

Resilience Through Storytelling in the EAL Classroom

Koreen Geres

English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers often become the trusted confidants of students who experienced forced migration. Although teachers are not typically trained to be counsellors or encouraged to take that role, what they do in the classroom can have a great influence on their students' well-being (Pipher, 2002). In fact, teachers and schools can be major factors in building resilience and creating opportunities for adjustment (Pike, Cohen, & Pooley, 2008). When teachers provide strategies for well-being, youth are more likely to have the capacity to cope with tremendous social, educational, and emotional change. One classroom strategy to promote resilience is storytelling. In addition to storytelling being a viable strategy to encourage language learning (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002) and address emotionally difficult issues for the writer (Hong Kingston, 2006), hearing youths' stories can build community support (Theron et al., 2011). This article describes a study to explore how teachers of secondary students who were new to Canada used storytelling and what stories the students wanted to tell. The results of the study are discussed in regard to teachers' reflections on storytelling with EAL students.

Les enseignants d'anglais langue additionnelle (ALA) deviennent souvent les confidents fidèles des élèves qui ont subi un déplacement forcé. Même si typiquement les enseignants ne reçoivent pas de formation ou d'incitation pour devenir conseillers, ce qu'ils font en classe peut avoir une grande influence sur le bien-être de leurs élèves (Pipher, 2002). En fait, les enseignants et les écoles peuvent constituer des facteurs importants dans l'accroissement de la résilience et la création d'occasions pour l'adaptation (Coventry, Guerra, MacKenzie, & Pinkney, 2003; Ingleby & Watters, 2002; Pike, Cohen, & Pooley, 2008). Quand les enseignants offrent des stratégies visant le bien-être, les jeunes sont plus aptes à avoir la capacité de faire face aux changements profonds sur les plans social, éducationnel et affectif. Une stratégie pédagogie qui améliore la résilience, c'est celle de raconter des histoires. En plus de représenter une stratégie viable pour stimuler l'apprentissage des langues (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002) et aider le raconteur à affronter des questions difficiles (Hong Kingston, 2006), le partage de récits peut accroître le soutien de la communauté (Theron et al., 2011). Cet article décrit une étude portant sur l'emploi de récits par des enseignants au secondaire et sur les histoires que leurs élèves, de nouveaux arrivants au Canada, ont choisi de partager. Les résultats de l'étude sont discutés en fonction des réflexions des enseignants sur le partage de récits avec des élèves d'ALA.

Schools have been identified as important organizations in the successful settlement of immigrant and refugee youth (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002). “Interactions with teachers, peers, and curricula all influence a child’s growing and changing sense of self, making the school a key site in the construction of a social and cultural identity” (Hoffman Clark, 2007, pp. 1–2). For refugee youth, school is the most important entity, yet school staff do not have the training to respond to all the issues (Stewart, 2010). There is, therefore, a great need to introduce teachers to culturally sensitive strategies to enhance youths’ resilience. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be storytelling in the classroom. In the first section, I review the literature related to resilience as well as storytelling for literacy learning, emotional well-being, and social change. In the second section, I provide an overview of research that I conducted with 11 secondary students who were new to Canada and 3 teachers who used storytelling as a method to encourage literacy, develop relationships, and understand students’ needs and strengths.

Youth Resilience

Adolescents who arrive as immigrants and refugees “possess the capacity to cope with and prosper amid the multitude of changes and hardships presented by the immigration experience, whilst simultaneously struggling with age-related development” (Berger, 2008, p. 103). Frequently, this capacity to prosper is referred to as resilience. “Resilience refers to a class of phenomena characterized by *good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development*” (Masten, 2001, p. 228, emphasis in original). To avoid perceiving these youth through a set of unrealistic expectations, however, I acknowledge that “children are no more and no less resilient than adults” (Capewell, 1999, p. 31) and that children are not invincible to continual risks (Garbarino, 2008; McAdam-Crisp, 2006). By taking a social constructionist stance, I seek to overcome the practice of using a white, middle-class, western perspective to evaluate the lived experiences of culturally diverse youth (Rogoff, 2003; Ungar, 2001) and recognize that the dimensions of resilience are both culturally and context specific (Theron et al., 2011). It is cogent, therefore, to understand from the perspective of youth who arrive as refugees and immigrants what supports, strategies, and personal attributes buffer risk and foster resilience. One strategy to encourage youth to share their perspectives is storytelling in the classroom.

The Power of Stories

Stories are a powerful force for learning, healing, and promoting social change across cultures. In the introduction to Mariatu Kamara’s biography,

former child soldier Ishmael Beah writes, “In my culture, every story is told with the purpose of either imparting knowledge, repairing a broken bond, or transforming the listener and the teller” (Kamara & McClelland, 2009, p. 7). Closer to home, Indigenous Canadian storyteller Richard Van Camp reveals the relevance of story in a rapidly changing world:

We are starving for stories and a sense of community. Electronic media does not always fulfill that need the way personal interactions do. We may think we’re “connecting” with friends and family with every tweet, text, and e-mail, but it’s not what we need as human beings. We all need to feel welcomed and we all need to feel that we belong.... We are all children again in the presence of great storytelling. Storytelling is a feast for the soul, mind, and sacred child within. (personal communication, February 27, 2011)

The wisdom of Beah and Van Camp is echoed by numerous researchers and writers who contribute to the literature. For thousands of years, storytelling has been used across cultures to teach lessons and strengthen cultural identities (Edwards & Sienkewicz, 1990; King, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). In more recent times, the age-old practice of storytelling has been used as a teaching strategy for literacy learners (Haas Dyson, 1994), a culturally appropriate method of addressing the effects of trauma (Hong Kingston, 2006; Nadeau & Measham, 2006), and to promote social change (Bell, 2010).

