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## Literature Focus Units as a Means of Exploring the Refugee Experience

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### ABSTRACT

Changes in the nation's demographics, a current focus on immigration, and the world's refugee crisis require educators to explore positive ways to assist students and families in transition. This article suggests using refugee literature to help ease children into the new school environment. Books associated with the refugee theme are organized using the literature focus unit framework. Four specific children's literature titles are highlighted within the piece; however, the suggested books and activities are provided as a model to assist teachers in gaining new insight into how they can use cross-cultural communication to explore the refugee experience. We propose that through this exemplar unit, teachers can learn about authentic instructional approaches that may help them meet the multicultural needs of a variety of diverse student groups.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Focus Unit, Literature, Multicultural, Refugee.

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### 1. Introduction

Changes in our nation's demographic are mirrored within classrooms across the country. With this increasing cultural diversity in American schools today, educators face the challenge of providing literacy-rich experiences that reflect various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, educators must become aware and proactive about these changes in order to meet the diverse needs of all students. In addition to facing the challenges of adapting to new and different cultures, we must realize that some families come to America due to political upheaval, war, or other unavoidable circumstances in their native countries.

To assist educators in addressing the unique needs of refugee children in the classroom, we posit that literature focus units are an evidence-based practice that can support authentic literacy development

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for this specialized group of students. Additionally, this type of interaction with authentic literature provides all students in the classroom with a common literature experience that can help them make connections and develop friendships. Through the literature experience, students may be moved to empathize with one another and to develop a deeper understanding of the actions, struggles, triumphs, and identities of those outside the student's own existence.

Through a review of the literature, we found that the limited amount of information regarding the use of literature focus units in elementary schools is somewhat dated (Moss, 1984; Tompkins, 1998) and has not typically focused on refugee children. Noting the need to enliven the use of literature circles in the classroom paired with the current political and societal focus on immigration and the plight of refugees, a discussion of this topic is relevant and appropriate.

The term refugee refers to an individual who flees their native country for religious or political reasons and legally enters the United States in search of freedom, peace, and opportunity for themselves and their families (Robertson & Breiseth, 2015). The intake of exiles into the United States has been steadily increasing since the 1990s and is predicted to continue (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The Obama administration expects that the number of refugees accepted by the United States each year will continually increase, from 70,000 in 2015 to 85,000 in 2016 and 100,000 in 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The United States' Office of Refugee Resettlement selects preferred communities for newly arrived refugees, due to low unemployment rates and a relatively low cost of living in such places as Lincoln, Nebraska and Amarillo, Texas, among others (Pipher 2002). Despite many welcoming efforts, there remain concerns that resources are lacking to adequately assist the number of refugees moving in every year. This includes job availability for adult refugees, educational support for their children, or access to interpreters for health and emergency services for individuals who do not speak English (MacLaggan, 2014).

Changes in the school population continue to impact the classroom environment with growing numbers of students entering school illiterate in both English and their native language. According to Stengle and Blaney (2015), teachers are having a hard time "getting students up to speed in schools" (para. 8). An effective way to address some of these challenges is through adopting a more generally inclusive approach. One such method is the use of multicultural literature to promote acceptance of differences and validate the unique qualities of all learners. Within the multicultural literature genre, a unique subset of literature focuses on the distinct experiences of refugee children. Literature focusing on the refugee experience through children's eyes can provide students a window into other cultures, while affording opportunities to share obstacles encountered by this group of people from differing perspectives. This type of positive cross-cultural communication is sorely needed, not only in classrooms but across our entire multicultural society.

According to an article published by Hwang & Hindman (2014), even though quality multicultural literature offers teachers and students great opportunities to broaden understandings about the world, little research about the refugee experience has been conducted from the viewpoint of the classroom. Information presented in this article will highlight some of the challenges faced by the refugee population on a daily basis and explore positive integrative approaches that convey messages about responsible citizenship, tolerance, and respect for all people (Hope, 2008). The literature focus unit framework for instruction will be utilized to examine suggested books and provide practitioners with concrete ideas to implement in their classrooms.

