

By Kathleen Mullen

Fifth-grader Malik said to her teacher, “I don’t know how we have bones inside our body.”

Her classmate Musa responded, “If you didn’t, you’d be like this,” and walked really wobbly, like a jellyfish.

Seizing the moment, teacher Suzanne Tyler, prompted, “If you didn’t, Musa, what would happen if you didn’t have bones inside your body?” Musa did the jellyfish walk again, and all the kids giggled.

They talked for a few minutes about bones and then Malik asked, “Does the bones inside us, does the face look scary?” Tyler pulled up a picture of a human skeleton on the classroom smartboard. Malik’s eyes widened with new understanding. “Is that how our head’s like inside? Ewwww!”

Malik’s “ewwww” moment will probably seem unremarkable to most, but it reflected years of teacher effort, learning how to build trust among children who often had good reason to be distrustful. It took place in a classroom of refugee-background English Language Learners at Grant Elementary School in Boise. While names have been changed to protect student privacy, the learning curve faced by both students and school staff is real.

Tyler and her colleagues anticipated that most refugee-background students would be new to English but gradually realized that these children also needed time to feel safe in their surroundings in order to learn. As she explained, “The adults haven’t always been trustworthy that they’ve been around outside their family, and so the students are oftentimes leery of any new adult.” She continued: “These kids will shut down if they feel confronted in any way. They’ll just shut down or fight back. . . . So, it’s much better to form a relationship with them. If they trust you, they’ll work very hard for you.”

In the spring of 2008 district administrators tasked Grant staff with developing a program for refugee English Language Learners in order to alleviate over-enrollments at neighboring schools. They recruited educators known for working hard to build a



INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

positive school community; holding students to high academic standards; and supporting families facing serious challenges such as food insecurity, homelessness, lack of health care, and other basic concerns. The principal, Susanne Weeks, drew on this foundation as staff prepared over the spring and summer for the refugee students who would join their school in the fall.

The district provided support on curriculum and contact information for translators. They gave school staff as much information as possible on students' prior education, home language, and migration histories, although details were often scarce. Based on this information, the two fifth-grade teachers worked with their classes to produce a school newsletter about the new students' home countries. Weeks, Tyler, and other staff



IDAHO EDUCATION NEWS

A refugee child from Iraq shares a drawing with his teacher, 2016.

Previous page: Bhutanese cousins, granted asylum, hug and laugh for the camera after years in a refugee camp in Nepal, 2015.

visited the homes of students who would join the school in the fall, delivering to each a translated packet that included a welcome letter, information about the school, staff photos and names, and a collage depicting school activities and services. They also put together a two-week summer camp to help incoming students get to know some existing students and become familiar with school routines.

As the school year started and the newcomers began arriving, teachers quickly learned not to assume any particular kind of background knowledge. Many refugee youth spoke

several languages but not English. Some came from former British colonies and brought strong verbal English but in colonial dialects with slightly different vocabularies. Some had been able to consistently attend school and thus arrived with native language literacy and a foundation in core academic subjects. Others arrived with severely interrupted or no prior schooling and lacked foundational literacy and academic skills. Many, like Malik, lacked background knowledge common to their native-born peers. Teachers also learned that refugee children were unfamiliar with activities common in American schools, such as coloring, doing puzzles, using a dictionary, checking out a library book, or using a computer to complete an assignment. Experienced at adapting lessons on the spot – a skill essential to good teaching – Grant staff found that working with refugee students brought a whole new dimension to thinking on your feet.

“There’s just no normal,” said Tyler. “There’s always different experiences. It’s very unpredictable. Every day is unpredictable.”

A sixth-grade teacher echoed this sentiment: “You have to be very flexible. Whatever you get hit with that day, just bend and go.”

Beyond academics, staff encountered student behaviors they did not initially understand. Refugee students sometimes pushed others aside when waiting in line for food or school supplies or tried to hoard. Some became very withdrawn while others became physically aggressive. Some had trouble getting along with adults or fought with other students. As they came to know their teachers better, many children shared harrowing personal experiences: extended flight through hazardous jungle, separation from parents, witnessing the murder of a family member, escape from a mass killing, or other significant trauma. “So, we’ll be in the middle of a lesson,” Tyler explained, “and a student just might say, ‘My brother was shot when he was holding me.’ And it really took me a while to get used to that.” She adds: “The traumatic stories have been a big, big challenge for me personally. ... I’ve gone home and cried. ... The more I hear about it, it doesn’t shock me anymore. And it’s the stuff you see in the movies. These kids have lived it.”