Stories for Literacy Learning

Across cultures, stories are used to teach powerful lessons and shape human development. “Science, religion, proper behaviour, community tradition and history are taught and learned through narratives in many communities” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 292). Due to the familiar nature of storytelling, many educators believe that narratives provide an engaging method of encouraging literacy (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Haas Dyson, 1994; Heath, 1994; Klingner, 2010; Miller & Mehler, 1994). One such educator is Roessingh (2007), who developed a dual language book project because “[n]arrative/stories are an ideal vehicle and provide an interesting context for children to develop vocabulary and early literacy skills and concepts and to acquire cultural information and thinking skills” (p. 1). Rather than using lessons from workbooks that have little transferability to the needs of everyday life (Vee-man, Ward, & Walker, 2006), learning becomes meaningful when students’ stories are linked to history and contemporary politics (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007). Educators who consider the whole child recognize that the connection to community is a powerful force in promoting literacy (Freeman et al., 2002; Heller, 1994). Reading, writing, and telling stories can also contribute to the emotional well-being of youth because every good narrative has a character who solves a problem by taking strategic action.

Stories for Emotional Well-being

Engagement in activities such as oral traditions, storytelling, and talking circles can result in change of perspective (Hickling, 2007). Planning for storytelling puts youth in control because “planning is imagining a possible agentive narrative” (Johnston, 2004, p. 33). Founding stories offer youth adaptive strategies to face challenges and build a sense of hope and agency by critically examining the past yet concentrating on the present and the future (Nadeau & Measham, 2006). Telling and reading fictional stories can be a way of helping youth explore emotions that are too difficult to personalize (Rozentals-Thresher, 2011). Traditional and personal stories can be used with immigrant and refugee youth to enhance emotional well-being in three areas: (a) identity confusion following migration (Rousseau, Lacroix, Singh, Gauthier, & Benoit, 2005), (b) developing a sense of hope for the future (Johnston, 2004), and (c) healing trauma (Hong Kingston, 2006).

Youth new to Canada are faced with the difficult process of establishing a new identity while blending cultures (Beiser, 1999; Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Narratives can help youth work through this process because “we constantly tell stories about ourselves to others and ourselves, and the stories shape who we think we are” (Johnston, 2004, p. 30). Narratives buffer risk as youth explore identities and retrieve a sense of wholeness after experiencing the loss of land and family (Rousseau et al., 2005; Williams, Labonte, & O’Brien, 2003). The arts help children by temporarily “suspending reality” in order to look at their grief, explore their emotions, and focus on their strengths (Rozentals-Thresher, 2011, p. 5). Storytelling has also been used successfully with adults who have experienced traumatic events.

Many of the ideas regarding storytelling and wellness are practiced by Maxine Hong Kingston (2006) in writing workshops for military veterans. Hong Kingston (2006) teaches people affected by war to write as a means of healing, understanding the past, and moving into the future:

We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization.... Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world. The writer becomes a new person after every story, every poem; and if the art is very good, perhaps the reader is changed too. (p. 1)

Changing the reader or working for social change can also promote healing and enhance resilience for youth who have experienced forced migration and trauma.

Stories for Social Change

Moving on to make changes in the larger society is a method of healing (Pipher, 2002) because people feel agentic through activism. Social action can take the form of storytelling because telling stories that have been silenced is an empowering act (Nafisi, 2010), and youth who have been silenced can have great insight into the need for bearing witness (Zunti, 2002). Although stories of inequity are uncomfortable to hear, resisting oppression is healthy for individuals and “makes a society stronger, more resilient and democratic, and more effective at fostering the well-being of its people” (Bell, 2010, p. 62). Valuing personal narratives from a variety of voices and the everyday as a source of agency (Giroux, 2005) can raise awareness and inform members of the general public less familiar with the pre- and post-migration challenges faced by youth. Moreover, understanding the differences and similarities of different cultural groups “can improve a community’s capacity to foster youth resilience” (Theron et al., 2011). “This role of story as a way of explaining and of prompting others to new perceptions makes special sense for those who see their experiences as somehow marginal” (Heath, 1994, p. 215). One such study was led by well-known Canadian researchers in the area of English as an Additional Language (EAL).

In a project with bilingual and multilingual elementary school children, Cummins, Early, and Stille (2011), along with an international cohort of researchers, explored the use of narratives or identity texts to promote language learning, negotiate a sense of self in a new culture, and work toward social change. In the study, students created narratives that presented their talents and shone a light on their cultures as valuable resources. Rather than being on the margins, the youths’ diversity was respected and treasured. The narrative project provided opportunities for English language learners to acquire new academic knowledge by building on prior knowledge while developing an awareness of the ways knowledge intersects with power.

To conclude, the literature on resilience shows that the use of storytelling enhances youth resilience by promoting literacy, incorporating cultures, and examining identity change caused by migration. When students have control over the stories they tell, it is an opportunity to regain a sense of agency after being forced to migrate. Reading and writing stories can help youth explore emotional confusions caused by experiences of trauma and consider their personal strengths to carry on after tremendous hardship. Sharing stories to help others understand the experiences of refugees and immigrants also enhances youth resilience as they work for social change. In the next section, I provide an overview of the study in which I collected secondary school EAL students’ stories as they improved their English skills, identified the supports that helped them through very difficult events, and described their personal strategies for living well.

