

# LIBERAL STUDIES

*Vol. 1, Issue 2, July–December 2016*



## *Refugee Children: Education in Emergencies for Empowerment*

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–Nigam Dave\*

A famous Nigerian proverb says, “It takes an entire village to raise a child.” Today, when the world is facing one of the greatest migration crisis it has encountered, as a global village, the world as a whole would have to get together to solve the issue and ensure that children who are the most vulnerable victims of forced migration do not get impacted immeasurably. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report 2015, hints at an alarming status, that of the world’s total refugee population, about 51 percent are children below 18. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has already launched a campaign ‘No Lost Generation’ that is focused on providing access to quality education to refugee children. Lebanon which is encountering a great rush of Syrian refugees had started in 2014, a program called ‘Reaching All Children with Education’ (RACE). The British Council has even gone a step further in providing online support to aspirants of higher education. They have started a program called ‘Language and Academic Skills and E-Learning Resource’ (LASER). It aims at providing entry level competence to people from 18–25 to enrol in tertiary education. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has provided unrestricted access to education, to migrants at all levels and given a right to free education to all refugee children. However, the gravity of the problem is so very huge that a major gap in providing access to education and receiving it still exists for the refugee children.

The modern times have seen a large scale, forced migration of people fleeing their homeland because of political persecution, religious fanaticism, crime, economic insecurity or civil wars. Taking refuge in a safe asylum is not all that easy. Families get separated and in some cases children are left the lone survivors.

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As if the trauma of leaving the comforts of homeland is not enough, these children are often left alone to face hostile situations as orphans and/or breadwinners in foreign lands.

According to UNHCR, a refugee is one who has fled the country of origin fearing persecution or threats of violence based on religion, race, nationality, political association or membership of a particular social group and an asylum seeker is one who is outside the country of nationality and has applied to the country they are in for a status of a refugee. Most countries that have accepted the migrants and given them asylum or accepted them as refugees now face another tough challenge of rehabilitating them. Food, healthcare, residence and sanitation have become challenging issues in resettling the refugees. But in order to lessen the trauma of displacement, assimilation and acceptance of displaced children, genuine acceptance and incorporation of these children in the education system of the host country becomes crucial. While the world is discussing the ramifications of migration and geo-political issues, refugee children and their human rights are sometimes sidelined and forgotten. The need assessment of UNHCR for refugees in Greece mentions that education is a top priority for the refugees in Greece. Around seventy-seven percent children considered education to be the top priority followed by family, health and home.

Education takes on a new meaning all together when refugee children, traumatised with the horror of violence in their homeland and facing a cultural shock in a new country get into the class rooms. Learning and counselling becomes necessary not just for the refugee children who are entering the class but also for the children who have been the existing stakeholders. In the latter, it is very important for the educators to foster the values of compassion, empathy, respect and understanding for these refugee children. Children who enter the academics from a hostile past don't immediately assimilate in the mainstream culture. For them not just the language but the new culture also becomes a challenge. At the same time, for the existing stakeholders, temporary doubts and concerns of missing out on quality education arises.

Children who enter as forced migrants in a new country most often feel their socio-psychological needs are not fulfilled by the ongoing system of education in the host country. Each refugee child has already been through some individual loss and pain and for that child to cope up with linguistic change, cultural change and social change becomes stressful. Also, not many empirical evidences are available to understand factors of ability of these children to assimilate in the mainstream culture in a given time frame.

It is hence imperative for the education sector to devise newer policies and strategies for these children so that they don't stay on the periphery and become one with the centre. Educators would do well to understand that these children over a period of time would become the citizens of the nation and as such their isolation after being inducted in the host country can bring grave consequences in the future.

Schools are the best places to start the process of rehabilitation, as education empowers an individual and teachers and schools working in the right direction can heal the wounds of the displaced very quickly. A teacher is one who is in a position to touch the lives of these refugee children up close and if all stakeholders work together properly, the displaced children can quickly leave behind their past and could get into the mainstream activities rather quickly.

One of the major problems to solve would be to understand the difference of the age groups. There are many countries today in which civil war or political atrocities are keeping children away from basic education and/or schooling. In some countries, for lack of options, children also take up arms and weapons. They have not been exposed even to basic literacy but they are grown-up or matured in age, mentally. When they are given refuge, the host country finds out the first challenge is in inducting them into the class room. If they are inducted as per their learning ability, it leads to mismatch in age groups in a class and can impact the learning outcomes of all. If this is not done, how do you induct one to the class room in which there is a vast difference of children with differing abilities? The entire EU and other countries that have provided asylum to refugees can try to make a policy of developing tracks, or exclusive bridge courses at the school levels, which in some way may help towards minimising this gap. These courses can focus on the linguistic and quantitative abilities of children first as both are needed to comprehend other courses. Many refugee children tend to face difficulties because they are acquiring the knowledge of new language not just to learn but also to communicate. Linguistic barrier comes as a main hindrance in the process of integration. The linguistic orientation thus becomes not just necessary for the refugee children but also for the educators to understand the problems of the new learners.