UNITED NATIONS

A Syrian child clings to a bag of raincoats and thermal blankets in a UN refugee camp.



WSCC

Holistic programs for elementary education emphasize emotional health and community collaboration.



Detail from a child's drawing showing a plane bombing a village, 2014.

Tyler and others at Grant were not new to working with students who faced trauma or whose families had no safety net. They had worked for years, through endless grant applications and volunteer outreach, to connect families to supporting services. They learned to recognize domestic violence, parental drug abuse or incarceration, homelessness, a lack of medical and dental care, and gaps in meeting other basic needs. The social worker and school psychologist both split their time among multiple schools, but teachers could draw on them for guidance when available. For many, however, the experiences shared by their refugee students were qualitatively different and thus made supportive school relationships that much more important. “I always share with the teachers that these students don’t automatically come with respect,” said Tyler. “You need to earn their respect, and that’s because of their past experiences.”

Teachers understood that children learned best when not hungry, sick, or fearful. However, the task of serving as both educator and community support for their students, native-born and refugee, lay beyond the school’s core educational mandate, and the task was sometimes overwhelming. Most responded by evaluating and adjusting their teaching practice, but some focused instead on perceived student deficits, criticizing refugee children and their families for not conforming to expectations.

The impetus to blame was familiar to principal Weeks, a 30-year veteran of public schools. She had for decades heard this type of complaint about lots of families across multiple schools, and she pushed back: “So, I hear too often, ‘These kids [have] moved into our school and changed it. And basically they’ve lowered our scores.’ No, we haven’t adapted to figure out what these kids need. So it’s more about schools need to learn to adapt and change. And change is difficult.” Teachers at Grant found that developing an understanding of a range of migration contexts experienced by their students was an important first step. With the notion that difficult changes can be made a bit easier when informed by the experiences of others, the teachers and families presented here shared their stories in the hope of shortening the learning curve for others working to help launch all students toward bright futures.

Malik, Iraq

Malik, her father, mother, and two younger brothers arrived from Iraq. A straight-A student in her home country, Malik understood very little English when she first came to Idaho. “Like, when I went to my, the first school, the first day there was a boy speaking to me, and I was just like this [she sits up very straight, very still, and with wide eyes]. I didn’t even understand what he’s speaking.” Despite arriving from a country that experienced multiple wars in recent decades, economic embargo, government collapse, and the rise of armed militias, her parents managed to consistently send her



RAND

to school until they left for the U.S. near the end of her third-grade year. Iraq once enjoyed a robust educational system; but by the time Malik started her formal education, many buildings had sustained significant damage and schools faced severe shortages of desks, chalkboards, chalk, texts, and other essentials. Malik’s mother, Aasma, disliked her daughter’s school, describing it as dirty and crowded with four children sharing a desk and teachers pressuring students to buy school lunch rather than bring food from home. Malik, however, enjoyed school and studied many of the same subjects as her

Worldwide, only 50 percent of refugee children attend primary school.

American peers except for physical education and science. She also attended special classes on Iraqi culture and learned in all-girl classrooms with only female teachers.

Malik shared stories that highlighted how larger events showed up in her daily life, explaining, for example, that police conducted regular house inspections in her neighborhood: “They come and they check your houses if you have a gun or something. We don’t have, so they check everything. Last time they took a people they were sleeping, and they took the door and then saw a gun there. So they took them to jail ‘cause they think they might kill people. But they don’t. So they took them to jail, and after a while they took them out.” She also matter-



CHRIS SAMUELS/DESERET NEWS

Refugee counselors work hard to counter prejudice against Muslim girls wearing traditional clothing and scarves.

of-factly shared memories of someone setting fire to the house of a family friend and of a violent assault on a classmate. The wars in her country scattered relatives, sending aunts, uncles, and cousins across Europe and the Middle East.

Malik’s father worked for Iraq’s state utility agency, but government instability led him to leave his job and open a

small bakery. He later worked for the American military, and the family eventually underwent a yearlong application process for refugee status. After notification that they would receive asylum in the U.S., they sold their home and made preparations to leave, only to be told that a mix-up meant they would not be going. Suddenly homeless, the family looked for a new place to live and spent another year sorting out their resettlement application.

Bilingual in Arabic and English, Malik's father found work in Idaho as an interpreter. It paid well enough that he could afford to move the family out of the shabby apartment in which they were originally settled and into a nicer one. The new apartment complex also housed a community center that offered homework help and after-school activities. With his educational background, Malik's father could help her with homework and with developing competence in both Arabic and English. Her mother did not yet speak English but helped her to continue using Arabic.