The Study

Context of the Research

This action research study was undertaken to better understand the academic, social, and emotional needs of youth who arrive in Canada with experiences of interrupted education and forced migration. By taking a youth perspective and employing anti-oppressive methodologies, this project addressed the gap in research regarding the challenges that create barriers to successful integration into Canadian society as well as the factors that assist youth in living well despite immense obstacles. This study was also an exploration in moving toward understanding in text, which rose out of my concern to avoid perpetuating stereotypes of physically and culturally different people created by colonizers studying the “Other” (Said, 1979). To this end, I ask the question: What are the pre- and post-migration factors that negatively affect newcomer youths’ capacity to successfully integrate into Canadian society, and what are the factors that support youth to be resilient in the face of migration challenges?

The research was conducted in a secondary or high school with Grades 9 to 12 in a primary urban setting in the province of Saskatchewan. The school enrolment was approximately 1,400, with a constantly fluctuating EAL population. At the beginning of the study, 85 EAL students were receiving support. The majority of the narrative collection occurred during the first five-month semester, although several interviews were conducted during the next five months of school and the beginning of the summer vacation.

My queries for the study were in response to EAL students’ comments I had heard during a decade of teaching. Often students had lamented that teachers did not understand the immigrant experience. Youth believed that educators did not know who arrived as immigrants or refugees, and therefore the EAL students were held to the same standards as Canadian-born youth. Because of these student concerns, I designed the interview questions from which the student participants in this study could expand or deviate: “What do young people need when they come to Canada?” and “What stories do you want Canadians to know about newcomers to Canada?” With the assistance of the student participants, I was able to move beyond an “adult-centric” (Ungar, 2001) approach to investigate the youth perspective on what is sustaining.

The Participants

The greatest share of the study was conducted in a class constructed for students who required a Grade 11 English Language Arts credit and were older than the typical Grade 11 students but had not gained a level of English needed to be successful in a class integrated with Canadian-born youth. This class was termed “sheltered Grade 11 English Language Arts” (ELA 20) be-

cause the same curriculum guidelines would be followed but with consideration for students' developing language skills. While the class was originally planned to serve youth at an intermediate English language level, the lack of appropriate classes for youth at a beginner level of English necessitated the creation of a multilevel program. As a result, two of the students completed the credit as an English as an additional language (EAL) credit. For ease of understanding, I will include the two students when I refer to the ELA 20 participants.

Although the study began with 8 student participants, it expanded organically to a total of 11 youth and 3 teachers in the school. There were no particular criteria for accepting the additional six participants other than their eagerness to share stories about the migration experience. In all situations, the power of storytelling arose in casual conversation as I entered the school, walked down the hall, or waited for class to begin. One student presented me with a personal essay about his experiences. His EAL teacher asked him if he would like to be involved in the study, and he agreed to submit his essay for my research and to have a personal interview. Two EAL students from other classes were recommended by their teachers who were moved by the students' accounts of migration. The two students agreed to submit their written class assignments to my research, but neither student participated in interviews. The referring teachers agreed to personal interviews, as did a third teacher in the same school who engaged me in conversation about her experiences teaching EAL students and using storytelling as a teaching tool. The six unexpected participants added to the rich, thick description via their unique perspectives.

To provide context for participants' perspectives, Table 1 summarizes the student participants' personally chosen pseudonyms, ages, gender, countries of origin, places of migration prior to arrival in Saskatchewan, and immigration status. Table 2 outlines the teacher participants' years of teaching experience and areas of specialization. Dates regarding length of stay in Canada or years of teaching experience are in relation to the commencement of the study. For the purpose of this study, youth are defined as people between the ages of 13 and 22, which is the age of funded enrolment in Saskatchewan secondary school. The term youth, however, remains problematic.

Rogoff (2003) provides numerous examples of the cultural relativity of the terms childhood, youth, and adulthood because of diversity in expectations related to age. Whereas some cultures encourage very responsible behaviours and activities at an early age, other cultures create a childhood free of mature expectations. In western cultures, the advancement of industrialization has led to the time of childhood being lengthened, which is directly correlated to the age of school enrolment. This imposed stage of development is not found in all cultures. I will, however, describe the student participants as youth in reference to the age of Saskatchewan secondary school enrolment with the acknowledgement that the term is not universal.

Table 1
Student Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of birth	Migration prior to arrival in SK	Family arrived in Canada as	Time in Canada
Adnan	19	M	Saudi Arabia	Turkey, Toronto, Edmonton Winnipeg	Refugees	1 year & 10 months
Loso	18	M	Saudi Arabia	Turkey, Toronto, Edmonton, Winnipeg	Refugees	1 year & 10 months
Marty	17	M	England	Iran	Visitors	5 months
Tim Tom	17	M	Germany		Temporary Workers	3 years
Pearl	19	F	Pakistan	Toronto	Immigrants	3 years
YG	20	M	Burma	Thailand	Refugees	3.5 years
November	17	M	Pakistan	Toronto	Immigrants	2 years
Oscar	20	M	China		Immigrants	2 years
Halwa	19	F	Somalia	Kenya, Saskatchewan, Edmonton	Refugees	2 years
Hamid	19	M	Afghanistan	Russia	Refugees	8 years
Sandman	21	M	Iran		Immigrants	6 months

