

RECOGNISING A WORLD OF EXPERIENCE: EMBRACING AKO WITH REFUGEE-BACKGROUND STUDENTS

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*Under moonlight
An unknown route
A sky the colour of intense anxiety.*

Behrouz Boochani (2018, p. 1)

The words above, from former refugee and author of *No Friend but the Mountain*, Behrouz Boochani, evoke a sense of the journey a refugee must take before arriving in a new land. It is a journey that few of us can imagine – with many experiencing insecurity, fear and trauma from years of war or persecution, followed by time spent in refugee camps or in forms of temporary accommodation in the period between being forced to leave their home country and that of arriving in their new country. Yet, once they arrive in their countries of resettlement, the journey is far from over. Refugees often need to learn a new language, a new culture and build new lives. For many, this means having to gain new skills and qualifications – usually by studying in Western tertiary institutes.

“We’re setting them up to fail” (Harris & Marlowe, 2011, p. 189). This comment, made by staff members at an Australian university, demonstrated concern about the lack of specifically targeted support for refugee-background students¹ who arrive without the necessary skills for academic study in Western tertiary settings. Unfortunately, these were not lone voices – an increasing number of studies (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Hannah, 1999; Kong et al., 2016) reveal a similar concern from staff and students in tertiary institutes around the world. The inequity that refugee-background students experience when entering this new environment risks further disempowering an already vulnerable group.

My initiation into the world of teaching refugee-background students coincided with Dunedin becoming Aotearoa New Zealand’s sixth refugee-settlement city in 2016. It also coincided with my search for a thesis topic for the Master of Educational Psychology degree that I had started a couple of years earlier. As an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) lecturer at Otago Polytechnic, my role involved teaching general and academic English to some of the new settlers who had arrived from Syria and Iraq via transit countries. Now they had found a new home, my students had dreams of an education that would allow them to find good jobs, build new lives and support their families, while contributing to their new country. They came with skills and knowledge from their previous lives, yet with the exception of a small handful, one by one they started dropping out of their mainstream courses. Some of them never even started their studies, fearing that they would go down the same pathway, experiencing stress and failure. As I saw their dreams disintegrate, I realised that I – and the education system I was part of – had not adequately prepared them for the path ahead, and I knew that I had to start looking into ways of supporting them to get the education they deserved.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Despite a growing call for institutional and governmental support in order to provide a more equitable chance of success (e.g., Hannah, 1999; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Joe et al., 2011), refugee-background students are not recognised as an equity group by the New Zealand government. A couple of universities had committed to providing equity within their own institutes; however, the Ministry of Education showed little sign of making this an official policy. In the meantime, my students were being unfairly penalised while we waited for any changes to happen, if indeed they ever would. I knew that I had to look into ways to empower myself and my students to receive the education they needed and – as permanent New Zealand residents – had the right to receive. However, I realised this was not something I could do alone, so I enlisted five Middle Eastern students to take part in two focus groups and an action research project looking at the ways in which ESOL teachers could best support the successful transition of refugee-background students from English-language classes into mainstream tertiary studies. My hope was that we would explore different ideas and activities to incorporate into the English-language curriculum and that in doing so, we would identify the skills and knowledge needed to help refugee-background students succeed in their mainstream studies. At this stage, my focus was on how teachers could help students. It was not until later that I realised that my students were about to become my teachers.

Seeking to uncover my students' narrative, I took a qualitative approach to the research; action research methodology was deemed most suitable by my supervisors, who pointed out the need for more practitioners to be involved in research. I was further encouraged by Greenwood and Levin's description of action research as a way of building a "better, freer, fairer society through collaborative problem analysis and problem solving in context" (2006, p. 3) and by O'Leary (2014), who added that it has particular appeal in education given its ability to provide "a collaborative research approach that could empower stakeholders to improve their own practice, circumstances and environments" (p. 167).