Countries facing the rush and overcrowding of refugees seeking asylum also need to have a number of competent language interpreters. Greece has adopted a policy of recruiting refugee teachers also, so that they can understand bi-lingual factors and help assimilation quicker. Canadian public schools have kept Arabic interpreters on their speed dial. The schooling system of a host

country should organise camps for teachers and administrators to understand the basic language of the refugees. Also, more books on language-to-language translations can be procured by schools. During the orientation of refugee children, pocket handbooks of some commonly used words in the host country with pictorial descriptions may be given to each child. Each school can have bilingual sign boards for all to understand some necessary words and directions. Basic greetings are the best way to understand civilities. Refugee children can be taught greetings and salutations in a language of the host country so that they can establish rapport with the mainstream groups.

Some countries have evolved a bi-lingual approach to education. In Sweden, a bi-lingual option is provided to refugees between the ages of 7 to 16. The children can study courses in their own language and study Swedish as a second language.

In addition to the bridge courses at the academic level, well structured orientation into the culture and the education system needs to be planned for the refugee students. In Denmark and Latvia for teacher education, courses in multi-culturalism are added to equip teachers to understand the diverse needs of various ethnic groups. Teaching and evaluation pedagogies vary from country to country and a student not oriented properly into the new system may feel academically isolated. If the students are not housed in the campus dorms, then orientation into the local culture and the geography of the city also should be designed for increasing their awareness of their immediate surroundings. Refugees generally come from a recent past of safety concerns and their doubts on their safety are further founded on their inability to settle in the very different, host culture. Also the food and eating habits may be completely different in the host country as compared to their home countries; so educators should understand that the child is not just trying to cope with the academics but many things that intertwine with academics and therefore progress in it.

One of the solutions to ensure speedy integration is to help form peer-relations. Refugee children because of their culture shock and poor linguistic skills often feel an inferiority complex and remain slow in mixing with their peers. Developing a peer buddy system is one way to ensure that for each refugee child there are buddies from the local culture, who, during their formal and informal interactions, help the refugee children to quickly adapt to the new culture. This also strengthens the multicultural appreciation among the stakeholders. Weekend home stay for the refugee children is another way of providing them an understanding of local culture and minimising apprehensions at both levels.

Schools can also develop modules of team activities that provide diverse groups to work on the same project. This provides the refugee children ample space to learn while they work. Children generally develop better interpersonal relations outside the formal class room activities. When the diverse groups work on group projects they can better relate to the challenges of members of their own group and help them overcome these challenges to meet the mutually planned outcome.

Refugees have reported to UNHCR that they also face a distance problem. Since it is not possible for all refugees to live in close vicinity to the school, where their children are enrolled, they find it extremely difficult to find suitable means of transportation. Car pooling or travelling long distance is not considered safe by many refugee parents and this results into a lower interest of refugees enrolling their children in schools.

Besides, as generally happens in most cases, the excitement of being away from foreseeable danger and accepted by a host country soon fades away when the second phase for a refugee starts;- when the child nostalgically remembers its homeland and the good old days back before the crisis. It is natural that in spite of safety and better access to all things, refugee children would start feeling lonely (or homesick) and would think of their homeland or even the lost members of their family. Post-induction in the schools, a periodic counselling system must ensure that children do not feel any regrets in settling in the new country. After an initial peak in the academics, there generally comes a lull when the refugee child gives up on positive attempts to cope up with academic pressure and stays in past. At such a time, one must remember that post migration inductions are as important as inductions at the start of accepting refugees in a new country.

Also subtle hints from school administrators and students of host country need to be monitored. Refugees already enter with a fragile and vulnerable mindset; any bias against them may escalate into racial bitterness and sidetrack the rehabilitation. Complaint redressal systems and effective third party observance is crucial for the safety of the entire system. Existing students also should not feel threatened with the induction of new students. As per the report of UNHCR, in countries like Lebanon and Jordan the demography of class rooms have changed. There are more Syrian students in the classrooms than children from the homeland. These and other similar countries are not prepared to cope up with such imbalance and hence also in ensuring proper financial resources to keep the system going on. This sometimes results in the host country stakeholders grudging the presence of refugee children and their ill treatment

becomes prevalent. Schools in Lebanon are now running shifts to accommodate the increasing number of students.

While EU and the neighbouring countries of Syria are trying to address the challenge of providing access to all refugee children, there is an added complexity as well. In a war affected population many children have disabilities. These children enter another country with severe trauma and a sense of loss. Better inclusion would warrant that each school tries to accommodate children with disabilities and provides basic amenities to them as well. So challenges exist on both sides and the host country is taking on a dual responsibility of moulding their future citizens.

At the national level of policy making, the host countries would do well to ensure stronger public schooling mechanism, recruitment of more teachers, creating expanded infrastructure by having prefabricated class rooms and minimising bureaucratic hurdles for the enrolment of all children. At such a time, it becomes necessary for the international community to come forward with donations and human support in this noble cause.

Education is a great leveller and has great healing properties. Providing access to quality education and creating an inclusive society through access is the least that the global society can do for the migrants across the world. It is time that the global society stands for inclusive access and makes all children of today global citizens.