

## Book Review

***From Bombs to Books: The remarkable stories of refugee children and their families at an exceptional Canadian school.*** Starr, D. (2011). Toronto, ON: James Lorimer. 187 pp. ISBN 978-1-55277-860-9.

Educational institutions have traditionally been recognized as centers from which knowledge is disseminated and in which the next generation is prepared to take over societal responsibilities, not only to maintain, but also to enhance the quality of life and living environment of the citizen. However, educationalists believe that educational institutions play an even greater role in the lives of pupils, particularly those who have faced the worst of human atrocities such as conflicts and war and their long-lasting impact. According to the United Nations High Commissioner (2011), in 2011 there were 60 million refugees worldwide, and children constituted 25% of the displaced population. For refugee children, schools have been recognized as essential centers to provide the needed care to promote their healing process and development (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). However, in practice, learning institutions have not created a space to foster the growth and empowerment of refugee youth (Rutter, 2006; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Therefore, this vulnerable population who were forced out of their nation and have resettled in a host nation usually fall through the cracks of our academic institutions and are further pushed to the periphery of society. In the midst of grim academic reports and social outlooks with regard to the educational success of refugee youth in their host nations, David Starr (2011), in his book *From Bombs to Books*, demonstrates the possibility of students' success if they are taught through a holistic educational approach to meet the learning needs of all students. According to Starr, it is possible for students to succeed if they are respected and understood and their experiences are valued. Furthermore, all students need to be provided with the basic needs of food, shelter, and compassion.

Starr, the former principle of Edmonds Community School in Burnaby, British Columbia, elegantly narrated the stories about some of the refugee students, their families, and their journeys from their homelands to their new host country of Canada. Edmonds School is an old building constructed in 1894 and located in a poor neighborhood of Burnaby. In his description of the school and its neighboring community, Starr not only painted the realities of a school in a poor neighborhood, but also acknowledged the important role of the school in the community and the reciprocal relationship between the school and its members. The students in Edmond School consist of representatives from 48 different countries, 6 of 10 students are enrolled in English as a second language, and one third of the students come from refugee backgrounds (p. 19). Starr referred to Edmond School as a "place of new beginnings" (p. 16), because the school welcomed the Scottish, Irish, and English a century ago; and, depending upon the geopolitical unraveling on the international scene, the school has welcomed students of many different nationalities and demographics. Starr did not simply narrate the stories of extraordinary struggles and the journeys of refugees to Canada; he began his narrations with a purpose. In his efforts to create an effective learning environment for all of his students, Starr recognized the importance of getting to know each student because of his or her unique history and lived experiences that contribute to or hinder their learning experience. He introduced not only the students to us, but also their families and their stories and explained how their parents' lived

experiences have impacted their children's education. He also recognized the role of parents in enhancing the learning experience of the students at Edmond School through their presence and volunteerism. The importance of understanding family circumstances is evident in Starr's endeavors to place in context the students' accomplishments compared to their life experiences: "Considering the ordeal her mother went through to bring her to safety, the true miracle was not that the girl could read a simple story, but that she was alive at all" (p. 89). Equally important is Starr's acknowledgment of the hard work, passion, and understanding of the school staff by telling their stories.

*From Bombs to Books* is an exceptional book in that the stories of refugees increase the awareness of all citizens, educators in particular, to the plight of refugees and the fact that, because of the extraordinary circumstances that they have faced, refugees are a different class of migrants to Canada. They did not leave their countries by choice and did not have the benefit of prior planning or reliance on human or social capital. This distinction is essential to recognize to be able to cater to the needs of refugee populations most effectively. Additionally, although the education system has a wealth of knowledge on refugee experiences, as the narrations in the book illustrate, refugees are not a homogenous population and dependent on global geopolitics; we have had an influx of refugees from various nations. Each population brings with it its own stories, challenges, and backgrounds; and it is therefore essential to understand refugees' experiences, knowledge, and histories to ensure their success in their host country. Further, Starr's stories of refugees bring to the surface the phenomenon of being a refugee and the concerns associated with becoming a refugee. Starr, through his narrations of the plight of refugees, has combated the dominant societal view of refugees. By painting a historical, political, and economical portrait of the "others," he created an image of them as regular members of society who, through no fault of their own, have been forced out of their homes and nations:

