

Cultural Interpretation for Refugee Children: The Multicultural Liaison Program, Ottawa, Canada

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Abstract

Cultural differences may pose as many challenges as linguistic difficulties for refugee children and their families in the school setting. This article explores the contributions of the Multicultural Liaison Program (MLD) created by the Ottawa Board of Education and the Ottawa-Carleton Immigration Services Organization (OCISO). Through cultural mediation, the MLO Program builds partnerships that support the efforts of schools and the refugee communities they serve. Anchored in a systemic approach that considers the child, parents, the ethnocultural community, teachers, and school officials, the MLOs—or cultural interpreters—facilitate the learning and teaching processes.

Précis

Les différences culturelles sont susceptibles de poser autant de problèmes que les difficultés linguistiques pour les enfants réfugiés et leur famille dans l'environnement scolaire. Le présent article examine les contributions du Programme de Liaison Multiculturelle (Multicultural Liaison Program: MLD) créé par le conseil scolaire d'Ottawa et l'Organisation des Services à l'Immigration de la région Ottawa-Carleton. Via la médiation culturelle, le programme MLO établit des partenariats qui épaulent les efforts des institutions scolaires et des communautés de réfugiés qu'elles desservent. S'appuyant sur une approche systémique qui prend en compte l'enfant, les parents, la communauté ethno-culturelle, les ensei-

gnants et les administrateurs scolaires, l'interprète culturel-MLO s'efforce de faciliter les processus d'apprentissage et d'enseignement.

Introduction

Host nations respond to increasing refugee populations in various ways. Some provide macro-level, comprehensive, government-funded service programs while others may do little to accommodate the refugees' complex needs and instead rely on micro-level programs provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Canada and Nordic countries use a hybrid approach, making resources such as housing, health insurance, and cultural interpretation available to children and their families through both governmental and NGO operations. However, in other countries, refugee children may not even get second language instruction, much less cultural interpretation to ease their adjustment to a host society.

Unfortunately, linguistic and cultural misunderstandings have academic or educational consequences for children: "research has shown that children are the most vulnerable group, besides the elderly, to the stresses of migration" (Tam and Spiegelblatt 1993). Miscommunication may occur among refugee children, teachers, school administrators, parents, and the community at large, leading to a loss of trust, a sense of alienation, and intensification of the sense of helplessness experienced by refugee children and their parents. Despite the well-understood reality that women and children need more assistance, they frequently receive inadequate help particularly in matters related to cultural interpretation and mediation (Camus-Jacques 1990; Martin 1995; Brown et al. 1996).

Refugee service providers buffer "cultural shock" to facilitate the experience of a new community in a novel way.

It is clear that schools are a key point where refugee issues, children, women, men and ethnocultural communities meet. Although the literature (Suarez-Orozco 1989; Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba 1991; Boothby 1994; Farias 1994; Camino et al. 1994; Igoa 1995; Cummings 1996; Hyman et al. 1996; Yau 1996; Zhou and Bankston III 1998) recognizes that resolving cultural issues is critical to success for refugees in their new homes, the question remains: how can one design and implement an effective cultural mediation program that takes advantage of the special place and needs of school? This article examines a cultural mediation model, the Multicultural Liaison Program (MLO), which was born out of the need to address the cultural gap and takes advantage of the unique opportunities afforded in the school setting. The MLO Program, currently in operation in Ottawa, Canada, was developed to meet the needs of refugee children "to ease the transition for newcomer parents and children as well as teachers" (Tam and Spiegelblatt 1993, 3-4; see also Stambouli 1990).

A qualitative research approach consisting of semi-structured interviews of service providers, school principals, teachers, and multicultural liaison officers was used. School and classroom visits and attendance at parent and community meetings as a participant-observer supplemented the interviews. The research presented is part of a larger comparative study on refugee service delivery in various countries and several cities in the United States.

This article discusses and seeks to understand what has made the MLO Program so successful. More specifically, it suggests some of the key ways in which the program has used the school context as a base from which to build bridges that support both the efforts of the schools and the refugee communi-

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ties they serve. After such an examination, it becomes clear that cultural interpretation (sometimes called cultural mediation) is central to the effective adjustment of refugee children to the school context and school expectations of the host country. It further suggests that cultural interpretation services need to be based on a systemic approach that considers the child, the parents, community, teachers, and school officials. Such services can contribute to the well-being of all involved while facilitating learning and teaching processes.

The essay is organized in two parts. First, it describes the inception of the MLO Program and its various components. Second, it examines the impact of cultural interpretation on immigrant and refugee children, their parents, the community and on the school community.

The Multicultural Liaison Program: Addressing Cultural Interpretation

The Multicultural Liaison Program started as a project to meet the needs of refugee students identified by the Ottawa-Carleton Board of Education. In January 1991, the Board approached an NGO, the Ottawa-Carleton Immigration Services Organization (OCISO), to request help in dealing with issues that were emerging in schools with high numbers of immigrant and refugee children.¹ Financing was shared equally. The project sought to engage joint efforts and capabilities of government and NGOs. The Board and OCISO worked together to create a pilot project that was launched in September 1991. Continued success led to the expansion of the project into an on-going program that grew from the initial three schools to a much larger effort currently covering two jurisdictions—the Ottawa-Carleton English Public Board and the French Public Board. While the MLO Program is based at 38 schools, it provides crisis intervention services to the entire Ottawa-Carleton school system, sometimes even to schools outside those jurisdictions.