In order to actively engage and assimilate refugee children into American classrooms, we invite educators to utilize quality literature that is relevant to their students' diverse cultural backgrounds (Bishop, 1987). This article focuses on ways to foster acceptance and understanding about the refugee experience and seeks to provide practical strategies to support students within the classroom. It also presents a sample literature focus unit employing four selected texts and suggests methods to be used over a one-week unit of instruction.

## 2. Methodology

Refugee literature was reviewed and evaluated to determine if the theme of the book would be useful in guiding children's transition into new school environments. Four specific children's literature titles were selected to demonstrate the use of the literature focus unit framework. The suggested strategies and activities are provided as a model to assist teachers in gaining new insight into how they can use cross-cultural communication to explore the refugee experience. Through this exemplary unit, teachers are exposed to instructional approaches that may help them meet the multicultural needs of a variety of diverse student groups.

### 2.1 Integrating refugee literature

Using high-quality multicultural literature in the classroom can open windows to allow students to see how others live, learn, and celebrate; and provide mirrors that permit individuals to understand themselves and their own ethos better (Bishop, 1982). By using literature of this magnitude, children develop pride in their own culture while gaining a sense of compassion towards children and families from other parts of the world.

Within this article, we present four children's books which were chosen to introduce a focus unit with the theme of embracing the refugee experience. The selected books include: *My name is Sangoel* by Karen L. Williams and Khandra Mohammed; *How I Learned Geography* by Uri Shulevitz; *Four Feet, Two Sandals* by Karen L. Williams and Khandra Mohammed; and *The Lotus Seed* by Sherry Garland. These titles were selected to develop sample lessons for a week-long literature focus unit. A summary of the book and practical strategies, hands-on project ideas are provided as an exemplar for teachers to use as a guide for developing similar focus units that would be appropriate for their unique students.

During a war in Sudan, a young boy named Sangoel loses his father and is sent to a refugee camp. From there, Sangoel, his sister and mother move on to resettle in America. When Sangoel started school he felt scared and confused, and his classmates and teachers had a difficult time pronouncing his Sudanese name. He finally discovered a way for others to remember how to say his name by drawing a sun and a goal. Through this experience, he begins to grow more confident in telling others his name.

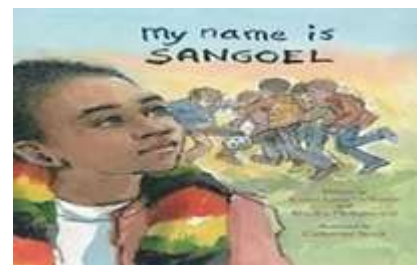


Figure 1: Cover Page of My name is Sangoel

This book opens the readers' eyes to some struggles refugees may face when coming into a new culture. Things that are common to most students are often new and overwhelming to refugee children. This book shows the importance of encouraging cross-cultural communication in the classroom. Many students coming into our schools have names that are unique and may be difficult to pronounce. Conversely, refugee students may have a hard time pronouncing their classmates' names. This book provides a positive way that teachers can address this difficult topic.

Two young girls, Lena and Feroza, live in a refugee camp in Pakistan and they hardly have any clothes to wear and do not have any shoes. One day, Lena finds a sandal that fits her foot perfectly and notices that another girl (Feroza) has the matching shoe. The girls decide they will share the shoes, with each wearing the complete pair of sandals on different days, instead of each girl wearing only one shoe.

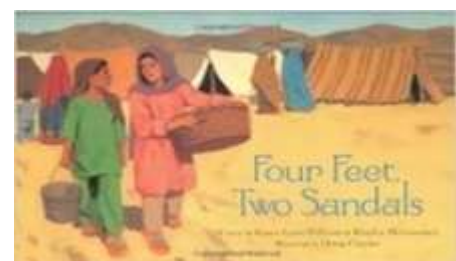


Figure 2: Cover Page of Four Feet, Two Sandals

The theme of this book addresses the importance of friendship and depicts how the two girls stick together through many obstacles. It highlights that individuals can be caring even in the worst circumstances. This book may

help students learn to be more grateful for the things they have. If students are able to see some of the hardships refugees endure, they will hopefully be more understanding of their fellow classmates and have compassion for their situations.

