



Research Article

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Heritage Nation Educational and Vocational Paths

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Abstract

The intake of immigrants and refugees by countries such as Canada, the US, the UK, and Australia has significant implications for involved adults and children. As they navigate their heritage nations, the acquisition of the English language becomes essential for education and vocational purposes. In essence, to be integrated into their heritage nations, migrant adults and children face the challenge of having to learn a second language. It is important to acknowledge the disruption of education and careers experienced by these individuals as they seek new beginnings in heritage nations. While heritage nations such as Canada have programs that facilitate the integration of immigrants and refugees, some of the initiatives fail to take into account their diverse needs. For example, Fang et al. (2018) indicate that refugees face gendered barriers, low education levels, emotional scars and physical impairments, and cultural barriers, which hinder their acquisition of the English language. Understanding the specific challenges immigrants and refugees face as they transition to their new environment is critical to improving their experience. This paper examines the psychological, socio-cultural, and educational implications of education and career disruptions of immigrants and refugees and suggests strategies to support new language acquisition.

Keywords: language acquisition, immigrants, integration, barriers

1. Introduction

1.1 Implications of School and Career Disruptions

1.1.1 Psychological Implications

The experiences of most immigrants and refugees before joining their heritage nations are characterized by the destruction of previous ways of life by events such as war. According to Warriner et al. (2019, pp. 32–41), a significant percentage of refugees come from families that have experienced religious, ethnic, and political persecution. In addition, many of them have experienced separation from families and communities. The loss of a way of life and culture, coupled with the difficulties experienced during escape, can have a lasting psychological impact on immigrants and refugees, which can impact language acquisition. As informed by Fang et al. (2018), other than physical impairments, refugees wrestle with emotional scars. Furthermore, the authors highlight how some refugees experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Fang et al., 2018). One interviewee in the research by Fang et al. (2018) narrates that sometimes, when the teacher is

explaining something, they are thinking about their son back in Syria. Benseman (2014) points out that the trauma experienced by refugee learners before arriving in their heritage countries can be psychological or physical torture, residing in primitive conditions during transit, cultural alienation, and sustained separation from friends and families. In essence, the experience of having to move to a new country has lasting psychological implications for immigrants, which impact how they live in their heritage nations and, consequently, how they acquire a second language. Without proper support from systems in the heritage nations, it can be difficult for immigrants and refugees to be fully integrated into their new environments.

The experiences of immigrants and refugees are also characterized by psychological distance, which is their affective state and relative predispositions toward learning a second language (Block, 2007). In this case, the experiences of immigrants and refugees can separate them from the ability to acquire a second language. The culture shock and language shock that come with moving to a new country implies that it can be extremely difficult for individuals to be ready to learn. As a result of culture shock, immigrants and refugees experience disorientation and anxiety as they navigate their new environment. Regarding language shock, Block (2007) points out that individuals can experience feelings of shame and stress when they suddenly find out that they have to communicate in a language they do not command. In essence, the psychological distance that immigrants and refugees experience as they settle in heritage nations can impede, to a great extent, their acquisition of a new language.

Immigrant and refugee children also experience many challenges that can have psychological implications. According to Miller et al. (2014), when refugee background students arrive in Australia, they suffer social isolation, financial hardship, unfamiliar bureaucratic processes, and difficulties in accommodation. These challenges can be a source of psychological distress for such individuals. Social isolation means that refugees and immigrants may lack social contact and relationships with other people, which are important for their well-being. When you add financial hardship to the problem, the experiences of refugees and migrants in their new environment can cause anxiety and stress. With disrupted schooling, it can be extremely challenging for refugees and immigrants to develop the cultural and social understanding necessary to navigate their new environments. Furthermore, when it comes to education, Miller et al. (2014) point out that it can take 7-10 years for them to learn the linguistic attributes necessary for writing in specific subject areas. The disruption of schooling and the way of life in their home countries, and the challenge of settling in a new country can be a challenging experience for immigrants and refugees.

1.1.2 Socio-cultural Implications

Moving to a new country implies leaving behind important socio-cultural aspects and values and trying to embrace new ones. Such a transition can be challenging, especially when the new culture is significantly different from one's own culture. For example, a refugee from a Middle-Eastern country like Syria that has a different culture compared to Canada can experience numerous challenges trying to settle in a new socio-cultural environment. A key issue migrants face as they settle in heritage countries is the loss of cultural and social capital (Block, 2007). Cultural capital means having the right cultural assets and resources, such as artifacts and connections to particular institutions, while social capital denotes the relationships with others that are integral in navigating social life (Block, 2007). Given the cultural and social capital that immigrants and refugees had developed over time before their transit, their loss can be devastating since they are important in interacting with others and generally living respectable and dignified lives. In their heritage nations, refugees and immigrants have to forget the social and cultural structures that characterize life in their home countries. In essence, in the new environment, they face the challenge of having to accumulate new social and cultural capital. Compared to the locals who have had a lifetime to develop these important forms of capital, immigrants and refugees must surmount obstacles such as culture shock to develop social and cultural capital.

