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Educating refugee-background students: Critical issues and
dynamic contexts. Bristol, United Kingdom: Multilingual
Matters. 264pp. ISBN: 978-1-78309-996-2**

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The beginning of the war in Syria in 2012 spurred a sudden influx of students with a refugee background in education in several Western countries. At that time, studies focusing on this group were scarce and the advice requested by policymakers or schools who needed to include this population remained largely unanswered. Now, some seven years later, this book is a first and much awaited answer to this call. The overall message of this book is poignantly captured in the story of a Cambodian student whose blessed string was cut by the police upon his arrest. Separated from this religious object, this student felt threatened by evil spirits and dispossessed of his cultural identity. This example serves as a metaphor for the loss that students with a refugee background have not only endured before but also after arrival in their host countries. This book describes how “early excitement may turn to profound disappointment” (p. 127), disengagement, and oppositional behaviours. It tells the story of the failure of well-intentioned programs and pedagogical approaches, which emphasise academic appropriation over institutional and social aspects of integration and all too often ignore the linguistic and cultural assets that students bring with them. However, this book does not only identify the problem, it also provides a goldmine of recommendations and pedagogical answers to support resilience and agency in these students. According to the editors of this volume, linguistically- and culturally-responsive education should be built on “aspects of identity that matter to students” (p. 3). Resources and safe spaces in a student-centred learning environment are used to address assumptions in a dialogue with the students, their family, and communities.

Part 1, Language and Literacy, starts with a quantitative study on “Recently Resettled Refugee Students Learning English in US High Schools” (pp. 17-32). In this study, Browder compares the impact of limited versus interrupted formal education on the development of literacy in the school language. His results show that educational backgrounds fall short in explaining the observed variability in literacy. These results point to the extreme heterogeneity of the group, thereby challenging preconceived ideas on interrupted learning. He also notes the relative absence of objective measures of literacy and mathematics in the language of the students (p. 19). In chapter 2 (pp. 33-48), Crandall explores the effects of literacy activities based on the students’ lived experiences as opposed to activities based on test-centred instruction. He finds that the lived experienced activities had a positive effect on the engagement of students in literacy activities, whereas test-centred activities discouraged and disengaged them. He also insists on the negative impact of the teachers’ lack of historical knowledge on global issues that, in the eyes of the students, delegitimizes the teachers. In chapter 3, Park and Valdez (pp. 49-65) and in chapter 7 (pp. 107-121), Dahl, Krulatz, and Torgersen question the gatekeeper role of learning the destination country’s language. An important merit of the contributions of the authors of these two chapters is their debunking of the myth that proficiency in the dominant language guarantees economic self-sufficiency. Moreover, in their view, both the right and the obligation to attend introduction programs may perpetuate exclusion instead of enabling belonging. However, according to Park and Valdez, translanguaging practices may disrupt linguistic hierarchies imposed by forced enrollment in language and civic programs, and increase

learners' identity investments. Omerbašić, in chapter 4, (pp. 66-81), via a qualitative study in US community centres, researched how teenage girls from Thailand negotiate knowledge skills and resources through multimodal literacy practices. Findings of her study lead her to highlight the necessity to bridge out-of-school practices and academic knowledge. Following a similar line of reasoning, Nakutnyy and Sterzuk, in chapter 5 (pp. 82-91), show how community and literacy, though profoundly interconnected, are disrupted by the process of migration. Additionally, their results show that adults without schooling are not "a homogenous mass of socially disabled people" (p. 84), but that their knowledge and resources are barely supported in the language classroom. An interesting aspect of this chapter is that it shows the close relationship of literacy and power distribution, describing the problematic situation of adults with a refugee background whose children learn to read and write the school language faster than they do, "causing parents to depend on their children" (p. 88). In chapter 6, (pp. 92-106), Monterov demonstrates how trauma stories, when appropriately received, can be used to help educators to understand the impact of traumatic experiences on their students' learning behaviour and relationships in schools. The chapter contains useful examples of the conditions required for the appropriate reception of such narratives within the classroom. This chapter forms an elegant bridge to part 2 of the book.

