadian school life. Evidence suggests that despite overwhelming odds, many children who have experienced trauma somehow not only learn to survive, but to thrive (Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001). Our new neighbours have witnessed first-hand some of the worst that humankind has to offer, yet bring with them a remarkable sense of resilience and hope for a new life in a new country. Educators taking up the challenging task of teaching and learning with children who have experienced the traumas of war will, we assert, find this hope infectious.

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