Table 2
Teacher Participants

Pseudonym	Years teaching	Areas of specialization
Mr. Jack	25	Language arts, technology, drama
Ms. G.	20	Language arts
Miss O. S.	15	Language arts, English as an additional language

Gathering Stories

Despite the great disparity in English language levels and previous education, all eight ELA 20 student participants received instruction around the same themes and were given the same assignments with adjustments for academic ability. Some of the writing and discussion prompts originated in a program developed for teachers to assist the settlement of newcomer students in the Netherlands and England. The Pharos program began with topics such as “the meaning of my name,” and progressed to more complex issues regarding the important people in students’ lives. The purpose of such exercises was explained in an online introduction to Pharos training and

materials (<http://www.pharos.nl/information-in-english/school-programmes-for-refugee-youth-in-secondary-education>). Although the program has since been updated, at the time of the study the introduction was as follows:

The aim is for pupils to share their experiences and develop skills that will enable them to cope more effectively with distressful experiences, not to explicitly bring up traumatic experiences for discussion. Emphasis is placed on the supportive factors in the social environment.

Miss O.S., the ELA 20 classroom teacher, followed the Pharos philosophy and took great care not to retraumatize youth by asking them to recount difficult situations.

Based on a combination of the Pharos program topics and the Saskatchewan Grade 11 English Language Arts curriculum, students created portfolios as evidence of their learning, which they submitted to me for my research purposes. They were also invited to participate in individual interviews: five students agreed; one student relocated before interviews occurred; and two students declined. One of the three additional students participated in an interview, one student moved to Ontario, and one student was unavailable due to employment. Although their unique migration experiences would have increased the richness of the research, it was more important to respect the wishes of those who declined, since promoting the students' sense of agency was one of my primary concerns. The variety of storytelling projects also gave the students choice.

Several approaches to storytelling were used to collect information in this project. The method of Photovoice was used when ELA 20 students wrote their life stories and illustrated their work with photos from a variety of sources. A curriculum requirement for this class included writing and illustrating a children's novel, which was well suited for students with developing English skills yet allowed the incorporation of emotional or moral challenges relevant to secondary school students. Direct instruction regarding the format of a typical western way of storytelling, that builds in action to a climax and ends with resolution, was intended to help students move forward from writing their own experiences of difficulty to imagining a future with possibility and promise. Throughout the semester, assignment structure was varied to meet the diverse needs and strengths of the class.

Students worked with various partners, in the large group, and individually. Most of the student projects were edited by the teacher and reworked by the students. Personal journals were not edited because students were encouraged to write freely. Miss O. S. prompted the students to write by sharing her personal stories, introducing classic Canadian stories, immigrant stories, and novels about teenagers. She also began classes with discussion on high-interest topics such as dating in Canada. Oral storytelling with the class extended throughout the project as the ELA 20 students and their teacher

recounted stories of past experiences in relation to the language arts assignments. Beginning lessons with oral storytelling helped students with limited first-language literacy move beyond their comfort zone to the challenging task of writing their thoughts. The additional students also submitted a variety of projects.

Two of the additional students submitted journal assignments from other classes. One student wrote weekend journals for a data-processing class. These stories were not edited on a regular basis because the main focus was keyboarding skills. The second student wrote lengthy journals about his visit to Afghanistan. These journals were edited carefully and reworked since they were for a language arts credit. The third student offered a personal essay that was not a class assignment. Being well educated in his first language, the young man felt most comfortable writing about the traumatic events of his past. Writing in English gave him emotional distance or safety rather than using his first language, which he referred to as the language of his heart. Finally, all the participants were invited to a personal interview.

The interviews took the format of oral storytelling directed by the participants. I began all the interviews with casual conversation before asking students what they wanted Canadians to know about the immigrant or refugee experience. Some students seemed uncomfortable, had little to say, and left after a few minutes. Several students returned for a second interview because they had many stories to tell. When time allowed, students talked until they determined they were finished. These approaches, with the central focus on storytelling, seemed to best fit my long-term goal to promote social change by giving the student-participants choices and by developing greater public awareness of the needs of youth who arrive as refugees and immigrants. Also, I believed the narrative content would provide rich, beneficial information to academics as well as teachers working with immigrant and refugee youth (Bell, 2010; Fine et al., 2007). First, however, I needed to make sense of the students' numerous stories before I could put them in a format for others to read.

Using NVivo 9 software, I clustered the students' statements by topic and arranged the topics according to frequency. Starting with the most frequently mentioned topic and continuing in descending order, the student-identified factors that enhance resilience are friends; having a positive attitude; family; attachment to Canada; having empathy and a belief in social justice; attachment to home country and culture; having fun through humour, art, music, reading, and TV; sports; education; making future plans; being independent and outgoing; religion; supports in Canada; teachers as allies; nature; political awareness; home country supports; resisting gang involvement; and reunification with family. I then developed four categories based on the literature: (a) academic supports, (b) family supports, (c) social supports, and (d) strategies for growing up well. The topics were then sorted into the categories. The protective factors identified by the student participants are academic

supports, including attachment to school and the recognition of teacher allies; family supports, including family assistance with resettlement, attachment to siblings and parents; and social supports, including positive peer relationships. Student strategies for growing up well include following the guiding principles of social justice and religion; learning from adversity; being hopeful; having a sense of humour; and being empathetic. In the next section, I provide students' narratives of the factors that enhance resilience.