Another socio-cultural implication of the disruption of educational and career life is having to learn a new language without enough social networks to practice with. Although immigrants and refugees can be exposed to new language through television, newspapers, and radio, there are limited opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom (Block, 2007). As revealed by Block (2007), practicing a new language outside the classroom depends on one's access to English-speaking social networks. As immigrants and refugees begin to settle in the heritage nations, the limited access to English-speaking people can impact language acquisition to a great extent. Given the significance of practice in learning a new language, the lack of social networks to facilitate practice means that many of the refugees and migrants learn at a slower pace than desired. Furthermore, the new environment characterized by new cultural and social values means that refugees and immigrants may not have the courage to converse with strangers, more so because their language skills are lacking.

1.1.3 *Educational and Career Implications*

Education and career are important facets of life as they enable one to lead a life with dignity, financial security, and good health. The disruption of education and career can be devastating, given that the acquisition of a new language is necessary for one to study and work in the heritage nation. For example, Syrian refugees resettling in Canada must learn English to continue their education and be eligible to get jobs. If one comes from a country where instruction is primarily offered in another language other than English, settling in can be extremely challenging. In essence, there are significant educational and career implications associated with settling in the heritage nations, which must be taken into account by the government and institutions facilitating the integration of immigrants and refugees into the heritage nations.

The disruption of refugees' and immigrants' education exposes them to difficult experiences, which impacts how they learn a new language. During the Syrian civil war, there were destructions of schools, and others were converted to shelters to house displaced families (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). In essence, before migration to heritage nations, the refugees and immigrants could barely go to school as infrastructures were destroyed and other schools converted to shelters. This implies that before being resettled in their host nations, many children may have experienced prolonged periods out of school. As described by Madziva and Thondhlana (2017), interviewed Syrian refugees narrated the disruption of education of their children as painful as future opportunities in the country seemed bleak. Furthermore, as they arrived in nations of first asylum, the Syrian children could not receive adequate education, with their enrollment rates being 30% in Turkey and 20% in Lebanon (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Therefore, the disruption of education means that the chances of continuing education in asylum countries are limited. Even when the heritage nations support their education, there are significant barriers and challenges that affect the acquisition of a second language. Madziva and Thondhlana (2017) report that migrant children in the EU have been noted to face discrimination and exclusion. In essence, the disruption of education experienced by immigrants and refugees in their home countries significantly affects their educational and career paths.

A key challenge impacting the education of immigrants and refugees in the heritage nation is a gap in the perception of learners' needs between students and instructors. According to Huang (2010), there is a gap between instructors and students in regard to what is considered "very important" skills. This implies that what is considered important by learners of a second language is different from what instructors perceive. In her study, Huang (2010) found that there were significant differences between students' self-evaluation and instructors' evaluation of their students. This divergence means that instructors may not fully meet the learning needs of refugee and immigrant students. While Huang (2010) points out that some learners may not be in a position to self-diagnose accurately, it further points out the challenges migrant students face while learning a new language.

Education for immigrants and refugee children also faces the challenge of implementing learner-centered activities. As informed by Benseman (2014), most learners perceive their instructors

as experts to be respected and as the only source of knowledge. Given the value of learner-centered instruction, perceiving the teacher as the sole source of knowledge limits the participation of migrant students. The low levels of learning skills also mean that learners can find it hard to work on assignments independently. The reluctance to ask for help and the difficulty in articulating difficulty means that instructors face significant challenges teaching students with low learning skills.

The disruption of the education of refugees and immigrants also means that they are instructed in ways not grounded in academic research. A study by Miller et al. (2014) found a large gap between the planning practices employed by teachers in teaching language as an additional language and practices supported by academic research. As per the authors, teachers experienced tension between planning for language and planning for content and had to strike a balance as per their perception of students' needs (Miller et al., 2014). The teaching context in research by Miller et al. (2014) was complex, which was challenging for teachers as they had to make sense of different elements such as instruction content, content language, and students' varying levels of language and conceptual knowledge. The lack of well-thought-out lesson and unit plans backed by academic research meant that refugee students received suboptimal instructions (Miller et al., 2014). In essence, as refugee and immigrant children join schools in heritage countries, they do not receive instructions that are grounded in research. While teachers can modify lessons and units to accommodate the needs of migrant students, without academic research support, instruction may not fully address the needs of the students.

