



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGEE

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Refugees and Literacy

Literacy refers, in its most narrow sense, to an ability to read and write. But literacy also entails, in a broader and much more rewarding sense, being able to effectively put these acquired skills to use in daily life. Only when we become functionally literate do we start reaping in earnest the practical rewards of learning.

These rewards can be quite substantial. Literacy can help us satisfy our basic needs or boost our self-esteem. It could even facilitate individual and communal quests for integration and, most importantly, for empowerment.

The achievement of functional literacy, a challenge to native speakers, becomes a monumental task for those who, like most refugees, generally do not master any of the common languages of the countries where they resettle.

Not surprisingly, the lack of mastery over a common language is widely perceived to be the most frustrating limitation faced by those trying to adapt to a new environment. This added limitation only compounds the social and cultural traumas experienced by refugees.

Ideally speaking, literacy programs available to unwilling migrants such as

refugees should cater to their specific needs. These needs differ substantially from those of other immigrants who willingly move to another country.

In Canada seldom do basic schooling, adult education or mother tongue literacy programs take into consideration refugee requirements. More often than not refugees are limited to taking advantage of standard English as a Second Language (ESL) or français langue seconde programs available to all immigrants.

The articles contained in the present issue are illustrations of Canada's current refugee literacy debate. The authors are all practitioners in the field of

education who work with refugees in different parts of the country. From different perspectives they discuss the literacy challenges refugees have to face, describe the available facilities, assess some of the advances being made, identify prevailing problems and suggest ways to overcome them in order to improve the literacy programs now available in Canada to refugees.

Marlinda Freire approaches the issue of ESL and literacy programs from a psycho-emotional perspective. She emphasizes the importance of early attendance: "Learning may not take place

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