The MLO Program and Its Goals

Initially, the project targeted three elementary schools and involved three full-time staff known as Multicultural Liaison Officers (MLOs). The MLO Program had one objective in mind: to improve "communication between the schools and home."² Simple but effective efforts were implemented to bridge the gap between the refugee parents and school officials, including "making phone calls to the parents, translating notes for parents and teachers where there was a need for better communication between the two."³ The decision to employ a low-profile approach served two purposes: a) to establish MLO credibility with teachers, parents, students, and the community; and b) to build trust among all involved. Both goals were achieved.

The initial group of MLOs understood several cultures and languages and could communicate effectively to share basic knowledge. The key was that, every MLO had linguistic and cultural knowledge of some countries. Together, they had a great deal more, as exemplified by the MLOs' competence in 30 languages. By communicating with each other frequently, the MLOs could either provide the particular cultural competence required in a given situation or locate it through the effective network they had developed.

Although the project designers knew that MLOs could not remain "glorified messengers," this initial step was essential. Once trust and respect were established, the MLOs proceeded to address other objectives. Among these were efforts to: a) "assist immigrant students to adapt to their new environment and to benefit fully from the educational system; b) facilitate the involvement of parents in their children's education; and c) provide cross-cultural sensitization training to the school staff" (Tam and Spigelblatt 1993). While these goals were articulated clearly, many of the school administrators and teachers involved truly did not know what to expect. Those interviewed reported uniformly that, although they initially had difficulty understanding

what MLOs really were and what they would do, they now not only understand them very well but cannot understand how their schools functioned before MLOs came on board.

The MLOs work continually to find ways of fostering understanding of the school system and encouraging cross-cultural sensitization for educators and students. It is a proactive rather than a reactive program. While much of MLOs' work comes in response to calls for help from school staff, parents, and other MLOs, they also initiate projects and programs that seek to build understanding and avert problems before they manifest themselves. This is partly accomplished by helping Canadian students learn about diverse cultures and, in turn, help new arrivals learn about the host country's school system. Even so, the MLOs are often called to help resolve misunderstandings arising among students and parents due to differences in the school systems, i.e., that of the Canadian system and of the country of origin. In such situations, two major issues frequently emerge. First, how does the Canadian school system operate compared to that of the student's country of origin? Second, how do MLOs help students, parents, and teachers understand the cultural perceptions of teachers, parents, and women among the various ethnocultural groups represented?

For example, the Somalis, like people from a number of cultures, view teachers as authority figures and hold them in high regard. Somali mothers who are Muslim generally do not intervene in the education of their children, a role generally taken by males.⁴ However, the situation may become more awkward when Somali single or widowed mothers are faced with the need to deal with the schools on behalf of their children. This is an issue because "refugee families may break down within two years of arrival in the host country" or women were widowed as a result of civil strife in their homeland, as commonly occurred to Somali women.⁵ It is also an issue because Canadian culture seeks to enhance women's capability to play an equal and active role in society. Un-

knowingly, teachers may question whether these mothers care about their children's education, a common misperception of refugee and immigrant parents, given their "reticence" to become involved (Nieto 1996; Hernandez 1997). On the other hand, Somali mothers may experience frustration at not being heard by school officials. In the end, the ones who really suffer are the children, who may find themselves with no one to mediate for their needs.

In such circumstances, MLOs have played a significant role. Thus, when it became known that Somali mothers were frustrated by a persistent problem with teachers of English as a second language (ESL), an MLO convened a meeting for Somali parents. She explained the process of communicating concerns to school officials. Concrete action was taken as the group worked together, with the facilitation of the MLO, to draft a letter to school officials. The most important outcome was not so much the letter but the empowerment experienced by the parents. The MLO had initiated a process of trust-building and communications enhancement through a discussion of common concerns identified by the parents as well as helping to lay foundations for constructive relationships between parents and educators in the Canadian context. Moreover, these mothers learned that it is acceptable for women to participate on an equal footing in school issues, and acquired some of the skills needed to do so effectively.

Improving Communication: An Essential Step

This activity fits nicely into a key set of MLO priorities. That first task, to improve "communication between the school and the families of immigrant students" (Tam and Spigelblatt 1993, 4), requires time and effort. It demands a continuing investment of effort with an understanding that it may require some time before the fruits of that investment are evident. In order to do this, the director explained that MLOs "find excuses to get to know each other as persons."⁶ Establishing bridges of mutual

trust and respect is always at the centre of the MLO work.

