Deficit vs. Asset Discourse in Discussions of Refugee-background Students

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Unity, 12 X 12, Acrylic on Canvas 2012
Eric Flemming & Sir John A. MacDonald
Secondary School Students, Hamilton, ON
This presentation examines trends in educational research and public discourse about students with refugee backgrounds. Drawing on media accounts and scholarly literature from the U.S. and Canada, we illustrate the prevalence of deficit-based discourse and present an asset-focused alternative, which can inform future research and curriculum/instruction for refugee-background students.
65.6 MILLION FORCIBLY DISPLACED WORLDWIDE

as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations
17.2 million under UNHCR mandate

Refugees

22.5 million

17.2 million under UNHCR mandate
5.3 million Palestinian refugees registered by UNRWA

Stateless people

10 million

Refugees resettled

189,300 in 2016

17.2 million under UNHCR mandate
10 million newly displaced persons in 2016
20 people per minute on average were forced to flee in 2016.
WHO LIVES IN THE 21ST LARGEST COUNTRY?

The population of 65.3 million forcibly displaced people includes:

21.3 million refugees
Refugees have been forced to flee their country in order to escape danger, war or persecution.

40.8 million internally displaced people
Internally displaced people (IDP) have been forced to flee their homes, but remain within their own country.

3.2 million asylum-seekers
An asylum-seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary in another country is still being processed.

Source: UNHCR
55% of refugees worldwide came from three countries:

- South Sudan: 1.4m
- Afghanistan: 2.5m
- Syria: 5.5m
51% of refugees were children under the age of 18 in 2016.
Humanizing Pedagogy

- Multicultural Education
- Equity & Equality
- Critical Multicultural Education
- Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Human Rights
Humanizing Pedagogy

- Humanizing pedagogy “ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate students, but rather expresses the consciousness of the students themselves” (Freire, 1999/1970, pp. 50-51).

- Humanizing pedagogy “values the students’ background knowledge, language, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers” (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190).
“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

~Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Discourse and Power

“Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by [power relations]. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
This collection of empirical work offers an in-depth exploration of key issues in the education of adolescents and adults with refugee backgrounds residing in North America, Australia and Europe. These studies foreground student goals, experiences and voices, and reflect a high degree of awareness of the assets that refugee-background students bring to schools and broader society. **Chapters are clustered according to the two themes of Language and Literacy, and Access and Equity.** Each chapter includes a discussion of context, researcher positionality and implications for educators, policy-makers and scholars.
In what ways does school discourse and practice foreground or reinforce deficit discourse and how do students exercise their agency to resist this mainstream deficit discourse?
“Annual standardized test scores . . . show a yawning achievement gap between high-income and low-income students...English language learners, many of whom are African refugees, have even lower scores”
~ March 2012 news article
Students’ Awareness of Deficit Discourse

Most of us interpret [the article] as you guys calling us stupid. Like, four-year-olds. . . . Because they already call us stupid, and we don’t do anything about it, because we know we’re smart. . . . But her publishing that article just, like, makes people. . . say, “Oh wow, their stupidity is even published in the newspapers!” . . .

~ Student protester
The “Single Story” Created by Deficit Discourse

Framing of past
- Victimization
- Suffering

Framing of present
- Neediness
- Trauma/PTSD
- Education “gaps”

Impact on schooling
- “Othering” and Pity
- Low expectations
- Limited opportunity

e.g., Bigelow, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011
see Solórzano & Yosso (2002) for more on Critical Race Theory/counter-storytelling in education.
DEFICIT DISCOURSE

- What do you lack?
  (deficit / need)
- Where have you been?
- Victimization / Trauma
- Survival
- Pity / Sympathy
- Being helped
Student Frustrations with Low Expectations

- “I talked about a lot of teachers that I don’t want to be in ESL class, but they always tell me that ‘Your English is not ready to go to a high level.’”