ACKNOWLEDGING THE CHALLENGES

When I considered the challenges faced by refugee-background students entering Western education systems, they seemed almost overwhelming. They included the need for new knowledge and skills (such as understanding how much time and work was required in terms of independent study), dealing with different assessment types, writing academically and managing time effectively (Joyce et al., 2010), as well as learning to think critically rather than simply accepting the knowledge given by teaching staff (Chang et al., 2010).

For many refugee-background students, these issues are compounded by other challenges, including adapting to new technology (e.g., Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Kong et al., 2016), finding the right course and career advice (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008), lacking support and understanding from lecturers and support services (Baker et al., 2018), and having to juggle numerous external priorities and manage finances (Silburn et al., 2010).

Having sufficient English-language skills to deal with course requirements, as well as to communicate with staff and other students, was a major challenge. Despite meeting the English-language entry criteria, many refugee-background students report that language is a significant barrier to success (Kong et al., 2016). The problems associated with language included coping with the amount of course reading and subject-specific vocabulary (Hirano, 2014; O'Rourke, 2011), which can be particularly difficult for those who have not had adequate exposure to printed text during their childhood (Stanovich, 1986).

In an Aotearoa New Zealand context, O'Rourke (2011) found that the key issues were "weak academic English, coupled with good spoken English; lack of cultural and social capital appropriate to tertiary study in Aotearoa New Zealand; trust and safety issues rooted in refugee experience trauma; [and] lack of a sense of belonging" (p. 28).

Most of the previous research on refugee-background students in tertiary settings centred on students who had either moved on from secondary school or who were studying as young people in universities. In contrast,

my students at Otago Polytechnic ranged in age from 18 to their mid 50s and many of them had been out of the education system for a decade or more. In addition, they were dealing with a plethora of issues outside the classroom, including housing and health problems, financial issues, family breakdowns and adjusting to a cold climate. Yet, despite these difficulties, they kept attending classes, believing that this education would give them, and subsequently their families, the hope of a brighter future.

GETTING TO KNOW OUR STUDENTS

I used to tell my teacher “we have some other things we need to give to you – you need to consider our background, our culture – it may help you know how to handle different persons”. (Burundi student, Onsando & Billett, 2009, p. 7)

This student’s view – that teachers did not understand or appreciate their students’ backgrounds – was shared by other African students interviewed by Onsando and Billett at a TAFE institute in Australia. These refugee-background students, along with the participants in my study, felt that teachers and other students needed to be more aware of the life experiences, educational background and sociocultural practices that refugee-background students might have experienced and how these might differ from those used in a Western educational setting.

Understanding these different ways of learning and perceiving the world is essential if we are to give our students the best chance of success. Likewise, it is important for teachers to consider the knowledge, experience and characteristics that refugee-background students bring to their studies (Hayward, 2019). This was also recognised by O’Rourke (2011), who pointed out that even though there is great diversity in the refugee-background student population in any country, they tend to share valuable characteristics, such as resilience, curiosity and motivation to succeed. In addition to positive characteristics such as these, refugee-background students bring with them a wealth of experience from their lives before resettlement – both from their everyday lives prior to leaving their country and from the refugee journeys they have made since that time.

During the first focus group, the research participants recognised the following strengths in themselves: adaptability, life experience and a love of challenges. They felt that drawing on these strengths had already helped them adapt to a new culture and could also help them fit more easily into a new educational context. Acknowledging strengths that refugee-background students bring with them is important because these skills and traits can be used to help them succeed within a new education system (O’Rourke, 2011). Furthermore, a focus on strengths can counteract the Western tendency to use a deficit-based perspective in which former refugees are viewed primarily as trauma victims (Hayward, 2019).