This simple story from the Vietnamese culture tells the story of a young girl who is forced to flee her home. When she gets married, the lotus seed goes with her. However, as the war intensifies the young woman is forced to flee with her children to a foreign country. Many years pass and the woman becomes a grandmother. One day her grandson takes the special lotus seed from its secret place and plants it in the yard. When it blossoms and turns into a lotus pod, the grandmother gives each of her grandchildren a seed to remember her by.

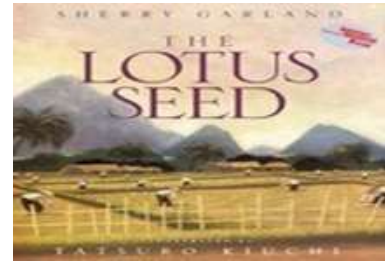


Figure 3: Cover Page of The Lotus Seed

The lotus seed reminded the woman of her homeland and provided her with calming solace in the midst of great strife. Throughout the book the lotus seed represents good luck and long life, and becomes a symbol of hope for the family.

During World War II, a boy and his family escaped Poland and were forced to flee to a new country. This family lived in poverty and struggled to have enough food for everyone. One day the father left the house to buy food, but instead brought home a large map and hung it on the wall. As the boy studied the map, his curiosity and imagination ran wild as he was transported to faraway places. At the end of the story, the boy realized that he had spent hours exploring new and exhilarating places and decided that his father was right in buying the map after all.

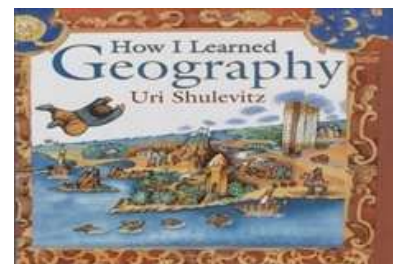


Figure 4: Cover Page of How I Learned Geography

The theme of this book starts out heavy with references to war and hunger, but the book takes a light and colorful turn as the boy reaches into the depths of his imagination through the use of the map. The story is enchanting and warm, while presenting the serious struggles refugee families may face.

## 2.2 Literature focus unit

A literature focus unit is an instructional approach in which the whole class reads and responds to high-quality literature. The structured responses may incorporate lessons on language skills and/or comprehension strategies (Tompkins, 2015). Literature focus units are an instructional framework that utilize several methods and incorporate a collection of books on a similar topic.

These targeted units incorporate the five stages of the reading process, including pre-reading, reading, responding, exploring, and applying (Snow, 2015). Each day the students work on a variety of individual and/or whole class assignments from creative presentations and hands-on activities, to written responses and special projects. Whole class discussions are incorporated to elicit students' reactions and connections. These learning activities begin in the classroom and can expand to the family and community through exploration and application within the real world.

## 2.3 Sample literature focus unit using children's refugee literature

By designing an interdisciplinary unit focused on the refugee experience, teachers can begin to embrace refugee students and their families into the school community through welcoming and non-threatening activities. This exemplar unit provides ideas and suggestions for each of the selected books, so a classroom teacher may implement these suggested activities or use these ideas as a catalyst for designing similar activities to help their students feel welcome.