The disruption of education means that migrant students have to take expensive and time-consuming tests in order to graduate and get jobs. As informed by Annable (2019), there is a plan by the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba to have nurses take mandatory language testing that would cost \$320, which some nurses opine to be too expensive. The plan came after a revelation that nurses were graduating without adequate language skills (Annable, 2019). While communication is significant in facilitating the interaction between nurses and patients, language proficiency evaluation ought to be part of the education program and not something to be administered towards the end of the program. In this case, such tests at the end of an educational program create an unnecessary barrier for students from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

The career disruption experienced by adults means that they have to take English classes in order to get jobs in their heritage nations. However, there is a long waiting list for federally-funded English classes, which implies that it can take a lot of time for one to get a job. According to Carman (2016), British Columbia (BC) had about 5,000 people waiting to access English classes. Given that it may have taken a lot of time since their jobs got disrupted in the war-torn countries, having them on a waiting list further increases their time away from active employment. This may limit their ability to be productive once they get employed in their heritage countries.

Another career disruption issue is declassing. Reorienting careers to the context of the heritage nation comes with declassing, which involves moving from an upper class to a lower one after transitioning (Block, 2007). In his book, Block (2007) describes several instances where immigrants became declassed after moving to the heritage nation. One such instance involves Carlos, who previously lived, studied, and lectured in Colombia before moving to England. During his education, he studied French as a way of protesting against the perceived imposition of English by the US. When he arrived in London, he could only work in low-level menial jobs because he could not speak English (Block, 2007). In essence, moving to England meant that he was declassed from a professional middle-class to an unskilled worker. While he was a university lecturer in Colombia, in England, he had to do unskilled jobs like delivering mail. Another case is that of Katarina and her husband, who experienced declassing after moving to Canada despite being university-educated (Block, 2007). In essence, declassing is a significant implication of disruption of one's career as one moves to the heritage nation. The frustration that comes from working as an unskilled worker instead of the professional middle class they are used to in their home country can limit, to a great extent, the motivation to learn a new language.

2. Strategies to Support Language Acquisition

As seen above, refugees and immigrants face numerous challenges as they settle in their heritage countries. In this case, addressing the challenges is imperative to improving their language acquisition and, consequently, their integration into the new environment. Policymakers and educators can implement the following strategies to ensure that refugees and immigrants acquire a second language with limited challenges.

2.1 *Creation of an Enabling Policy, School, Home, and Community Environments*

While it is commendable for heritage nations to accept refugees and immigrants to settle in their jurisdictions, it is important to ensure that the settlement is accompanied by a policy environment that supports their language acquisition and, consequently, their integration into society. According to Madziva and Thondhlana (2017), one of the key elements of a good quality education policy is a supportive policy environment. Such an environment is characterized by the provision and distribution of textbooks, teacher development, competitive incentives and salaries for teachers, national debate on the quality of education, inclusive curriculum, and financial support for schools (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Given the challenges teachers experience while teaching students with diverse needs, incentives and competitive salaries can go a long way in motivating them to put extra effort into attending to the specific learning needs of the refugees. As revealed in this paper, research has shown that there is a difference between instructors' perceptions of students' learning needs and students' perceptions of the same (Huang, 2010). With teacher development and competitive salaries and incentives, teachers can be motivated to understand the needs of the students better, which can facilitate language acquisition to a great extent. A good policy environment can also ensure that thousands of refugees are not on the waiting list to access English classes, as seen in the BC (Carman, 2016). Given the expectation of a fluctuating number of immigrants and refugees, governments can put in place mechanisms that provide enough resources to fund English classes without having to put individuals on long waiting lists.

An enabling school environment is also instrumental in enhancing language acquisition by second-language learners. In this case, key elements of a supportive school environment include structured pedagogy, infrastructure and resources, school self-evaluation, and school-based professional development (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Structured pedagogy can especially be valuable in ensuring that learners receive optimal education. One of the key challenges facing teachers as they instruct migrant children is the lack of a framework to follow. As noted by Miller et al. (2014), teachers rely on intuitive knowledge gained over time to instruct migrant students with diverse learning needs. In their study, Miller et al. (2014) found that teachers sometimes failed to identify students' prior knowledge because of a lack of communication from the administration and the multi-level composition of their classes. With structured pedagogy, teachers have a framework to rely on as they integrate migrant students into the heritage nations' education system. Such a framework can allow the use of an evidence-based approach to teaching, which can boost how learners acquire a second language. In essence, with a supportive school environment, the acquisition of a second language by immigrants and refugees can be enhanced.