Discussion

Students' Stories of Resilience

The youth showed great insight into the factors that increased their well-being. They identified the people, places, activities, and values that comforted them in times of overwhelming despair. Through their stories, the youth demonstrated the personal qualities that enhanced resilience as they shared words of wisdom. As reflected in the literature reviewed, it became clear that the factors that enhance resilience are a complicated matrix of a youth's personal characteristics, social capital such as education, and the family's capacity to cope (Tuk & de la Rive Box, 2003). My query for this study was to investigate factors that could be supported in the EAL classroom. Although I was cognizant that solving family issues is far beyond the scope of an EAL teacher's responsibility, I witnessed students bringing family issues into the classroom. Astoundingly, many families faced with tremendous pre- and post-migration challenges raised resilient children, and I was curious to know more. Most importantly, I wanted to know what aspects of school positively affected newcomer youths' struggles to stay in school. Therefore, I grouped the participants' narrative of support into themes of academic, family, and peer support, as well as the students' personal strategies, values, and attributes of resilience.

Academic Supports

Without a doubt, the student participants in this study showed a high level of attachment to their Saskatchewan school, where learning extended beyond academics to include adjustment to culture and to the development of strategies to cope with personal and family challenges. Several participants voiced their thankfulness for teacher allies who offered emotional support and created a welcoming and safe learning atmosphere. These youth recognized the benefits of acquiring education, and demonstrated appreciation for the school system in Canada. After a peer interview with YG, November wrote, "YG's favorite class is English because he likes to learn English. He never wants to skip." Conversely, Tim Tom's attachment to school was not as straightforward. He described his learning journey after being removed from the current school for one semester:

Another thing I learned is that if I do better in my classes and get better marks school is more fun and exciting. Last year I didn't get any good marks mostly because I didn't study. I got really frustrated and didn't really want to go to school anymore. I started skipping a lot and didn't do my homework. This semester I only had good marks and its more fun.

Tim Tom displayed a sense of attachment by returning to the school he had been forced to leave. Tim Tom's explanation was that he learned that school could be fun, which corresponds with the concept that a sense of belonging has numerous constructive effects, including a positive attitude toward learning and one's self as reflected in higher attendance and retention rates (Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009; Pike, Cohen, & Pooley, 2008; Zwarych, 2004).

While Tim Tom expressed his preference for the school in a somewhat guarded fashion, Halwa was able to explicitly express her attachment. When Halwa made the decision to move to Ontario to help her mother, her weekend journals reflected her great attachment to the school and to one particular teacher, Mr. Jack: "I loved this school nice teachers.... I will miss you Mr. [Jack] and my other teachers and some students. I will miss this school." In the next section, the bond between students and teachers as a factor of resilience is explored further.

Students' attachment to teachers appears as a particularly important element in developing resilience because teachers play a predominant role in providing youth with the guidance and information required to be successful in the larger community (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002). Adnan showed a great appreciation for teachers' commitment to youth:

Teachers they're helpful. They explain anything you don't understand.... They're teaching us what we need for our future.... think about it. Why teachers wake up in the morning, come to school, and teach us something? ... [Teachers] can go home and sleep ... but why the teacher not? Because ... they need to make a better future for teenagers.

Considering the positive aspects of school from a youth perspective brings attention to the value of teachers' acts of kindness and compassion.

Feeling safe and emotionally comfortable with teachers was identified by students as being important. Oscar said, "Here the teachers are very nice. They don't hit the people and yell. If you need help the teachers are very friendly to help you." Marty described how some teachers create a welcoming atmosphere for students to ask questions: "Some teachers are good to ask.... For example my biology teacher says, 'The meaning is this, and if you have any other questions just tell me.' And she feels comfortable with my questions."

For Sandman, teachers created bridges to the larger community. With few social supports in the city, Sandman identified school staff as a major support. Because of teachers' suggestions and guidance, Sandman was introduced to classes and extracurricular programs that helped him cope with his emotional challenges:

[Teachers] gave me the opportunity to go to that T-shirt class, and there was lots of other stuff [they] introduced me to, and that was really, really good thing for me, and it helped me quit my problems. Like that youth program; I still think about that program, and it was a really, really positive thing for me.... those three days there, I forgot lots of things; I didn't forget; I just deal much better with those problems.

As a result of experiences in school, Sandman felt nurtured:

In history class [the teacher] was talking about my country, and I described it. And the reason I did that was I knew that my teacher actually cares and listens to me.... There are lots of really good teachers in that school.... who know about things and care about things.

The other caring people in the stories of the student participants were parents and siblings.

Family Supports

The support of family members is a significant protective factor for the well-being of youth (Arafat & Musleh, 2006; McCubbin, Ishikawa, & McCubbin, 2008), and the students in this study identified several factors specific to family assistance. Family members previously resettled in Canada offered scaffolding and guidance into the new culture. Siblings provided the companionship previously supplied by friends. Finally, the students demonstrated a crucial protective factor that is defined as common across cultures: attachment to predominant caregivers (McAdam-Crisp, 2006). Although the behaviours that illustrate attachment to family vary according to the context as well as students' cultures, the affective result is consistent. The emotionally moving stories created by student participants clearly demonstrate the importance of family in the development of resilient children. The following examples are a very small portion of the prolific stories about the students' families.

Youth in this study expressed that a significant function of the family is to assist with resettlement. Halwa's sister and brother-in-law helped when she moved to Saskatchewan:

[M]y sister was happy to buy every thing I need. I was happy to have my sister.... I asked my brother in law witch [sic] school I have to go. Because he know [this city]. He [lived] before here he tell me go to [this school].

