

Reaching for the STARS: a critical and culturally responsive approach to meet the educational and socio-cultural needs of refugee background students in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Aotearoa New Zealand has come a long way with its educational support and interventions for refugee background students over the last 30 years. Since the 1980s, when quota refugee resettlement was first established, refugee background high school students have been supported by many dedicated principals, ESOL teachers, Heads of Departments and refugee coordinators. Furthermore, the establishment of refugee targeted Flexible Funding Pools by the Ministry of Education, managed and supported by Refugee and Migrant Education Co-ordinators have further contributed to their educational achievement. Although these recourses have proven a small nation's strong commitment to refugee student's educational achievement, the school system as whole still has the responsibility to acknowledge and cater for their specific educational and social-cultural needs. As a supporter of *Multicultural Education* and *critical multiculturalism* ideals this conference paper suggests some attainable concepts for improving the schooling experiences of refugee students through presenting the STARS cultural responsiveness model.

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand has come a long way as a nation, from assimilative approaches to settling refugees and migrants to more inclusive and co-ordinated approaches. **For many refugee students and their families, the introduction to New Zealand education is often a foreign experience and therefore there is a greater need for schools to offer an inclusive and welcoming environment for them from their first term of being enrolled.** Although the country has improved services for refugees in general, many refugee students still require targeted social and academic support to settle well into schools, especially in the first year of their enrolment.

In relation to the key themes of this conference paper I would like to start by stating the following powerful expression by a Somali/Kiwi refugee background student given as part of 2014 **National Race Unity Speech Awards: I AM AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND ... TE RANGA TAHI, TOGETHER WE GROW**, in which the student highlights a number of themes such as diversity, multiculturalism and identity and refugee educational experience:

“My brother, 6, refugee fleeing a civil war. My brother, 12, ungrateful immigrant for refusing to read in front of the class. My brother, 21, studying as a mathematician at Victoria University. My question for the audience here today, is how do we as a nation ensure that our people are freed from the shackles of stereotype and prejudice, free of the limitations that we, society, impose upon them. How does one move from being ostracised and shamed by his teacher in front of his peers, to pursuing his passion? How does one free himself from the restrictions of oppressive stereotypes? ...

Aotearoa, has and always will be a country of many faces. From the arrival of Pakeha to the days of the Dawn Raids our multi-culturalism has become a part of who we are as a people, united under the name of a flightless bird we have become so much more than the Treaty of Waitangi. So much more than just two peoples, two languages, two traditions. New Zealanders are a people with heritages spanning from Ireland to Iran, Somalia to the Solomons we're constantly redefining what it means to be a Kiwi, what it means to call the land of the long white cloud home.”

Socio-culturally responsive educational practice

It is crucial for New Zealand schools to acknowledge the reality that the student populations continue to become linguistically and ethnically more diverse. Therefore more attention must be given to creating learning experiences and environments that are conducive for nurturing and embracing diversity, multiculturalism and bilingualism. **In this regards, for many refugee background students who have experienced trauma, displacement and prejudice, their own religion, culture and language can provide them with a strong foundation to build their new life along with the strength, identity and self worth to overcome the past and start afresh in New Zealand.**

Meeting the diverse cultural needs of refugee students requires all those involved in educating them to approach the task with optimism. **As Arnot and Pinson (2005, p.45, cited in Taylor, 2008) emphasise:**

The celebration of cultural diversity in a diverse globalised world and the moral values of caring and inclusivity are values which are at the heart of education. A positive approach towards strangers, in this case asylum-seeker and refugee children, should be a central element in all children's learning. In this context the asylum-seeker and refugee child is a litmus test of the ethos of schools.

As the New Zealand government continues its commitment to resettle 750 quota refugees and a number of asylum seekers in New Zealand, our schools will continue to experience an increase in the number of refugee students of all ages. Therefore it is important for teachers, and the school community as a whole to continue to develop new skills and gain further knowledge about these students, their issues, their histories and their cultures. Educationally and socio-culturally teachers and school leaders play an important role in helping refugee background students to gain mastery in English, learn study skills and successfully integrate into the school system. **A responsive teacher is open to learn about their refugee students' backgrounds and to make every effort to build on students' prior experiences and histories.** Hamilton and More (2004), suggest that this should start early on while teachers are at their pre-service stage of their careers. **According to Hamilton and More (2004), schools and policy makers must endeavour to develop curriculum that supports human rights and cultural diversity thereby eliminating racism and bullying; strengthen cross-cultural topics and initiatives to help increase the whole school's level of acceptance of cultural diversity and cross-cultural respect.** Furthermore schools must aim to develop a more positive and culturally appropriate relationship with refugee parents through school forums with an aim of fostering cultural diversity. **Schools must engage in positive and culturally appropriate ways with refugee background students in order for them to feel that their languages and cultures are appreciated (pp. 112-116).**

In New Zealand, school principals with the support of their BOT can play a key role in establishing a school culture that is inclusive of diversity and the promotion of social justice. According to Stewart (2011) "to promote the success of all students, school leaders should develop and implement pedagogical practices that strengthen the school culture" and "by promoting equality, fairness and respect" (p.284). Stewart further emphasises that they must **facilitate learning opportunities for their staff to examine their behaviour and attitudes toward their refugee background students** to reduce issues such as racism, discrimination, exclusion and unfair actions.