Reaching Out to Parents

The second priority was developing effective ways to reach out to parents, especially women, who may be alienated or intimidated by the school system. When parents come to school to pick up a child, MLOs are quick to tap the opportunity to chat. "I invite them for a cup of tea to my office. There was a Somali grandmother who just stood outside the school in the cold. Since we could not communicate [linguistically], I brought her a chair for her to sit inside, an offer she accepted."⁷ Other ways of integrating parents into the school community were to "translate notices of meetings and important workshops," and "to contact families by phone, using the team of MLOs as interpreters."⁸

The toy library—another program originated by an MLO to help children as well as to attract parents to the school—operates with toys donated by children themselves. Those who want to borrow a toy can do so overnight. However, the project needed staffing. In this case, the contributions of the refugee community is exemplified by a "72-year-old librarian who was afraid to come out of her house but now handles a toy library." This kind of reciprocity between the schools and the community enhances acceptance of diversity in societies maximizing the cultural and intellectual resources available among new arrivals: "exiled individuals and communities have contributed greatly to the cultural diversity and the intellectual vitality of their adopted countries" (UNHCR 1995, 17).

Helping parents to meet their responsibilities with schools and other agencies through the MLOs, without the need to rely on their children, addressed another common problem in refugee families. When children become translators, they get into a dominant position relative to their parents, making parenting more difficult. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas are also avoided when MLOs, instead of students, translate for school officials and parents, thus averting possible violation of stu-

dents' privacy (Haffner 1992; Vargas 1998). It also frees students' time and energy for participation in other school programs.

Connecting School Staff and Parents

Third, MLOs worked towards building closer contact between staff and parents of immigrant and refugee students. Explaining school regulations, in particular to single mothers with little or no literacy even in their native language (let alone English or French), was one way. "Parents are afraid even to talk to the secretary of the school. When their children are sick they are afraid to call the school to notify them of it," but with the efforts of MLOs, teachers "became more understanding" and learned "not to make assumptions, and instead to find out"⁹ what was really taking place. In cases where the way of doing business did not recognize the parents' needs, school procedures were changed. For instance, "the process for parent teacher interviews [were modified] to allow time for interpretation and some flexibility in scheduling,"¹⁰ as meetings with students and their families are now arranged by the MLOs.

Facilitating Access to Community Resources

A fourth objective of the project was "to connect the students and their families to other appropriate resources in the community" (Tam and Spigelblatt 1993, 4). MLOs call on other agencies to help parents with resettlement or housing arrangements and assist them in accessing crisis intervention services for run-away youths. "Information sessions on topics of interest" are provided by the MLOs themselves or by representatives from pertinent "agencies such as the YMCA, heritage language schools, United Way, or health centres."¹¹

Maximizing School Resources

Another objective of the program is to use school resources more effectively. If MLOs can do the work needed to bridge the goals of teachers and parents for the children by mediating between the

school and the home, "teachers can focus on teaching according to the needs of students."¹² For example, report cards have been translated and simplified to accommodate the needs of parents. With the assistance of MLOs, parents can now communicate to teachers and school officials their "educational aspirations and expectations" for their children. This support has turned one of the most forbidding parental obligations, parent-teacher conferences, into positive experiences for many refugee families.

Educating about Specialized Services

Finally, "the MLOs link parents and students to appropriate services that may be required to facilitate learning" (Tam and Spiegelblatt 1993, 4). Access to services becomes easier when the MLOs "precede referrals with phone calls," given that, for example, psychological interventions with refugees are more complex (Chester and Holtan 1992). This kind of communication among service providers, the schools, and the clients is possible due to the "close collaboration that MLOs maintain with other service providers."¹³ In some cases, services may be necessary to help refugee children with health problems including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),¹⁴ which may go undetected by teachers but in fact seriously affects learning (Chester and Holtan 1992; Lavadenz 1994, Hyman et al. 1996). MLOs can easily intervene when PTSD issues are at stake or vaccinations are required.

Results to Date of MLO Efforts

The Multicultural Liaison Program has been rated very positively by teachers, principals, parents, and the community. Specific results include increased "participation in parent/teacher interviews, which went from almost non-existent to at least 60 percent" (Tam and Spiegelblatt 1993, 4). Parents who stayed away from schools either because of distrust of the schools or to language difficulties "have started to call the school and request meetings with teachers. This did not happen before, except

in 'critical' circumstances."¹⁵ As a Vietnamese MLO elaborated, "Parents still call me for help five or six years later, even after they have moved to other areas."¹⁶ The interactions have changed as stakeholders, parents, students, and educators "collaborate in the decisions about the students' education." MLOs also maximize parents' visits to the schools "to do 'on the spot' needs assessments and referrals."¹⁷

The Multicultural Liaison Program's interventions for the immigrant children, their parents, the community, and school officials have resolved a great deal of the ambivalence and confusion because trust has erased past miscommunications. Essential cultural modulation allows teachers to get on with the business of teaching, helps children understand cultural differences so that they can focus on learning, and parents and the community communicate their care and concern to educators, critical to healthy integration of child refugees.

Breaking Down "Non-Academic Barriers" through Partnerships

Educators can learn a number of lessons from a study of this approach to serving the needs of refugee children. The lessons, affective and cognitive, include: (1) awareness of who the refugee service providers are; (2) enhanced understanding of the needs refugee children have in the educational setting; (3) a clearer recognition of the "non-academic barriers"¹⁸ that must be addressed if the children are to progress; (4) heightened sensitivity to the importance of integrating parents and their community into the school community; and (5) greater sensitivity to the importance of decreasing racial and ethnic tensions that may be introduced to school by the children.