### Day 1

1. Read: *My name is Sangoel* by Williams and Mohammed

2. Instructional activities:

- Introduction of the Refugee Literature Unit: Establishing a week-long exploration of literature focused on the refugee experience is the perfect opportunity to creatively address the issues and challenges surrounding refugee students and their families. Sometimes it is hard for students to fully comprehend the inimitable trials immigrant families face on a daily basis. To help others become more sensitive to the needs of the refugee people, offer students opportunities to read quality literature and participate in activities focused on themes relevant to this special population.
- K-W-L Chart: A KWL Chart is a great tool for teaching critical thinking skills (Oxford University Press ELT, 2013). Before starting the unit, ask students to discuss a definition of the word 'Refugee' with a partner or small group. In order to activate their prior knowledge before reading any of the books, teachers should direct their students to write what they know (K) in the first column of the chart. Students will then be asked to write questions they have about the topic of refugees in the second column (W). At the end of the unit, students will complete the last column to explain what they have learned (L) about refugees through participation in targeted learning activities.
- Two-Column Chart: Prompt students to brainstorm as many reasons as they can, regarding why people move from their homes. Sort the reasons into two columns with these titles: Reasons people move voluntarily vs. Reasons people move against their will. Have students discuss their lists with the whole group. This activity will help students understand the difference between an immigrant and a refugee.
- Read Aloud: Read the selected book, *My Name is Sangoel* to the class and discuss the story together. After reading the story, ask students to share any personal experiences of having their name being pronounced incorrectly. After the class discussion, help the class develop an anchor chart listing adjectives describing how this experience made them feel. Then the students will use the anchor chart to write a journal entry describing how they feel when someone pronounces their name wrong.

### Day 2:

1. Read: *Four Feet, Two Sandals* by Williams and Mohammed

Review: *My Name is Sangoel* by Williams and Mohammed

2. Instructional activities:

- Picture Walk/Creating Questions: Before reading, the class will engage in a picture walk of *Four Feet, Two Sandals*. As the teacher shows the pictures in the story, students will predict the topic or storyline of the book. Students will then be given a sticky note and asked to write a question they have about the story. Provide time for students to share their questions with a partner before reading the story aloud. After reading, revisit the questions to find out how their questions were answered.
- Graphic Organizers: Graphic organizers are a way to facilitate students' understanding through the use of visual images (Connell, 2014). The class may begin with reviewing the first book, *My Name is Sangoel*, discussed on the previous day and then compare it with *Four Feet, Two Sandals* in terms of characters, main events, settings, themes, major plots, and writing styles. Any graphic organizer can be utilized for this task to compare and contrast the similarities and differences of the two stories. Through class discussion, the comparing and contrasting activity may be extended to include a comparison of the cultures represented in the classroom.
- Author/Illustrator Study: An author/illustrator study would be applicable for these two books since they were both written by the same authors. Studying authors can benefit students by boosting their critical thinking skills and motivating them to read more (Reading Rockets, 2016). Class members may enjoy the distinctive writing style of a particular author or appreciate the artwork produced by an illustrator. A focused author/illustrator study can help students learn

about the author's or illustrator's personal biographies and identify why they choose to write about or illustrate a specific topic.

- **Time to Flee:** After reading and comparing/contrasting these two stories, the teacher will lead the class in a discussion about how the characters in the book were not able to take personal belongings with them when they fled from their homeland. Students would then be asked to complete a suitcase-shaped paper with questions listed: "Where would your family go if you had to leave the country immediately and why?" "How would you get there? What type of transportation would you use?" and "What items would you take with you?" Before students begin, they will turn and talk to a partner to discuss their answers to these questions. After students record their answers to the questions, they will then share their personal responses with other students in a small group.
- **Grand Conversation and Response Journal:** The class will then take part in a Grand Conversation (Tompkins, 2015) to discuss various ways they can help people in difficult situations. Students can be prompted to tell about ways that they may have helped someone at school or in their community. Students will then write a personal narrative story about a time when they helped a friend. Later, students will come up with ideas about how they can help new students feel welcome in the classroom