THE NEED FOR SOCIOCULTURAL CAPITAL

Despite the need to focus on strengths, it is important to acknowledge that many refugee-background students enter tertiary education without the sociocultural capital necessary for studying in a Western education system. In order to fully understand how this affects their ability to have an equitable education, it is necessary to consider the sociocultural differences that can impact on success. In a literature review of student transitions into higher education, Donnell et al. (2016) found that many researchers drew on Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital (1986) in pointing out the inequities that eventuate when members of one group enter the world of another without the same sociocultural capital. While their research did not focus on refugees, Donnell et al. concluded that “[i]nstitutions and their students must come together and recognise their respective roles in transition, and institutional identities, as well as student identities, should shift to accommodate and support these processes of development and change” (p. 19).

This comment alludes to a need for educators and organisations to reconsider how they provide education in increasingly multicultural communities. A start in this direction was suggested by Silburn et al. (2010), who called for teachers to include international perspectives in the curriculum, provide speakers from similar backgrounds to the students, and be aware of the knowledge and skills that refugee-background students bring to their studies.

While changes in the curriculum can help, empowerment is a key concept that needs to be addressed. In his well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) stipulated that an acknowledgement and understanding of empowerment is essential, especially when working with those who may have lost power through authoritarian leaderships and displacement. Freire recommended empowering students by using what he termed as a problem-posing method of education, in which students are given the opportunity to find solutions to their own problems. This form of pedagogy transforms the role of teacher and student into the new relationships of teacher–student and student–teacher, who work collaboratively. This is similar to the Māori concept of *ako*, another dialogic method which the Ministry of Education (2013) describes, using ideas explained by Pere (1982), as an inclusive practice where shared teaching and learning experiences take place, resulting in new knowledge and understanding. This method of teaching and learning avoids what Freire called the “banking concept of education” (p. 72) in which the students are simply vessels to be filled with knowledge by the teacher, with no regard for the knowledge they already hold. Instead, using these collaborative approaches, knowledge is shared and aspects of society are critiqued, challenged and changed in order to bring about a fairer and more socially equitable world.

EMBRACING AKO TO OVERCOME EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

By using *ako* with my research participants, I gained a new perspective on the need to incorporate different educational styles into my teaching in order to cater for a much wider range of students and learning styles. None of the participants in my study had experienced education at a tertiary level before arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand – two of them had completed high school, while the other three had left school at around the age of 14. For all but one of them, this meant a gap of between seven and 24 years since they had last studied in a formal learning environment. The students worried that this time away from study would make it difficult to establish new study habits, particularly given the Western focus on literacy and the different learning styles used in the Western and Middle Eastern education systems. They were already beginning to note many of the differences, including that during their schooling they had been taught what to learn, but not how to learn – other than through rote memorisation. One participant feared this had led to an inability to use critical thinking skills:

We're just memorising, we just try to memorise it to pass the exam. We don't have to do researches [sic]. We don't have to think critically. It's like we have to memorise the book and then print it out on exam sheets.

Despite this student's dismissal of her previous learning style as “just memorising,” it is important to acknowledge the benefits that different cultural practices, such as rote learning, can bring to the classroom. Chang et al. (2011) described the difference between learning in Eastern and Western contexts as the former focusing on social learning – copying the success of others, rote learning and harmonious values – and the latter focusing on independent learning using innovation and trial-and-error methods. They reasoned that both styles had their place in education, claiming that skills such as rote learning and memorisation typically used by Eastern learners could be used in combination with Western-style problem-solving activities to produce more successful outcomes than through Western methods alone.

AN EXAMPLE OF AKO IN ACTION

A particular concern mentioned by all five participants was how to cope with reading requirements in their future courses. This ignited a discussion about our different experiences of reading. I am an avid reader, a pleasure instilled in me by book-loving parents who read to me for countless hours in my childhood and role-modelled their own love of reading. My students, however, pointed out that reading was not a normalised behaviour in their culture and subsequently they found it difficult to motivate themselves to read in their own time, for either study or pleasure. The exception to this was during Ramadan,ⁱⁱ at which time it is a requirement for Muslims to read or recite the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, an experience described by one participant: "During Ramadan we have to finish the whole Qur'an and we do it, we can do it. We do it at least once. So, we have the reading culture, but we're not committed to it."