Who Becomes a Refugee Service Provider? What Does It Take?

Many refugee service providers are themselves former refugees or members of refugee families. They frequently operate in a pressure-filled, resource-poor environment, often with a high turnover and burnout rate, all characteristics

common of educators. An indication of awareness of specific problems in their work is helpful to understand how MLOs foster respect and build trust (Vargas 1998). A female principal attributes the success of the MLOs to the various factors:

Issues of heart are difficult to translate, if you have only knowledge of the language, but MLOs are able to convey deep thoughts; it's more than just translation. It is also intimidating to reach out to the community from the school office. Therefore, we have to do outreach through the MLOs.

However, the rate of success of the MLO is determined by the personality and initiative of the MLO. Some MLOs have a "sit-and-wait" approach while others have a very proactive one, and have a great deal of initiative to begin new projects. Our current MLO knows exactly what you need. She also knows her colleagues very well and knows how to match the right individual to the situation, whether it is a gender issue, [or] a personality issue. In other words, it is not just a linguistic issue.

The school also bears responsibility for the success of the MLOs. They need to have their own telephone lines and answering machines since families will latch on for a long time. MLOs need to feel part of the school staff, and this will depend on how well they are introduced to the staff. We connect them to the internal e-mail system.¹⁹

The MLOs build on their personal refugee experience to deepen understanding of, and empathy for, new arrivals. Their commitment to help refugees is both to ease cultural shock and to contribute to their host country, Canada. Although this implies more than a nine-to-five job, the MLOs draw on their painful and traumatic refugee past to extend themselves to others. In one of the interviews with female refugee service providers with whom the researcher had been working for a period of over four years, the women found themselves reliving the experience of flight as the long-repressed memories gushed out unexpectedly. One shared for the first time the story of her family's flight out of Vietnam and the boat jour-

ney they hoped would take them to a safe but unknown destination. Later, after arriving in Canada, she recalled the recurrent nightmare of being sea sick long after the ordeal and memories of the fear of sea pirates.

Experienced at building a network of cultural brokers, MLOs maximize talent and scarce resources:

Even though not originally conceived as a role for the MLOs, they are now doing more and more counselling. The hope is that there will be an MLO at every school. The MLOs work closely with the guidance faculty and the vice-principal. In fact, the counselling office often refers cases to the MLOs, who then proceed to deal with situations. Since students discuss parental demands—or expressions of concern for the general welfare of their parents who may be out of work—with the counsellors, the MLO is called upon to follow up, because the MLO network can facilitate intervening with parents, or even helping parents find jobs.²⁰

Thus, MLOs find ways to match the needs of the refugee child and family with resources: “the contact of the MLO is beyond the school, because of what kids say in counselling.”²¹ As MLOs themselves endured anomie, a dramatic change in status or loss of prestige, or a loss of professional opportunities upon their arrival, they now reach out to others.

The Needs of Refugee Children

The Multicultural Liaison Program has been regarded as highly successful by teachers, principals, school board members, and the communities it serves in its support of immigrant children. One of the lessons from the MLO Program concerns the fact that, because of developmental issues, refugee children and adolescents bring to school a different cognitive, affective, and psychological profile from other students. Furthermore, their school needs are dynamic depending on who the most recent refugee groups are. In this instance, the MLO Program continues to change in order to respond to the needs of new arrivals.

Another lesson concerns assessment. Assessment and proper place-

ment conducted in the native language, as is done in Ottawa, has served the children well and has also made the teachers’ job easier. This type of assessment is particularly important for children with learning or neurodevelopmental disabilities or children who have not had the opportunity to develop literacy and numeracy skills. However, assessment of children with special needs still poses additional challenges. Informal assessment is done with the help of the MLOs in the native language when IQ testing and possible referral to special education issues emerge.

Children with Special Needs

Cultural interventions become more critical when refugee children suffer from neurodevelopmental disorders, and may even lack a native language in which to communicate. In Ottawa, an MLO intervened in a case in which “the school officials were frustrated with a girl who was hearing impaired and was not advancing in her school work.” She decided to visit the family at home. In meeting with them, family members assured her that in fact they were helping the daughter with school assignments. The experienced MLO then proceeded to ask the parents:

When you show her an apple, what do you say? The parents quickly responded with the proper word. However, they were using both Persian and a Kurdish dialect in helping the child. At this point, I told them that they needed to practice the lesson in English because this was creating confusion for the child at school.²²

The lesson learned from this incident is that, although the parents were being supportive of school efforts, there was a misunderstanding.

In another case, a hearing impaired child was provided with an augmentative hearing device (AHD) at school. At home, the child became frustrated and anxious. Since the family spoke no English, the MLO got involved. Other professionals also got involved, thinking that the problems were medically related. However, after extensive testing, the professionals did not find anything

wrong beyond the original diagnosis. The problem was one of communication in four areas. First, the parents were operating from the cultural premise that the teacher was the expert. Second, the teacher did not call the family because they did not speak English. Third, the parents were worried that if the child was becoming mentally ill, it was going to be advertised to the school and the ethnic community. Fourth, for some ethnic groups, the family doctor is the expert.²³ Thus, rather than request a referral to a specialist, they continue to take the child back to the family physician. In fact, they may not even understand the concept of “specialist” doctors. Even though the MLO’s intervention identified the source of the problem—that the child was not allowed to take the AHD home, causing her great frustration—the school still did not provide for its use beyond school grounds. These cases indicate the need for a family-centred and culturally-sensitive approach advocated and modelled by the MLOs.