- “I can’t even read [my earlier essays]. How did I get an A?”

- “The SAT test-- I was like ‘What is that?’ I never learned it from them. Nobody taught me.”

- “[Teachers] don’t want to push them….but you have to push them.” (parent)
Dehumanizing Practices (Deficit)

- improper placement of students in classes (i.e., placing students in classes that are either too difficult or too easy);
- inconsistent sequencing of developmentally appropriate courses;
- developmentally inappropriate instruction; strict enforcement of English-only rules; use of humiliating and (re)traumatizing disciplinary measures (e.g., yelling, shaming);
- inadequate professional development provided to teachers who work with vulnerable students;
- poorly resourced classrooms (e.g., developmentally appropriate and culturally sustaining learning and teaching materials).
DEFICIT DISCOURSE

■ What do you lack? (deficit / need)
■ Where have you been?
■ Victimization / Trauma
■ Survival
■ Pity / Sympathy
■ Being helped

ASSET DISCOURSE

■ What do you bring? (resources / potential)
■ Where are you going?
■ Agency / Empowerment
■ Success / Thriving
■ Pride / Aspiration
■ Helping others

Shapiro, 2014; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017
Toward Asset Discourse

❖ “Do you guys accept us—that we’re different, that we’re here, and we’re actually trying to succeed? . . . You guys brought us to America, because our country wasn’t . . . giving us the chance to have success in life. We came here to have success in life!”

❖ “Give me one minute, and I’ll impress you. Just one minute!”

~ Student protesters
I’m gonna just say, **this is about making family**. . . . If you bring all kids together and you’re telling them . . . all positive stuff. . . . “We want you to have a family, a future, and we’ll be working hard on you”. . . . We just got to bring more **love** to the community, in order for these kids to change.”

~ Najib, interview
Humanizing Practices (Asset)

- acknowledge the reality of the learner, including stories of dehumanization
- extend and value students’ sociocultural resource,
- ensure that content is meaningful and relevant to students’ lives,
- link students’ prior knowledge to new learning, foster trusting and caring relationship,
- challenge systemic inequities that may impede students’ personal and academic success (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Salazar, 2013; Salazar & Franquiz, 2008)
- adopt an asset-based orientation and honor the students’ dominant (non-English) language and related cultures, religions, and identities;
- create opportunities for students to authentically see themselves in the curriculum;
Example of Resourcefulness

We tried colors. First we built a house, we put a lot of different colors to check if the birds come in. If the birds see those colors, they fly away because they’re scared of the colors. So first we test, we put a lot of colors. So it didn’t work out. The second one then we built it. And we put blue. We tried another color. Then we thought of building the house the birds’ colors: red and blue and black. So we tried those, so the birds didn’t scared of those colors. We put red and blue and black colors to paint the house. The birds wore red, blue, and black colors. The birds were scared with other colors, like light blue and orange.

It’s in Kenya. We placed it somewhere in the forest. We put some hard plastic over the top so when the rain comes, the water won’t go inside. We built it like you build a tent. That’s how it looks like. If the rain comes, it won’t smush the birdhouse.

Sometimes we went and looked at it. The birds were using it. It’s real cool. It was really cool. I hope you see it. Now the birds live there. I don’t know if it’s still there. It was still there when I was coming here.

~ Ibrahim (Refugee background student)
“Telling My Story”—Living Humanizing Pedagogy

- “I want my children to know my history, where I came from.” (Ibrahim)
  
  [http://ibrahimstories.blogspot.com/](http://ibrahimstories.blogspot.com/)

- “I wanted to tell my story to other people.” (Muslima)

- “I want them to know who I am.” (Arbai)

- “I want people to know about me and what I went through back in Africa.” (Mariamo)
Testimonio or testimonial narrative is “a novel or novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience” (Beverly, 2005, 547).
“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”
References


THANK YOU

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TAK

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GRACIAS

Paldies
For these slides and other resources, go to
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