Students also wrote about siblings in other contexts. Despite their very different migration experiences, a close bond to siblings was evident in the stories of youth participants. Sandman's brother offered a great deal of support in the adjustment to school and Canadian culture: "If I wasn't with my brother, I would feel really, really, really lonely in that school." Because Oscar did not have a brother due to the one-child policy in China, he had a sibling-like relationship with his cousin, whom he referred to as the second most important person in his life: "[H]e always teach me Math, Chinese. If I don't [know] how to do, he must to help me do the homework finish. He show me study is very important. So he change my life."

In addition to siblings, parents were frequently featured in students' narratives. Seven of the eight students in ELA 20 wrote about their parents being the most important people in their lives. As the son of a visiting scholar to Saskatchewan, Marty explained how his parents helped him cope with the temporary but challenging change in cultures: "My parents always were my best people. I can't imagine my life without them.... I love them because of their support and guidance they are giving me." YG poetically described his immense appreciation for his mother and father's sacrifices: "Anything my mom and my dad did all for me.... My dear parents are my blood and my life." Adnan wrote prolifically and emotionally about his fidelity for his mother:

My mother is the most important person to me because she is the only person I could not live without. I love her so much because she gave everything she could.... She want to make my future better.

Pearl's family helped preserve an attachment to her deceased father through stories:

Now I want to tell something about my dad he is not any more he died when I was just six months old. I don't know anything about him just those things that my mom and my sisters told me. But he is alive in my mind and my heart. I know he was a really good and nice father because my sisters told me. I wish I could see him just once but I can't I know.

Without exception, the students showed a strong bond to family.

In brief, the participants in this study identified several aspects of family support. First, family members already established in Canada eased the struggles of migration by acting as culture brokers. Close relationships with siblings and surrogate siblings provided emotional well-being and guidance. Some families were able to maintain the histories of deceased family members who continued to be role models and a positive connection to the past. Most importantly, parents who sustained loving relationships in the midst of chaos, danger, and relocation were able to instill devotion, respect, and reciprocity within their children. As outlined in a BRYCS Brief (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services, 2010), aspects of resilience that develop

in positive family relationships are “connecting to one another using caring communication; creating generational and cultural continuity; building trust and positive identity rooted in the family” (p. 3). As the students’ narratives showed, family members have the potential to create a protective barrier for refugee and immigrant youth faced with the challenges of relocation.

Peer Support

The final entity on which the student participants frequently relied was their peers. Studies have shown that in certain cases peer support can be more influential than parental support in determining the well-being of immigrant and refugee youth (Galler & Sher, 2010). This aspect of the newcomer youth experience was broached in novel studies and creative writing assignments in the ELA 20 class. Such assignments help youth “process their experiences and explore paths for growth from a safe emotional distance” (Berger, 2008, p. 102). Miss O.S. offered the students numerous activities to consider peer support and the value of teenage friendships. The participating youth showed a great appreciation for personal relationships both within and beyond the EAL program.

Marty pointed out the importance of friends being able to trust each other and share secrets. Oscar wrote that friendship is so important it can change a person’s life. In another writing assignment, Oscar recognized the support of a fellow Chinese student he met at school: “In Canada, I not have a lot of friends. [This friend] always took me go everywhere help me go to find the job [and] help me too much.” For Loso, friends, like brothers, fulfilled his need for fun: “Friends are important too because you can have fun with them. You can play with them. I like my brothers and friends. It is important for me to have them.” In Sandman’s life, companionship was emotionally sustaining: “Someone to talk to even when you do some kind of stupid things [and] laughing, you forget the bad things that happen, and you just leave that behind and just continue living.” While the friendship of culturally similar youth was comforting for the students in this study, the relationships developed in the EAL classroom presented new world views.

Oscar and Pearl originated from culturally homogeneous countries and had no opportunities to meet culturally different friends until they came to Canada. Like many other students, Oscar’s EAL friends were his only cohorts outside his cultural community. He wrote: “YG is my classmate and he is my best friend, too. YG is [moving] to other place, but I so miss [him]. I hope YG everything well in new place.” For Pearl, friends outside school were not only limited to people within her community, but limited to females. Therefore, the opportunity to speak to male peers was a novelty. Pearl wrote, “I did an interview with Adnan.... It was nice to talking to him because it gives me more information about my class mates.” The relationships students built within the EAL community played an important role in fulfilling the need for emotional support as well as being a social learning experience.

As the previous stories demonstrated, friends provided a great source of comfort during the difficult transition to settlement in Canada. The students voiced a need to find friends who would be trusted companions, cultural brokers, and coparticipants in fun and distracting activities. While these close relationships were typically with youth from the same culture, the students also appreciated the friendships developed with EAL students from diverse backgrounds. Friendships made in a Canadian context were very important. Relationships within the EAL program, the school, and the larger community were an important factor in developing social capital that enhanced emotional well-being and positive citizenship (Putnam, 2000). In addition to familial and social supports that buffered risk and supported resilience, the student participants demonstrated positive personal strategies, activities, and values that helped them cope with adversity.

Personal Strategies, Activities, and Values

The 11 youth participants identified valued sources of well-being such as a connection to nature, music, and involvement in sports that brought happiness and relief from overwhelming worries. The guiding principles of social justice and religion acted as protective factors that provided rules for behaviour and the comfort of a higher power in times of change and uncertainty. Despite experiences of premigration violence and great hardships in Canada, the students demonstrated a capacity to learn from adversity, be hopeful, and have a sense of humour. A personal attribute that repeatedly came to light was the youths' capacity to have empathy for others.