Another aspect of refugee children’s psycho-social development is taken into consideration when cultural interpreters are available in Canada to avert possible traumatic experiences. For example, in some cases refugee children’s games and style of playing has been interpreted by school officials as “too aggressive” or misinterpreted as “fighting.” However, when a principal in a Canadian school called two boys who were assumed to be fighting, the children responded as they hugged each other, “We were not fighting! We are friends!”²⁴ In similar situations, the MLOs continue to sensitize school personnel. Unfortunately, ethnic conflicts are sometimes transplanted to host nations, creating dilemmas for teachers and school administrators.

Through the interventions of the MLOs, consideration has been given to the children’s needs regarding religious practices. In the case of Muslim children who fast for Ramadan, school rules that required them to be in the cafeteria became very difficult. To accommodate their religious observance, some school administrators opened a game

room during lunch period. Thus, "Muslim children could engage in educational games that entertained them instead of dealing with the temptation of eating when fasting."²⁵ Other principals interviewed accommodated the needs of Muslim students who pray.

The school found a room for them. The school requests a parent's note granting permission for their children to be excused from class for a half hour every Friday. Since the children have to do a thorough cleaning of their bodies before prayer, the MLO has helped to accommodate their needs.²⁶

Adolescent refugees face another set of problems in an already difficult developmental stage which is intensified by the refugee experience. Cultural interpreters, who interact with schools, parents, social agencies, and even police on teenagers behalf, deflect a great deal of conflict for teenagers. The MLO Program clearly indicates that developmental tensions are significantly worse for adolescents, since refugee children are under additional stressors imposed by flight and, in some cases, torture and abuse.

Dating issues, so critical for teenagers, often create cultural conflict at home, in the schools, and with the community. Teenage refugees find in MLOs "a friend," someone in whom they can have trust and who will listen to them. "Students find it reassuring to know that there is someone who understands the problems they face."²⁷ Students have benefited from counselling provided by bicultural counsellors or an MLO appointed by the board of education as a mental health worker. For parents, cultural interpreters organize conflict resolution workshops, classes about the host culture, and Parent Discussion Groups.

With regard to education, refugee students have been empowered. In cultural interpreters they find a listening ear and a person who understands their culture but is there to mediate for them when academic problems emerge. Not only are cultural workers positive role models for them, they also help "students realize MLOs are willing to help

them find solutions."²⁸ For example, curricular goals that conflict with gender roles and religious beliefs have been mediated by cultural interpreters. Muslim girls who cannot wear sports clothes because of religious restrictions have been allowed to substitute computer classes for physical education.²⁹

Culturally-affirming programs such as the MLO Program serve dual functions. First, cultural mediation fills a gap between the students' private world and school expectations that can clear the way for academic achievement. "It instills students with confidence in the school system."³⁰ Second, possible disengagement due to "cultural discontinuity" is averted, when refugee students' energies are channelled into setting up cultural youth groups, participating in heritage schools or participating in the foreign language program in which immigrant and refugee children teach their Canadian peers their native languages and cultures (discussed later) (Olneck 1994, 325). These activities foster and strengthen cultural identity while having a positive impact on students' academic performance. The academic environment is thus enhanced when students and teachers, through mediation by the MLOs, understand each other's meanings and symbols mediated by the MLOs.

Breaking Down Non-Academic Barriers in the Schools

School officials and educators often have the best intentions at heart, but may lack knowledge of the cultural ramifications of applying normal school procedures and rules to refugee children. Even when language translation is available, the cultural dimension may be overlooked, creating unnecessary tensions. As an elementary school principal from the Ottawa area stated, "Translation of words isn't enough. MLOs understand both the cultures and the school system." Further, as MLOs have indicated, "we don't take sides. We listen to both school officials and the parents, and try to help them understand each other's concerns."³¹ According to a school administrator, MLOs "are excellent not just with literal trans-

lation but with nuances of cultural differences,"³² especially when curricular issues are at stake. In fact,

some curricular expectations may pose a potential conflict with religious or cultural traditions. For example, Muslims are not allowed to dissect frogs, therefore we have accommodated by providing computer programs that have simulations of the same procedure. Or we make teachers aware of the demands of Ramadan on the children. Teachers can then be sensitive to the effects of fasting on the children who may be more tired or irritable.³³

Interventions by cultural brokers lessen the stress on teachers while supporting "culturally responsive instruction" (Olneck 1994, 325). Since academic expectations or pedagogical appropriateness may need cultural mediation, school support of MLOs as equal partners in school endeavours is critical. Schools should give MLOs access to e-mail.