Supportive home and community environments are vital to the quality of education immigrants and refugees receive in their heritage nations. Enabling policy and school environments is not enough as they are interconnected with the home and community environment, influencing the quality of education received by migrant students. Good relationships between the school and parents are important to addressing the specific learning needs of the migrant students. The home and the community can provide the student with books and a place to study (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Parents also ought to support the students as they acquire a second language. In sum, the interaction of policy, school, home, and community environment is critical for the success of language acquisition by the students.

2.2 *Incorporation of Own Language in Teaching*

A key debate regarding teaching language is whether to embrace a monolingual or bilingual approach. Despite the existence of such debate, research has consistently shown the value of a bilingual approach in facilitating learners' acquisition of a second language. According to Hall and Cook (2012), own language is integral in laying the foundation for learning other languages. The learners' language is a "pathfinder" and a natural reference system that can enhance the acquisition of a second language by learners (Hall & Cook, 2012). The authors note that bilingual learners develop metalinguistic awareness, which implies that they can benefit from focusing on the differences and similarities between two languages. The learners' own language is bound to their knowledge and determines their use of the second language (Hall & Cook, 2012). In essence, the use of one's own language in teaching is instrumental in helping learners of a second language better understand the new language.

An important aspect related to own-language use in teaching is code-switching, which plays a key role in lightening the cognitive load on learners and providing an efficient shortcut (Hall & Cook, 2012). Own language use and code-switching support both communication and learning for the students. Hall and Cook (2012) also point out that code-switching is important in enhancing vocabulary learning, given the value of translation in the process. By employing code-switching and learners' language in the classroom, teachers can boost language acquisition by refugees and immigrants. These sentiments are supported by Warriner et al. (2019) who note that refugees' first language literacy should be considered an asset upon which a second language can be built. In this case, leveraging the learners' first language accelerates the engagement of migrant students with academic content.

2.3 *Community-Based Learning*

A key approach to language learning is community-based learning (CBL) proposed by O'Connor (2012). CBL is characterized by students participating in activities in their local communities as part of their credit courses. By getting involved in their communities, students get a better understanding of course content (O'Connor, 2012). Key benefits associated with the approach include enhanced understanding of the course content, increased self-confidence and self-awareness, and enhanced appreciation for service (O'Connor, 2012). Self-confidence and self-awareness are especially important for students trying to adjust to life in the heritage nation. With these values, the students can learn how to express themselves, which is integral in language acquisition. O'Connor (2012) also highlights how CBL can lead to the improvement of critical thinking skills and writing skills. In essence, through CBL, not only can migrant students enhance their new language skills, but they can also build important social networks and social capital, which can boost their chances of succeeding in their heritage nations.

2.4 *Emotional and Social Support*

Emotional and social support by systems in the heritage nations is also important in determining how immigrants and refugees navigate life in their new environments. As revealed in this paper, when refugees and immigrants are in their heritage nations, they carry with them emotional scars that can impede the acquisition of a new language. Traumatic experiences during their stay in their home countries, as well as during transit, can have psychological implications. Fang et al. (2018) point out that it is important for teachers to remember that refugees experience emotional distress and that many of their friends and family members are still in war-torn regions. For such individuals, Fang et al. (2018) emphasize the need to create space that allows them to pursue learning at their own pace. According to Warriner et al. (2019), when delivering language instruction and addressing discrimination and prejudice present in schools and communities, teachers can consider providing

social and emotional support to students. Furthermore, the authors recommend the provision of safe spaces by schools so that migrant students can have a sense of safety as they adjust to the cultural expectations of a new environment.

3. Conclusion

Given the ongoing conflicts in many parts of the world, the challenge of adults and children moving to a new country is not one that is about to end soon. The disruption of education and careers experienced by migrant children and adults has significant psychological, socio-cultural, educational, and career implications. Psychologically, migrant students have had traumatic experiences that affect their acquisition of a new language. The emotional scars they carry can impede learning to a great extent. The socio-cultural implications of disruption of education and career include loss of social and cultural capital and the challenge of having to build new social networks in order to navigate life in the heritage nation. When it comes to education and career, migrant children and adults have to learn a new language to continue education and access jobs. With such huge obstacles, the provision of supportive policy, school, home, and community environments is necessary for a smooth transition into their heritage nations. In addition, employing the learner's first language in teaching can enhance their acquisition of a new language, consequently smoothening their integration into new environments. Community-based learning can also enhance the acquisition of important knowledge and skills necessary to navigate life in heritage countries. Given the emotional and psychological damage from their traumatic experiences, the provision of social and emotional support can go a long way in boosting their chances of learning a new language.

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