Connections to nature, the arts, and sports provided a sense of comfort for students who had experienced difficult or traumatic events. Speaking of his "difficult life" as a child in a refugee camp, YG described the small glimmers of happiness he found in nature: "I remember a long time my friend and me we will go to climb the mountain and we're smell the tree flower and my heart so best." Pearl also identified nature as a source of solace in her children's story: "It was a countryside place with peace and happiness. There was no way to be sad just happiness was in their lives." Sandman reflected on the ever-changing but peaceful beauty of the Saskatchewan prairie: "Oh, it's so beautiful here. I haven't been [to this rural area] for almost three weeks ... it's so beautiful." In addition to the pleasures brought by nature, Sandman spoke of the invigorating role of music:

Oh God! Music! Music is something that talks for me. When I can't talk, when I can't shout, music does it for me. I guess listening to music really helps me ... I went to a concert, and it was so good that I was feeling really energetic that day and the day after. And I still feel really energetic when I think about that.

The activity most often identified as a source of enjoyment was involvement in sports. For different reasons, several of the male participants in the

study attributed a high value to sports. Marty found great enjoyment during a summer hiking trip organized by a settlement agency; Oscar referred to YG exercising after school. For Adnan, soccer was closely linked to his sense of identity: "I was the best soccer player in that school.... Soccer is my life and I have been able to be a part of the Senior Boys [Community] Soccer team this year." Sandman identified the grueling and often dangerous nature of bicycle polo as a way to fulfill his need for risk and help him overcome the thoughts that caused sleeplessness: "It can be dangerous.... so fun.... So hard and so tiring ... that I can have a really good sleep at night.... I'm sure about that." Although the choice of activities for well-being differed for individuals, their strong, positive beliefs were very similar.

Through the students' stories and interviews, I observed a passionate sense of social justice and firm dedication to a higher power. Pearl expressed her beliefs by taking the voice of the narrator in a children's story: "They were very friendly and sharing birds. When a group of birds found food they shared it with whole group of birds either it's enough for all of them or no." During a personal interview, Adnan expounded on justice and religious teachings in the context of a young Somali boy being shot as he waited for the bus: "God says, no killing people. If you kill people you go Hell. God forgive if you do anything ... but kill person, no.... It's illegal." God was also a frequent topic in YG's writing. First he wrote about God as being the "first important" person in his life, and later he wrote about God's magic to make refugee sponsorships. For Loso, religious practice protected and healed him when he thought about public executions in Saudi Arabia. On these occasions, Loso told his mother about the thoughts, and she advised him to wash and pray. After performing this ritual, Loso was able to sleep. These strong beliefs in social justice and a higher power were seen as a protective factor for students because generally "[t]hose that have strong ideologies seem to cope better" (McAdam-Crisp, 2006, p. 469).

Personal Attributes to Support Resilience

Finally, the student participants demonstrated personal attributes that helped them cope with difficult situations. Resilient youth exhibited numerous personal characteristics and traits that served as a buffer to the accumulation of risk (Ungar, 2001, 2006). In this study, youth demonstrated personal attributes in three areas: the ability to learn from adversity (McEwen, 2007), being hopeful and optimistic for the future (Seligman, 1995), and having a sense of humour (Cameron, Fox, Anderson, & Cameron, 2010). Although the students seldom identified their positive attributes, these qualities became clear through their stories. I made the choice to attach labels to personal characteristics I observed or perceived in their storytelling. The following excerpts from students' writings and interviews demonstrated these qualities.

First are examples of youth's ability to learn from adversity with an underlying hope that life would be better. Tim Tom recognized several positive changes in his life:

Living in [this city] was hard at first but after living here for a while my English got better and I was kind of getting used to the cold. Now I know lots of people and its essayer [sic] to learn English and to get around ... I have changed my attitude towards school this semester. When I got kicked out I realized that I need school to get a good job or a good education. I started doing my homework and going to all of my classes.

Adnan openly expressed his desire to make a positive change in the future:

Don't ever give up. This is life. You're going to see a lot of things.... We want to live in peace ... I know I lived in a bad life and good life but now I'm ready to make a better life.

While Adnan and Tim Tom typically wrote stories of a serious nature, Hamid and Oscar used humour. Hamid was well known for his jokes and positive outlook on life. When he wrote about his stressful and dangerous trip to Afghanistan, he was able to find humour in a scary trip to the outdoor toilet, cultural confusions about praying, and being questioned by an armed soldier. Oscar's narrative took him back in time to a simple childhood when his classmates tricked a teacher by hiding a smelly wild cat in a desk. By writing and illustrating a detailed story about this hilarious event, Oscar moved away from the heavy burdens of his everyday life and used humour as a "strategy for navigating the potentially exhilarating and challenging terrain of adolescence" (Cameron et al., 2010, p. 719). Like his classmates, concern for his parents' struggles kept Oscar going during this very difficult time.