E-mail makes it easy to consult with MLOs. For example, a teacher contacted an MLO for the following: "I will be teaching an unit next week, but a student says there is a feast and he can't participate." Or male Muslim students may object to working in co-ed groups in a science class, or ninth graders have objected to participating in mixed groups in physical education classes. The student makes the request, but we consult with the MLO. If the MLO endorses it, teachers respect it.³⁴

When teachers are able to understand that gender makes a difference when dealing with Somali boys, and that an overgeneralization that all "Vietnamese refugee children come with excellent academic skills" is just that, they can move on to meet the individual needs of new arrivals. Let us consider this example:

A teacher complained to me [to the MLO] about the unusual behaviour of some of the newly-arrived Vietnamese students who were doing poorly academically. In particular, a boy pushed to be first in line for everything. Although there were plenty of pencils and crayons on every desk, he would take them and hoard them

in his desk. He did not take them home. He also displayed other aggressive behaviours towards his classmates.³⁵

The cultural interpreter was herself a Vietnamese refugee who had also worked through the United Nations in refugee camps in Hong Kong. She explained to the Canadian teachers that

these children had to learn [in the camp] that in order to get food, they had to push their way around and be first in line, otherwise they went unfed for the rest of the day because of food shortages. Many had not had schooling because it was unavailable in the camps.³⁶

In this case, the cultural interpreter helped teachers deal with other non-academic issues that may affect the classroom experience. Consider the case of a mother whose daughter wanted to marry outside her ethnic group.

In one of the Parent Discussion Group meetings, the mother had shared that she had told her husband she would not tolerate his hitting her children anymore. On one occasion, the daughter asked us [school officials] to be excused from an exam because of stress; she even had a doctor's note. This story seemed fishy to us, so we checked her record of lates and absences, only to discover that she had forged her mother's signature in 28 notes. We called the mother to discuss this. It turned out that since she [the daughter] was not allowed to see the guy, she was doing it during school time. Had the mother not been to the discussion groups, where she could see us as her allies, this wouldn't have felt comfortable to approach. The situation had a happy resolution through the intervention of the MLO. The girl is now allowed to see the young man.³⁷

Issues of confidentiality are resolved when cultural interpreters are available at schools. Previously, schools have had to rely on children, creating ethical problems. On the one hand, negative effects commonly encountered when children are used as translators include: a compromise of confidentiality; lying about grades by the children; and the inability of the children to handle diffi-

cult emotional and linguistic situations.³⁸ On the other hand, school volunteers from the ethnocommunities may present problems, too. Issues of confidentiality may emerge when schools rely on these volunteers since they may know the family involved (Vargas 1998).³⁹ However, cultural interpreters who have earned the trust of the community have played a crucial role in averting these ethical dilemmas. The role of the MLO was central in a thorny situation: "We had to notify a mother about the accident her son had been in. Instead of calling her on the phone, we sent the MLO to tell her in person. Because contact had been pre-established, this was much easier to handle."⁴⁰ Because a working relationship had been developed with the mother, it was easier to break the bad news. Calling on a student to translate for school officials would have been ethically problematic, because of family privacy issues and because it would have placed another child in an emotionally stressful situation.

In other cases, cultural interpreters help teachers learn about the importance of cultural traditions that children bring to schools. In this manner, teachers deal with cultural differences that may impede learning. Regardless of the specific situation, the work of cultural brokers represents major strides in the adjustment of refugee children in the schools. Teachers spend less time on non-educational problems, which according to a respondent, "Allows us to spend more time on the job we were trained to do."⁴¹ Another educator commented, "we treat people better," resulting in improved relations with parents and the community.⁴²

Bridging the Parents and the Community with the School Community

The MLO program has been successful at building bridges between parents and other community members and the school community. Furthermore, the participation of parents and community members has a positive effect on the students and the school community (Nieto 1996; Tam and Spigelblatt 1993;

Gandara 1995). The task of including refugee groups in the broader community may be overwhelming due to cross-cultural barriers. The MLO Program uses a "reach-out" approach before engaging in actual community organizing. The positive effect of the reach-out approach of the Multicultural Program on the children, the parents, the community, the teachers, and other school officials has been multiple. Although a common occurrence, police presence in the schools can trigger fear among refugees. Through the Parent Discussion Groups, the perception of police presence in the schools has been turned around.

One issue that came up was the police presence in the school, because we have a police resource officer assigned to each school. Given that refugees have endured persecution by authorities in their homeland, when the children see a police car parked outside the school, they become alarmed. However, the officers are here to deal with safety issues, places to avoid and to alert them to certain parts of town. Other subjects covered by the officers is drug awareness educational programs. Since the officers sometimes are in uniform, the children responded with fear. These sessions have helped the parents and the children understand the officers' role. Consequently, the children have learned that it is all right to approach the officers.⁴³

The MLO Program has afforded parents with critical system skills and knowledge how the school system works in Canada. "When parents understand the grading system, they can take a more active role in the progress their children are making."⁴⁴ The Parent Discussion Groups, created by an MLO, have been instrumental in communicating with school officials these kinds of concerns. At these meetings,

We explain the Canadian school system, the general and advanced components or the academic versus applied courses. We also discuss marking (grading) procedures. Since there is a 40-hour community service requirement, we explore with the parents appropriate placements for

their children. For example, we discuss the needs in their communities, and linguistic considerations. The parents will share with us information on the [ethnocultural] organizations to which they belong, and request that their children do the community service requirement at one of them. This is helpful, because the organizations are based in their own communities solving transportation problems for the students.⁴⁵

As parents learn more about the educational process of the host country and find a space in the school community, "they feel comfortable about volunteering at school and about participating in advisory council meetings."