These comments on motivation to read prompted a discussion on ways the students could establish new habits, such as reading at home for enjoyment. Three of the participants, who had children at school, felt their children were developing the habit, but that they still struggled to do so themselves – not simply because it was a new habit, but also because of the many other household responsibilities they had to attend to first. A suggestion from one participant was that the practice could be introduced slowly: "When we think about reading the whole book [it] is a huge idea. Maybe some baby steps. One page a day. Only one page a day. Maybe that's the way." This participant also suggested that teachers read stories aloud to their classes so the students could learn correct pronunciation at the same time.

Having a chance to read different types of text was another suggestion given to help promote reading. Two of the participants enthusiastically described the enjoyment they felt when one of their teachers gave them the task of reading a condensed novel in the form of graded readersⁱⁱⁱ that they chose from the library. Reading fiction in this way was a new experience for them and one they found particularly rewarding, as one participant described:

The novels that we read, they were interesting, and we felt like if you could find a good book that has things that we like to read, maybe that will help. It's like we were watching a movie and seeing it, but we were turning the pages.

This student explained that she was so engaged in the story that her reading became more fluent: "Surprisingly, I read it without translating and could understand it easily."

The participants felt that other ways of increasing their interest would be through access to stories from their own culture translated into English and enjoyed through collaborative reading, where everyone in the class reads aloud with help from the teacher. As another student said: "I think instead of just letting us read on our own, if we're all reading together, it's easier to listen and read and understand and be able to answer the questions." These suggestions point to the need for teachers to have an in-depth understanding of different cultures in order to incorporate more culturally relevant practices into the classroom.

COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM

In my classes, I would encourage students to discuss aspects of their culture and we would talk about these in relation to different aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand culture. I had always considered this practice "sharing cultures" and thought I was learning about the students through doing so. Yet, during this research, when the participants started talking in more depth about their prior learning experiences, their childhood dreams, the difficulties they dealt with on a day-to-day basis and their fears about their future education, I realised I did not really know them at all. I had either not been asking the right questions or I had not been listening actively and as a result, I had missed out on valuable information that could help me teach them more effectively and, subsequently, could help them learn more effectively. As Lenette and Ingamells (2013) warn, "the wealth of experience-based

knowledge that all students bring, and the cultural and professional knowledge that adult, educated migrants and refugees hold, are at risk of being discounted in contemporary learning and teaching processes” (p. 66).

Utilising the practice of *ako*, along with Freire’s problem-posing method (1970), the participants and I were able to pool our knowledge and subsequently consider ways of bridging the cultural divide. In a collaborative environment, we were able to speak openly and honestly, without judgement, enabling us to identify some of the knowledge gaps that could have a profound impact on their ability to study successfully in the future. For teachers working with students from all over the world, there is a need to avoid making generalised assumptions and instead to actively learn about the knowledge and expectations that each student holds.

Dialogue with the participants helped me to realise the fears they had about various aspects of studying, such as coping with the reading requirements in mainstream education. Yet, in a very short time, they gave me several ideas that I could incorporate into my teaching practice to encourage them to read more and to help them develop a love of reading. Over the ten-week project, the participants and I discussed the challenges they faced, the strengths and qualities they brought to their studies, their past educational experiences and their ideas for how a Western education system could work more effectively. With their honesty, openness and enthusiasm for the possibilities of intercultural best practice, I realised that my students had become my greatest teachers. By encompassing cultural practices, ideas, skills and knowledge, not only can we help avoid the “intense anxiety” described by Behrouz Boochani at the beginning of this article, but we can enrich both the learning *and* the teaching journey.

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- i. In Aotearoa New Zealand, refugees become permanent residents on arrival and from that point on are referred to as former refugees. Once they enter study, former refugees are usually referred to as refugee-background students.
 - ii. Ramadan is a month-long religious observance in which Muslims around the world focus on fasting, prayer, reflection and community.
 - iii. Graded readers are short books with simplified language, designed specifically to encourage reading in English-language learners.