Furthermore, teachers play an important role in settling refugee students in schools and being a culturally responsive teacher contributes to the development of inclusive and welcoming classrooms (Goodwin, 2002; Olson, 2006). **Pedagogically, teachers with higher levels of cultural awareness or what I describe as cultural intelligence (see below) are better able to serve the academic needs of their refugee students.** According to Ladson-Billings, these teachers can also better support and empower their students "intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically", and that "these cultural referents are not merely vehicles

for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right" (1994, p. 18).

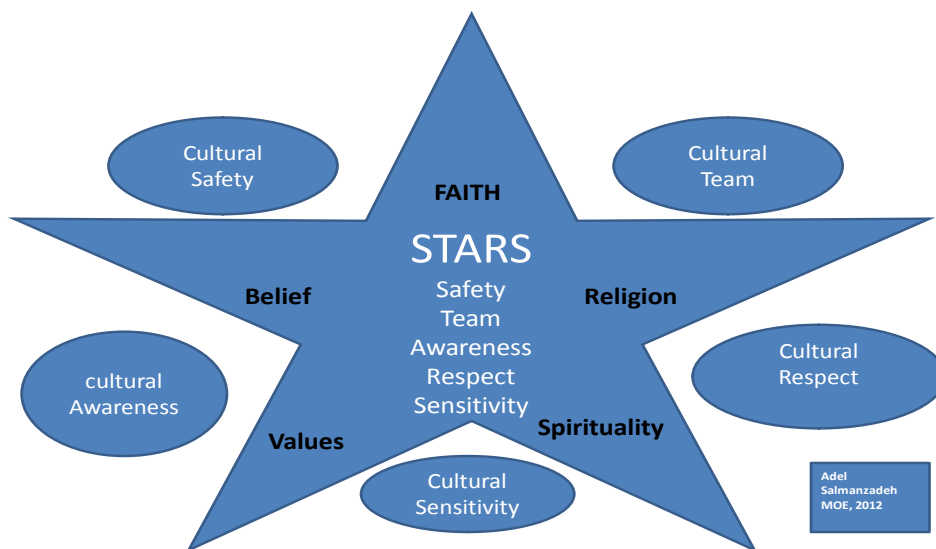
Gay (2000) acknowledges the importance of being a culturally aware and responsive teacher who incorporates diverse student's cultural knowledge and learning styles "to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (2000, p. 29). Stewart (2011) also recognises the importance of teachers being culturally responsive to refugee background students by **utilising and developing culturally diverse educational resources and lesson plans.** According to Stewart, teachers also have the responsibility to encourage local students to become more aware of cultural diversity. **A teacher can encourage local students to take issues of racism and discrimination seriously and encourage open dialogue about topics such as human rights, and social justice amongst all students, foster the original languages of their refugee background students and encourage multiculturalism. (pp. 290-293)**

Many researchers have emphasised the **importance of professional development for teachers and school leaders to increase their knowledge about cultural responsiveness;** issues of diversity and their understanding about diverse refugee related issues pre and post settlement in the host country (Darling-Hammond, 1993, Hamilton & Moore, 2004 and Stewart, 2011). Stewart (2011), goes further by recommending that "anti-racism and sensitivity training should be taught to all government agencies, ...as well as the general public and the business sector" (P.286). **As a past refugee high school student in New Zealand I have had personal experiences of discrimination and prejudice. In more recent years due to my Middle Eastern appearance and accent I have continued to be discriminated against in New Zealand, certainly more so after the events of 9/11. Although I'll always call New Zealand home, my experience of being regarded as a 'kiwi' varies from day to day and person to person.** The refugee's experience of racial discrimination in New Zealand is not widely documented. However a recent research document titled *Refugee Voices: Journey towards Resettlement* (2004) does address some of the issues to some extent. Many of the participants in the focus groups, both past and recent arrivals, **"found that refugees in New Zealand were often the target of racism or discrimination fuelled by ignorance and a lack of understanding about the issues facing refugees"** (p.16).