In the first chapter of part 2 (pp. 123-255), on Access and Equity, Hiorth and Molyneux (pp.125-143, chapter 8) describe the complexity of individual transitions from reception to mainstream schools. The voices of the students bring to light the inadequacy of "well-intentioned programs in school systems that still exclusively value the cultural knowledge of the dominant culture" (p. 127). According to these authors, social, institutional, and academic domains of transitions should all be part of the curriculum, and the necessary cultural knowledge should be taught in order to support the students in a successful transition. In chapter 9, (pp. 144-158), Khan explores how cultural integration is influenced by citizenship classes. Her research shows how these courses reinforce historically-held negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities, while depicting a homogenous British society hiding an agenda of cultural assimilation. In chapter 10, "Using Photovoice (...) to Uncover Community Cultural Wealth and Influence Policy Change" (pp. 159-176), Papa examines the relationships and tensions among home, community, and school linguistic and cultural practices of Cambodian and Guatemalan youth. Interestingly, the main loss expressed by Cambodian youth is the loss of their mother tongue, the Khmer language. The participants explained how their lack of knowledge of that language has impaired communication with their parents and grandparents, highlighting the importance of mother tongue maintenance in the education of youth with a refugee background. In chapter 11 (pp. 177-190), Holmkvist, Sullivan, and Westum explore teachers' understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They conclude that formal training on PTSD destined at teachers may help them to support the students and to engage them in learning. Furthermore, these authors emphasize the necessity to create individualized learning opportunities that build upon students' resources and resilience. In chapter 12 (pp. 191-207), Korntheuer, Gag, Anderson, and Schroeder examine the "Systemic Barriers to Equitable Participation in the Vocational Education System." The reader discovers that even in vocational education programs, which are intended to be equitable, students with a refugee background may be marginalized. The chapter is well-balanced as it also explores the positive effects of intervention programs such as mentoring programs, and the effect of available language support, monitoring, and evaluation approaches. The authors conclude that these strategies may help to avoid exclusion mechanisms. Experiences of discrimination in schools on the basis of language, faith, or nationality are at the centre of

chapter 13, “Iraqi Refugee-background Adolescents’ Experiences in Schools” (pp. 208-224). In her contribution, Pucino studies reactions of victims that might range from passive to active depending on individual characteristics and controls. This is another chapter with useful recommendations, such as training teaching personnel and including families and communities into the educational programs. In chapter 14 (pp. 225-240), Hirano investigates the dynamic construction of identity through individual students’ trajectories. She shows how persistence and retention are fostered by the students’ sense of belonging to a community of practice, underlining the crucial role played by the community. Finally, in chapter 15, (pp. 241-255), Bukus contests the rigid traditional categorizations of migration trajectories and the impact of these categorizations on “Children’s Educational Participation.” Capturing the diversity of student experiences, she advocates the use of more accurate conceptualizations of the phenomenon, “decisive for the determination of inclusion or exclusion mechanisms” and “challenged by current trends of movement across the globe” (p. 242). Finally, the merit of this book is that it challenges many of the assumptions related to stereotypes and ideologies about students with a refugee background by giving them a voice.

In her Afterword (p. 256), Bigelow pleads for “a worldwide endeavor and collaboration” in education. She reiterates the need to capitalize on students’ skills and to nuance the narratives on students with a refugee background. Understanding and including individual narratives and literacy practices for teachers and policymakers is a crucial step that will help them to shift from a self-centred to a more informed and responsive global education. The book also provides an index of the most useful terms and concepts (pp. 260-264). As reader, we may conclude that our ultimate educational objective should be that students do not feel threatened anymore, nor dispossessed of their cultural identity. Educators, applied linguists, policy makers, or volunteers, we should all strive for a school context in which students, together with their communities and teachers, may feel safe, and enriched and reinforced by new educational experiences.

References

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