"I had an excellent job," he says. "Thirty years ago I was making the equivalent of two thousand US a month, and I was able to travel on vacation to Europe whenever I wanted. . . . The security forces came to my house at midnight . . . and told us we had five minutes to get ready. We were put into cars and driven away. To this day, I have never seen that house again." (pp. 100-104)

In his narrations, Starr has woven together the simple aspirations and common virtues of the students and their families in the stories—resiliency, love, determination, courage, and faith: "Lori's roots are, to say the least, complex: they have grown with resiliency, love, and determination" (p. 32). These qualities are recurring themes throughout the book; they are the qualities required to survive the loss of loved ones, what was once familiar, and what the refugees have worked all their lives to accomplish. These qualities are essential to regain strength and rebuild their lives with little support in a foreign land. Hope is also an essential quality depicted throughout the narrations of the book. The hope of achieving their aspirations, such as family security, employment, and education, was the driving force behind the students' and their families' perseverance and advancement.

In my opinion, the most important theme of the book is the possibility of success. The stories reveal that if students have a desire to learn and benefit from compassionate educators, hope can be rekindled, and success becomes possible:

These professionals have chosen to bring compassion into the workplace, to see the *whole* child (including the horrors of what has come before and the challenges facing the entire family in this strange new environment), and to embrace the creativity required to support these often-fragile students. (p. 130)

In demonstrating the important elements of success for students, Starr did not outline specific teaching strategies; rather, he introduced the framework of holistic education. Creating an educational environment in which all students feel that they belong is essential: “The need to be accepted, fit in, and be loved are universal” (p. 27). In addition, he emphasized the importance of equity: “Our job is to ensure equity for all kids; it’s not about giving every student the same thing but rather giving all children what they need to achieve the same outcome” (p. 54). Through his experience of working with refugee students, as well as the experiences of other educators and administrators, Starr created a formula for the success of refugee students:

Adequate levels of ESL and learning-assistance support; enough educational assistants to provide one-on-one support to the most vulnerable students; counseling services in the school to work with students with emotional and behavioral challenges, money to provide food, school supplies, clothes, and opportunities; and finally, having the right staff in the right placements. (pp. 72-73)

Starr recounted the realities of the lives of the refugee students in Edmonds Community School: stories of successes, failures, and tragedies. He opened the book with the story of a 13-year-old Afghan refugee girl, Elaha, the winner of the Dave Carter Cup in a public-speaking competition, which demonstrates the possibility of success for anyone. However, he also discussed failures in the story of Willy, a refugee boy from Sierra Leone. Willy’s story demonstrates the challenges that refugee youth face: their inability to succeed as a result of tangled circumstances such as students’ emotional and behavioral challenges because of their experiences in conflict zones and during their transition, the cultural clashes between families and the larger society, schools’ inability to meet the needs of more challenging students, and the larger societal issue of care for foster children. Further, some of the stories end in tragedy regardless of the love and care that the youth received. Akol Chol was severely injured as a little boy in his worn-torn country of Sudan. Although prior to their arrival in Canada his mother cared for him and upon their arrival he was loved by his family and was provided with the needed care in his new country, his injuries prevailed, and he passed away, leaving in the memories of his family, peers, and teachers his spirit of kindness, determination, and hope.

Although one can argue that *From Bombs to Books* lacks evident analysis and evaluation of the education system with regard to refugee education or comments on governments’ responsibility for caring for these newcomers, I believe that is beyond the purpose of this book. As Arnot and Pinson (2005) contended, in society, refugees as a distinct migrant group are generally stripped of the majority of their identity, except their forced identity of being stateless and statusless. Further, Husserl (1970, as cited in van Manen, 1984) asserted that interpreting others is an activity to be conducted through a dialectical process. Therefore, it is crucial to be attentive to the stories of others to be able to bridge a world that is unfamiliar and even frightening to a world that is familiar and comfortable. I believe that David Starr’s illustrations have successfully created that bridge in his paving of a path to the lives of refugees: to their plight of displacement from their country of origin and the struggles and barriers that they face in

their host country. Equally important, Starr's stories also demonstrate the need for a holistic model of education. Given the multifaceted needs of refugee youth, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful success without paying particular attention to the areas of learning and the social and emotional needs of these students. As Starr has outlined and many scholars in the area of refugee education have affirmed, understanding students as a whole, respecting students and their past history, ensuring students' feeling of belonging, and creating hope are important elements for educational institutions to be able to create environments in which all students can succeed, grow, and reach their full potential.

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