Towards a Multicultural Society: Decreasing Racial Tensions

The contribution of cultural interpreters in addressing racial tensions in the schools has been attested to be critical. In Canada, the Multicultural Law was instituted in 1988 (Elliot and Fleras 1992). Regardless of the approach, laws need to translate into specific programs. In this respect, the MLO Program has been instrumental in building bridges across various ethnic groups and across ethnic groups and Canadian students. Specifically, racial and "cultural teasing" has been addressed by MLOs while facilitating a healthy integration of refugees into society.⁴⁶

In many instances, not only have cultural interpreters deflected possible escalating conflict, but they have worked towards creating racial tolerance. The principal of a high school acquiesced with the perception of other principals:

There has been a definite difference in the school since the MLO joined the school. In fact, within three months of her arrival, we were racial-conflict free. We have not had a single incident since then [one-and-a-half years old]. She is very artful at working with the students and the teachers. My colleague, who took over a school that was most problematic, has been able to turn the school around completely with the help of the MLO.⁴⁷

MLOs step in to diffuse conflict, even when racial tensions are caused by stu-

dents dating outside of their own ethnic group, or when conflict is due to imported tribal feuds. Cooperative efforts, such as the foreign language program or the cultural celebration activities, have been established with Canadian students to ease racial strain provoked by attitudes towards refugee and immigrant students. Specifically, ethnic, racial, and "cultural teasing" have been channelled into increased cultural awareness and acceptance of diversity, although much remains to be done given a recent assault on a Muslim student.⁴⁸

Foreign Language Program: Planting the Seed of Diversity

Responding to the need to entertain children at lunch time during the frigid winter, an MLO developed the foreign language program at an elementary school. It consists of children teaching their native languages in 20-minute periods during lunch for a 10-week session. The languages are non-Western or nontraditional, such as Farsi, Arabic, Somali, Polish, Turkish, and others. Children volunteer to be "teachers." These children come into class with their portfolios of prepared lessons. Not only do they teach oral skills, but they also work on writing skills. Most impressive yet, their lessons include a strong cultural component. When asked to say what they liked about the program, children's responses were: "I get to learn a new language;" "we can speak with other people;" "we get to do fun things and have a good time;" "it's fun to learn different things from around the world;" "if new people come [to school] we can speak to them;" "we're learning how other people communicate;" "it's easier to learn a language from another student;" and "we don't get put down and we don't get laughed at when we make a mistake."⁴⁹

Observations of these student-teachers indicated that they, intuitively, are doing what current research on second language acquisition recommends: respecting the silent period, asking questions to assess learning, lowering the affective filter or having "fun" ("It's like playing!"), integrating listening, speak-

ing, reading, and writing skills, using mistakes as opportunities for learning ("If we make a mistake, he tells us to try again!"), and teaching language in context ("they tell stories") (Richard-Amato 1996; Omaggio 1993; Oller 1993; Krashen 1985; Krashen and Terrell 1993). One of the child-teachers indicated that, "If you make them feel it's OK to make mistakes, they try again." Visually-rich and contextualized teaching materials, are created by the child-teachers themselves. Some of the illustrations with writing, tell stories.⁵⁰ The success of the program was such that it has been introduced to 11 other schools. Among the many features of the MLO program, the foreign language classes stands out as one that truly builds bridges among Canadian, refugee and immigrant children.

Celebrating Cultures

Another significant activity of the MLO is organizing cultural celebrations. At a high school, an MLO organized a comparative religion session entitled, "Christianity, Islam, and Judaism: A Comparative Study," in which a rabbi, a pastor, and a representative of the Muslim religion discussed the pillars of each faith.⁵¹ At another high school, a similar activity was conducted with student representatives of each religion. "After each student talked about his or her religion, we asked them about commonalities among all."⁵²

Schools, the community, teachers and students have joined hands to celebrate cultural diversity. Celebration of multicultural week, and regular workshops for school personnel and for students have become part of the schools operation. The MLOs provide multicultural training for school personnel and organize the Multicultural Celebration Week Fairs for students and parents in which at least 16 cultures are introduced through 25-minute presentations by representatives of those cultures. Multicultural dinners renamed "International Dinner" in order to attract participation of Canadians have become a common practice at schools to bring schools and community members closer together.

Possible cultural collisions are certainly averted when refugees are allowed to retain their native language. The benefits of preserving ethnic groups at the local level are twofold. First, the ethnic group can evade harm from assimilation or "cultural discontinuity" (Olneck 1994, 325) in which the native culture is surrendered. Second, they enrich the communities where they resettle with their cultural, intellectual, and linguistic heritage, e.g., when refugee children teach their languages to Canadian children through the Foreign Language Program.

