



MARCH 2005 SPOTLIGHT

Serving Children with Little or No Previous Formal Schooling

BRYCS would like to thank Burna Dunn of The Spring Institute who authored this spotlight. [The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning](#), founded in 1979, is a nonprofit training and consulting corporation dedicated to demonstrating that national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences are assets that foster understanding and cooperation. The Institute has been designated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement as their technical assistance provider in the area of English Language Training.

"Hear what I'm not saying"

*I don't always want to do the things I do
But how else can I make you see
That I'm still here and I have feelings, too*

- used with the permission of Refugee Works

This excerpt from a poem, written by a Hmong student in the Fresno (California) Unified School District, expresses a level of self awareness that many refugee children do not have. It also identifies a core issue for everyone working with refugee youth. As service providers, we often focus on our own issues: how to have students line up, how to have students sit down, how to have students "fit in", how to have students pass tests, how to have students make up for lost time so that they can be in classes with students their age. We, perhaps, forget or become impatient with the fact that these young people have few opportunities or lack the language ability to express to school personnel what they are feeling and, particularly, what they are feeling about school.

It is hard enough for an adult who has hoped and prayed to come to the United States to cope with their culture shock. It is even more difficult for children who probably did not participate in the decision-making process for the family and who lack the language skills and maturity to express their fears and frustrations.

CHALLENGES

The challenge for these refugee children is that now they are here and they must attend school. Even in situations with veteran teachers of refugee students, some of the new refugee students present challenges that are very different from the students who have come before them. The new students' attempts to be heard and seen and to express their feelings can make life difficult for the teacher as well as the school. Most of us will never find ourselves living in an environment where we do not understand the culture or know the rules. However, from time to time it might be helpful to think about how we would cope if we were in an environment where everything was unfamiliar and we lacked the language capacity to make ourselves understood in even the most basic of situations. What would we need to learn? Who would assist us in finding our way?

STRENGTHS

We know that many of the students who today seem difficult to serve will make it just fine in the long run. However, we also know from experience that youth who feel alienated or disenfranchised turn to gangs, suicide and other self-destructive behaviors so we need to do all we can to equip these students by helping them regain their voices so they can express their feelings in constructive and healthy ways.

Schools need to begin by examining their own culture. What are the implicit rules that govern school operations? How did the other students learn these rules? How can the rules be taught to the students who do not know them? What are the rules on the playground? How does one appropriately defend oneself without adequate language skills? How can students be taught what behavior is appropriate and what is not? Who are allies for the teacher? How can schools with refugee children meet the No Child Left Behind

Act requirements? How can teachers be supported so that their classrooms contribute to the forward progress of every student? How long does it take to learn English? How can the background of refugee students be shared so that they can be appreciated and encouraged in ways that honor and encourage their native culture and respect their efforts to learn new ways of behaving?

There are no easy answers and each school and school system will have to find their own most appropriate responses. Fortunately, there are resources available that can help.

RESOURCES

School administrators and educators of refugee children and youth can access more information in this month's [featured search on education](#) and through the following resources.

From the Spring Institute:

The Spring Institute has worked with Dr. Dina Birman of the University of Illinois, Chicago to produce materials that will be useful to classroom teachers who teach refugee children. Two such publications available through the Institute are *Mental Health of Refugee Children: A Guide for the ESL Teacher* and *Somali Youth Report*, Excerpts from the Report Prepared for The Maryland Office for New Americans, Maryland Department of Human Resources. Both are available through The Spring Institute (Web Site: <http://www.spring-institute.org>, E-mail elt@springinstitute.org, phone 303-863-0188, fax 303-863-0178).

Other resources:

[Center For Applied Linguistics](#). Cultural Profiles.

Igoa, Christine. (1995) *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

[National Somali Bantu Project](#).

Additional resources found in the BRYCS Clearinghouse that relate directly to this month's spotlight:

Adult Learning Resource Center. (2003) [Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in Their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges, and Successful Strategies](#). Des Plaines, IL: Adult Learning Resource Center.

Allen, Rick; Franklin, John. (Fall 2002) ["Acquiring English: Schools Seek Ways to Strengthen Language Learning."](#) Curriculum Update. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Blackwell, Dick; Melzak, Sheila. (2000) [Far from the Battle but Still at War: Troubled Refugee Children in School](#). London: The Child Psychotherapy Trust.

Brigaman, Katie J. (2002) [The Culturally Diverse Classroom: A Guide for ESL and Mainstream Teachers](#). Paper presented at the Graduate Student Forum, TESOL Convention 2003, USA, December 9, 2002.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (2003) [Understanding the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: English Proficiency. Quick Key](#). Naperville, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory NCREL.

This month's [featured search](#) in the BRYCS clearinghouse will lead you to the above resources and more related to the topic of education.

In April 2005 look for the [featured search](#) on child abuse and neglect.

You can read previous monthly spotlights and view resources on the featured searches through the [BRYCS Publications](#) page.