### Day 3:

1. Read: *The Lotus Seed* by Sherry Garland

2. Instructional activities:

- **K-W-L Chart Revisited:** The class will revisit the first two columns of their K-W-L chart that was constructed on the first day. Now, students will complete the last column with the information that they had learned (L) about refugees up to this point.
- **Bubble Wrap Vocabulary Prediction:** The students will look at the cover page and the title page illustrations of the book, *The Lotus Seed*, and will be prompted to predict approximately six vocabulary words that they expect might be in the story and record the words in a list and also on small colorful dot stickers. Students will then place each of their predicted word stickers on a large air bubble from a small section of bubble wrap (See Figure 5). As the teacher reads *The Lotus Seed* aloud, students will review their word choices on their list, and pop the corresponding air bubble by squeezing it with their fingers when they hear any of the words on their sticker list (Hwang & Hindman, 2014). After the story is read aloud, each of the vocabulary words that were predicted will be reviewed once again. If time allows the class may be invited to create a new class story using words that were not actually used in the story.
- **Integration with other Content Areas:** *The Lotus Seed* book can be used across other content areas as well. For example, in social studies the class can compare and contrast the lives of the characters with the lives of the students in the classroom. In the area of science, this book could be used to introduce a unit on plant life cycles. In response to the story, the teacher could distribute a variety of seeds for students to examine with hand lenses, and then help them plant the seeds in a classroom flowerbed. Over time, students can observe and record the growth of their flowers.



Figure 5: Picture of Bubble Wrap Vocabulary Activity

### Day 4:

1. Read: *How I Learned Geography* by Uri Shulevitz

2. Instructional activities:

- **Timeline Poster:** The settings of the four books in used in this unit are unique in terms of the time periods. The first book, *My name is Sangoel*, is set during the Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). The second story, *The Lotus Seed*, was based on a true story that happened during the

Vietnam war(1954-1975). The war in Afghanistan began in 2001 and was the setting of the story, *Four Feet, Two Sandals*. The last story, *How I Learned Geography*, occurred during World War II (1939 to 1945). Using this information, the class can develop a class timeline poster together to show the major events of the stories in chronological order.

- “Me on the Map”: Students will be provided a large piece of paper and be directed to place a small construction paper circle labeled with “Me” or the child’s picture in the center of the large paper. Then, concentric circles will be stacked underneath this circle or picture, getting progressively bigger with the categories of “My Home,” “My City,” “My State,” “My Country,” “My Continent,” and “My Planet.” Students can draw pictures or glue cutouts of the categories, such as a picture of their home, or an outline of their state.
- Find it on the Map: In order to practice map and globe skills, distribute a table-size world map and a globe for each small group. Groups will be given time for free exploration for a few minutes, and then provided a unique set of cards to locate specific places on their maps, such as continents, countries, oceans, capital cities, rivers, mountains, lakes, etc.

#### Day 5:

- Family Fun Night: At the end of the unit, the class can host a culminating event by reviewing what students have learned about the refugee experience and invite family and community members to the celebration. Students can choose how they will present their culminating project at the Family Fun Night. They might choose from verbal demonstrations, graphic presentations, poster exhibitions, or serving as an activity leader by assisting younger children attending the event.

### 2.4 Adopting refugee literature in the classroom

According to Texas Health and Human Services Commission and the U.S. Census Bureau, Amarillo became one of the highest refugee placement cities per capita in the country (Michels, 2016). A teacher from Amarillo Independent School District expressed her concern by saying, “We have 660 refugee children who don’t speak English and the U.S. Department of Education says they have to be at grade level within one year” (Ward, 2016, para. 19). Often teachers are too hard on themselves and don’t understand that they already possess many essential skills needed to help refugee students in their transition. Instructional strategies such as literature focus units can help all students engage and interact with high quality literature, and are a non-threatening way to help refugee children.