Conclusion

Cultural interpretation services based on a systemic approach that considers the child, the parents, community, teachers, and school officials contribute to the well-being of all involved. The lessons learned from this kind of study of a model of cultural mediation can contribute to the building of partnerships among the schools, the community, and other social service agencies who serve refugees. An essential ingredient of this program has been the consistent efforts of cultural interpreters towards building trust among students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and the community at large. This goal has been achieved through small efforts, from translating for Somali mothers with limited literacy to explaining school rules and regulations to children and parents, taking parents to doctor's appointments, mediating between teachers and students about possible misreading of academic objectives, developing foreign language programs taught by refugee children, etc. A principal stated that, it [the interventions of the MLO Program] leaves the door open for children to get on with their learning and teachers to focus on teaching." An MLO portrayed it as "a puzzle that comes together."⁵³

The Multicultural Liaison Program offers hope in addressing these needs which can only occur when communities are committed to, and supportive of, pluralistic societies. Although this has been a solid program, it still faces pressures due to funding cuts to NGOs and

schools. Although expansion has been a positive force, it also demands more effort to maintain the network and cohesion that promotes success. The complexity of changes in funding for both NGOs (Herman 1994) and schools may undermine the work of both, if ministers and local officials are not alert and sensitive. These threats need to be addressed in greater detail, since it is clear that the government/NGO partnerships are becoming more complex every day (Weisbrod 1997). Notwithstanding these concerns, the MLO program provides an important model for action. ■

Notes

1. Interviews with MLO Director, Ottawa, Canada, November 1993, February and April 1994; personal communications, January 1996; conversations, August and December 1996, April 1997, April 1998.
2. Interview with Multicultural Liaison Project Director on February 7, 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
3. Ibid.
4. Interview with MLO Director and two MLOs from Somalia, Ottawa, Canada, November 1993, February 1994, and April 1994.
5. OCISO Interviews with Community Development Workers, Social Workers, MLO Program Director, February 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
6. Interviews with the MLO Program Director, Ottawa, Canada.
7. Personal communication with MLO, April 1998.
8. Interview, MLO Director, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
9. Interview with MLO fluent in both Vietnamese and Chinese, February, 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
10. Interview, MLO Director, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview with the principal of Elementary School No. 1, February 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
13. Interview with MLO Director, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
14. Physical, emotional, and cognitive manifestations of PTSD: loss of interest in age-appropriate activities, listlessness, concentration difficulties, daydreaming during class, aggressive or regressive behaviour (e.g., bedwetting), restlessness, detachment from others, intrusive images and flashbacks, bitterness, fear of particular noises [helicopters flying over], depression, and irritability.
15. Interview with MLO Director, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
16. Personal communication with MLO, October 1998.
17. Interviews with MLO Director and several MLOs, April 1994.
18. This is how the principal of High School No. 1 conceptualized the work of the MLOs, interview, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
19. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
20. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
21. Ibid.
22. Presentation by three MLOs, Vermont Interdisciplinary Leadership Education for Health Professionals Program (VT-ILEHP), University of Vermont, October 1998.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with the principal and vice-principal of Elementary School No. 2 in the Ottawa-Carleton area, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
25. Interview of MLO, Ottawa, Canada, April 1994.
26. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
27. Interview with MLO who speaks seven languages, April 1994.
28. Interview with Principal, High School No. 4, December 1998.
29. Interviews with the principal of High School No. 2, and Somali MLO assigned to it, Ottawa, Canada, April 1994.
30. Interview with the principal, High School No. 4, December 1998.
31. Personal conversation, three MLOs, October 1998.
32. According to the principal of Elementary School No. 1 which had 47-50 percent English as a Second Language students, February, 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
33. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview with MLO, Ottawa, Canada, April, 1994.
36. Ibid.
37. Interview with principal, High School No. 4, December 1998.
38. For an excellent discussion of a cross-cultural misunderstanding in the health arena and the importance of cultural brokers, see Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*,

- (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
39. Telephone conversation with MLO Director, January and April, 1996.
 40. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
 41. Interview with the principal of elementary school Elementary School No. 2, April, 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
 42. Interview with the vice-principal of Elementary School No. 2, April 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
 43. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
 44. Sonia Nieto discusses this at length in her book, *Affirming Diversity*. In the book's case studies, what becomes clear is that parents from diverse ethnic or racial or cultural background indeed care about the education of their children, even when they are not actively involved with the school, or when parents do not have any communication with school officials.
 45. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
 46. Interviews with various MLOs, attendance of Multicultural Week Celebration, and interviews with school administrators, November 1993, February 1994, Ottawa, Canada.
 47. Principal at High School No. 3, Ottawa, Canada, November 1998.
 48. A Somali female high school student was assaulted by her classmates right after school and outside school after continuous racial teasing and singling out. She was the only Black student in the school. The assault was so severe that she is at risk of losing a kidney and other possible consequences, January 1998.
 49. Classroom observations at elementary school Elementary School No. 2, Ottawa Canada, June 1997.
 50. Ibid.
 51. Meeting at High School No. 3, Ottawa, Canada, November 1998.
 52. Interview with the principal of High School No. 4, December 1998.
 53. An MLO from the Middle East, fluent in seven languages, described the role of the MLOs in this manner.

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