In my professional practice as a Senior Adviser, Refugee and Migrant Support in Auckland, I have come to recognise the importance of developing a shared and universal cultural intelligence framework as a professional development tool for my colleagues, teachers and

other educational professionals. I began developing The STARS Model as part of my doctoral research proposal in 2011. I was later given the opportunity to further develop the model as part of the Ministry of Education's official **New Kiwi (refugee and migrant newcomers) cultural responsiveness as a professional development tool for Special Education practitioners such as Educational Psychologists, Speech Language Therapists, Advisors and their Service Mangers. The STARS model places a particular emphasis on religion, faith and the beliefs of refugee and migrant populations, which for many forms the foundation of their mental views and attitudes about the life and the world around them.** The STARS model has now been adopted as the official Ministry of Education Cultural Intelligence Framework for New Kiwi (newly arrived migrant and refugees):

New Kiwi Cultural Responsiveness: STARS Model



- *Cultural Safety:*

The model is underpinned by communication, recognition of the diversity in worldviews both within and between diverse cultural groups. Therefore it enables education professionals to offer a safe, appropriate and acceptable education as defined by those who receive it.

- *Cultural Team:*

Schools with many staff and students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can initiate the establishment of a cultural team which may meet and consult on various activities and projects to celebrate diversity, as well as addressing some of the challenges of diverse groups. The cultural team will further ensure more inclusive and authentic cultural responsiveness practices for migrant and refugee students and their families.

- *Cultural Awareness:*

It is the foundation of communication and it involves the ability to stand back from ourselves and become aware of our own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions. Why do we do things in that way? How do we see the world? Why do we react in that particular way? People see,

interpret and evaluate things in different ways. What is regarded as an appropriate behaviour in one culture could be regarded as inappropriate in another.

- *Cultural Respect:*

Cultural respect can be defined as the recognition of the holistic nature of diversity, acknowledging the important relationships between physical, spiritual, cultural, emotional and social wellbeing and community capacity of migrant and refugees in NZ.

- *Cultural sensitivity:*

Cultural sensitivity is being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and that they have an effect on values, learning, and behaviour of our students and their respective families.

Multicultural education and Refugee students

As an education specialist and a doctoral student, I have developed an interest in multicultural education and most recently critical multiculturalism. In this key part of the paper I aim to present some backgrounds to multicultural education and offer some relevant suggestions in terms of its possible applications to different aspects of refugee education.

In a New Zealand schooling environment, May (2004) suggests the following requirements for schools to consider for appropriate implementation or critical multicultural education:

- **Develop a theorised, educationally coherent, and critical approach to educational practice which overtly and deliberately links the micro-politics of the school reform to the macro-politics of multiculturalism, biculturalism [between Māori and Pakeha] and the wider systematic issue of redressing educational inequality for minority groups and ,**
- **Recognise the whole school systematically, in order to reflect the diverse languages and cultures of its students within the school. This includes a whole range of highly innovative and progressive educational developments that lead to the fundamental restructuring of the organisation, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment practices of school (p.94).**

By considering May's suggestions I argue that the application of the above requirements for a critical multicultural education for educating refugee backgrounds students in New Zealand should consist of:

- **Critically discussing the place of refugees within New Zealand's bicultural history and framework. As well as providing refugee students and their families with the opportunity to understand biculturalism and the place of Māori as original settlers in Aotearoa.**

- **Critically exploring key features of educational inequalities in New Zealand and the way refugees could be disadvantaged socially and educationally similar to Māori and Pasifica populations.**
- **Critically looking at the multicultural schooling in totality, which requires schools to recognise the unique and diverse needs of refugee students to be able to raise educational success amongst these disadvantaged populations.**

Finally, respected multicultural educationalists Banks and Banks (2007) cautions us that we are living in dangerous times and in these times we need “leaders, educators, and [needs] classroom teachers who can bridge impermeable cultural, ethnic, and religious borders, envision new possibilities, invent novel paradigm, and engage in personal transformations and visionary action” (p.5).

Conclusion

Over the past two decades Aotearoa New Zealand has provided many of our refugee background students the opportunity to benefit from a well-established education system, employment pathways and a safe nation to call home. It is however our education system's struggle to meet the holistic needs of Māori, Pacific and minority groups that continue to challenge us as a nation. Meeting the holistic needs of our refugee background students and their families demands our ability to broaden our vision and develop a greater understanding of their socio-cultural background, socio-economic status and their continuing emotional and psychological struggles with their past refugee experiences.

In this paper I have endeavoured to offer STARS as a holistic framework to educate refugee background students as a culturally responsive model for educators and schools. Overall, as we continue to develop our responses to multiculturalism alongside of biculturalism we must make a special consideration for our refugees and their unique backgrounds and experiences. A holistic education for refugee background students requires more academic research, more dialogue with refugee communities and most of all a greater commitment to equity and social justice.

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