Having empathy is the last quality to be addressed. The student participants showed empathy for people in different contexts such as family, other youth, and citizens of the world, but the primary concern was shown for parents in their struggles to provide and nurture children under difficult circumstances. Pearl empathized with mothers who have the great responsibility to raise their daughters well, in spite of many challenges presented in a culturally different country. November recognized his mother's challenges to cope with six children when he wrote, "My mother fed and dressed us as well as she could." YG appreciated his parents' struggles to provide the necessities of life in the refugee camp and later in Canada. He wrote, "My mom usually was pretty busy too.... Always I saw my mom real tired and sometimes she got sick too." Adnan began his story of empathy by explaining to me how he helped support his mother, so she would not have to beg from door to door. As his narrative moved to the present, the young man became filled with such emotion that he was unable to speak. Gathering his emotions, he

promised, “When I give my mom everything she needs, after that I’m going to start my life because mom, she’s important.” This quality to have empathy combined with strong personal values, beliefs, coping strategies, and recognition of supports showed the strength of youth who are new to Canada. These student-generated stories demonstrated the resilience of youth who had been forced to migrate and continued to struggle as they adjusted to life in Canada.

Teachers’ Stories

As this study shows, storytelling as a classroom strategy can play a role in developing stronger schools and communities by creating an atmosphere of caring and understanding. The three teacher participants explained their methods of developing trusting relationships with students. They learned from their students’ stories and adjusted their educational programs to meet students’ needs. Ms. G. explained how she used personal storytelling in her class:

The first year I [used storytelling] at the end of the year, and because I found out such valuable information about the kids, I regretted very much that I hadn’t done it sooner in the semester. So since then, I’ve done it right at the beginning.

Through storytelling and journaling, Mr. Jack learned about the students’ interest in sports and used this topic to start a conversation, develop a sense of trust, and then delve into more personal matters:

We get talking about why they like those sports, and then you find out they have a fierce loyalty to the countries they’re from ... And they’ll share their thoughts.

Miss O. S. saw the stories of EAL learners as a vehicle to bring history and current events into the classroom:

I think the regular classroom teachers [are] missing out on so much ... on knowing these amazing young people. And the rest of the class is missing that too ... I think of the example of the history class ... studying the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and not realizing that we have students who are from countries that are in a revolution right this minute, and the perspective they can have.... [W]e, the teachers, miss all kinds of opportunities to make things real and relevant ... just by asking students to share their own experiences.

Miss O. S. recognized that teachers might feel overwhelmed by students’ stories, and she offered words of assurance:

[Teachers] worry that if they open something up, they’ll be responsible for fixing it, so it’s a matter of educating teachers about the

purpose of storytelling.... It's not that we have to figure out a way to solve all the issues. It's listening to the student tell what the problem is.

Without being trained counsellors, teachers can learn techniques to support their students through storytelling.

A critical requirement is for teachers to create a classroom atmosphere of empathetic listening that is nonjudgemental and leads to a climate of trust. When staff engender a sense of trust, students are encouraged to stay involved in school (Roessingh, 2004). Trust is related to learning because, as learners, we are taking a risk; we make ourselves vulnerable by allowing someone to teach us. "Trust makes it safe to be vulnerable. And having a sense of safety cannot be underestimated" (Levine & Kline, 2006, p. 364). It is clear, from the students' stories in this study, that a safe school climate with trusted and nurturing adult allies is critical for the promotion and support of resilient refugee and immigrant youth. When students feel that school is a safe place where all adults advocate for youth and foster success, the experiences can be transformational, with lifelong positive outcomes. A greater sense of school belonging is associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy in youth, regardless of the level of past exposure to adversities (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Although schools have traditionally focused on the academic needs of youth as an independent variable, it has been shown that emotional well-being is essential for academic and social success (Brendtro et al., 2009; Watson, 2003). The challenge is for school administrators and teachers to consciously create conditions that foster emotional well-being in a student population with such diverse experiences and needs.

Concluding Thoughts

Using storytelling as a classroom strategy encourages literacy development and helps adult allies learn what newcomer youth need to overcome adversity. Taking a youth perspective can help school staff put the appropriate student-identified supports in place, and listening to youth brings to light the personal strategies, values, and attributes these frequently marginalized young people possess. Offering EAL students opportunities in which to be heard can be a simple yet powerful act of strengthening the factors that support resilience, yet there are challenges to this approach.

An ideal scenario for listening to youth would be unfettered by time. However, this was not the reality of this action research study. Often students' stories were curtailed by the ringing of bells to change class. Despite the students' emotional involvement or the intensity of the story, when the period ended, students moved to their next classes. This limitation was frustrating because the atmosphere of the moment could not be recreated at a later time. Keeping this limitation in mind could assist future action researchers to guide

students to a comfortable conclusion within the time constraints. Prospective inquiries offer other opportunities.

Building on this study, future research exploring the effects of teacher training on the well-being of youth is critical. Because school is a crucial factor in the cultural, emotional, and academic development of newcomer youth, it is essential to support teachers to support youth. Working with youth who experienced forced migration and interrupted education is demanding work. Many questions remain regarding what educators need to feel prepared in such challenging teaching situations. Could additional training regarding the effects of trauma help educators nurture youth as they adjust to life in Canada? Most intriguing is to further investigate how school administrators and government officials respond to the wisdom and insights of students who continue to thrive after facing very difficult migration experiences. These queries are pressing as Canada accepts refugees, yet teacher training to enhance youth resilience and school supports for student well-being remain static or are reduced.

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The Author

Koreen Geres teaches newcomer students in Saskatoon, SK. She has an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. focusing on trauma. Her interests include creating opportunities for Canadian-born and newcomer students to interact and reduce stereotypes, raising community awareness regarding the strengths and needs of students new to Canada, and developing safe, supportive housing.

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