As we support newcomers, the teacher must establish a welcoming atmosphere to ensure the refugee students and families feel welcome when they arrive (Robertson & Breiseth, 2015). Mutual respect for different cultures will allow teachers and students to create a positive environment for learning (Alber, 2015). The class may be involved in the activities such as practicing names of people from other cultures, discussing personal culture shock experiences, and respecting individual differences. Teachers should not wrongly assume refugee students do not have assets or strengths. Pipher (2002) points out that “refugees may arrive penniless, but they don’t arrive resourceless” (p. 69). They carry with them their unique traditions, positive memories about their family, and their rich culture as well. Refugee students have learned skills in survival and difficult decision making techniques that their peers have not experienced. Pipher (2002) also presented 12 attributes that contributed to refugee student success in America, including “future orientation, energy and good health, the ability to pay attention, ambition, verbal expressiveness, positive mental health, flexibility, good moral character, etc. (pp. 69-70). These individual traits are effective not only to refugee students, but all immigrant newcomers who are adjusting to their new lives and struggling to succeed in the American society.

Exposure to high-quality children’s literature can play a critical role in shaping young children’s perspectives of various cultures and providing them with many opportunities to gain a broader understanding about the world (Moats, 2010). Carefully selecting texts that refugee students can relate

to will pique their interests and encourage them to pay closer attention to the text. This strategy allows the refugee students to feel more included in classroom interactions and content.

The use of active, engaging, and hands-on activities can assist refugee students in developing concepts in the context of student-teacher interaction and lessons designed to encourage reflection about the language they are learning. Some suggested activities include writing on the board and saying the word as they spell, using manipulative letters, trays, letter cards, playing games, creating their own slide shows, reading with a peer, using a dictionary, and rereading the notes (Hirano, 2015). To actively engage students, class projects can be used to extend learning into the real world (Dolan, 2014). When the whole class is involved in a service project, it can empower them with responsibility, engage their compassion, and offer them the chance to make an impact in the lives of their peers.

Communication with parents is also a critical component in building solid and meaningful relationships with families (Gillmore, 2016). Even though refugee parents possess high expectations for their children's education, they simply don't know how to be involved (Pipher, 2002). Arranging meeting times around their work schedules, visiting their home in person, maintaining relationships with caring and consistent adults such as ELL teachers or school counselors, and socializing within the communities are some of suggested strategies to build up parental involvement and to promote rich interaction with family members.

Finding resources for further assistance is also essential. Teachers should utilize best practices for sharing helpful resources to properly assist refugee students and their families, not only for their basic needs, but also for their academic success. Some suggested resources include:

- The United Nations High Council on Refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>) for help with basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, access to health care.
- The State Department (<http://www.state.gov/j/prm/index.htm>). The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration provides aid and sustainable solutions for refugees, victims of conflict and stateless people around the world, through repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in the United States.
- The White House Task Force on New Americans (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/immigration/new-americans>) was created to support new Americans by welcoming and assisting them in building the lives they seek and providing support services in local communities.

### 3. Conclusion

In the last 25 years, America has seen an increase in refugee populations. With this influx, it is important for schools to become aware of this change and make adjustments to meet the needs of all students. One way to accomplish this is by effectively integrating multicultural literature focused on the refugee experience into the classroom. Literature focus units which utilize Rosenblatt's (1986) transactional theory allow the reader to create deeper meaning through individual exchanges with texts and other readers (Probst, 1987). These units can provide an instructional framework of support to help make the transition a bit easier for refugee students. The interaction between readers and texts can create an environment of acceptance and celebration of diversity in the classroom. Mutual respect is nurtured as the school reaches out to understand and honor refugees as they strive to understand and fit into the American culture as well (Pipher, 2002).

Policy implications from the study suggest strategies that educators may utilize to adopt children's refugee literature in the multicultural classroom. Through the implementation of effective instructional strategies, the life experiences of refugee children are embraced and celebrated. Based on the exemplar unit presented in the article, teachers are exposed to instructional approaches that may help them meet the multicultural needs of a variety of diverse student groups.

As a result of exploring this topic, it is evident that additional research is needed to examine the use of literature focus units to enhance the classroom community. The term *Sankofa*, an African word from



the Akan tribe in Ghana, when translated means to “go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful” is a compelling metaphor to motivate further examination of this issue. We assert that educators should embrace the “spirit of Sankofa” to revive the use literature focus units in the classroom, especially with the refugee population.

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