Malik was an eager student but initially did not like school in Idaho. She attended a different elementary school before coming to Grant and was one of only a few girls who dressed according to traditional Muslim understandings of modesty, or hijab. She covered her hair and did not wear short sleeve shirts, short skirts, or form-fitting clothes. Aasma said that other Iraqi students who chose a more western style of dress made fun of her daughter's appearance. "Because she wears scarf, she has no friends. Because she has the scarf, nobody likes to play with her. ... Another people from Iraq, they tell her something not good about she wears scarf, not the people from America."

The teasing escalated to the point that Malik stopped wanting to go to school, but things changed when she transferred to Grant Elementary. "A lot of people were wearing hijab like me, and so I became friends with them," Malik explained. The teachers were nicer, too. "Here, if you do something not right the teachers will help you. ... In my old [American] school, a couple of them were, like, mean."

To be successful in her new country, Malik thought she should, "be responsible, show respect, be honest." Her goal was



UNITED NATIONS

"When I grow up I want to be a doctor and help my family," says an eight-year-old refugee girl during her school presentation, 2014.

to go to college and start looking for a job so she could help her family. She thought she might like to work in medicine, perhaps in pediatrics, family medicine, or medical translation. Aasma viewed education as important for her daughter's future but did not know what Malik would need to do to reach her goals, explaining, "I have no idea about the education here." She worried that the fact that English was not Malik's native language would be an obstacle. The family received some guidance through Grant's college and career awareness program, which included visits to the nearby high school, local universities and technical schools, job shadowing, and other activities. The program gave Malik an idea of what comes after elementary school and how her future education links to her current aspirations. She and her family are still learning how to navigate life in a new country, however, and will likely need continued guidance as she works to pursue her goals.

So Min, Burma, Thailand

So Min, his mother, father, grandfather, and three siblings arrived from Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, the largest and oldest of nine camps along the Burma-Thailand border. So Min's family was resettled in Idaho during his first-grade year; but as a result of multiple family moves, he attended three different elementary schools before transferring to Grant during third grade. Generally quiet, he could be surprisingly chatty with his friend Musa in Tyler's fifth-grade English Language Learner class. Both boys loved sports and were on the basketball and track teams. So Min enjoyed sports but said he disliked it when students got too competitive. "Kids fighting over stuff. ... They say, 'You're out. You're not supposed to.' Like that." Not entirely comfortable at his prior schools, he felt accepted at Grant. "They know me," he explained. "I'm most nervous asking people, 'Can I be your friend?' I don't really do that."

So Min's family is ethnic Karen, one of several minority groups in Burma that have sought some degree of self-rule since at least World War II. Historically Karen people fled into Thailand in response to fighting and returned to Burma when conditions allowed. The temporary nature of Karen

displacement started to change in the mid-1980s, when the army began to intensify its military campaigns against minority communities and later refused to acknowledge the 1990 democratic election of Aung San Suu Kyi. Daily life in Burma came to involve seizures of food, livestock, and property; forced portering, mine-sweeping, or infrastructure construction; interrogation, torture, and killings; as well as the relocation of villages to government-controlled areas or their entire destruction. Seeking to extend its control, the army



MIKHAIL ESTEVES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

also employed detention without charges, incommunicado detention, imprisonment in life-threatening conditions, human trafficking, recruitment of child soldiers, and systematic rape.

So Min's parents fled to Thailand around the early 1990s, and he and his younger siblings were born and grew up in exile. The Thai response to Karen asylum-seekers vacillated over the years due to the large number of other refugees already in the country, attacks within Thailand by the Burmese military and Karen militias, and Thailand's political interests. Over the decades, government officials allowed families like So Min's to cross into Thailand or barred their entry; ignored or deported them; allowed them to establish camps within

Six decades of war have displaced hundreds of thousands of Burmese people from southeast Burma. Pictured: Mae La Refugee Camp.



Relief agencies provide a daily lunch to more than 33,000 Karen children in refugee nursery schools, 2012.

certain areas; offered refugee status to those in camps but not those living in Thailand outside camps; or offered money to return to Burma, a form of coercion that violated international principles.

When speaking of life at Mae La, So Min's older brother explained: "In there, in the camps, there's a lot of people in a small place. A lot of people. So, it's dirty there. And benefits, we don't have a lot of benefits." Researchers found that camp rations met short-term nutritional requirements but did not offer the balanced diet needed for long-term subsistence. Residents could grow vegetables and raise chickens or pigs, but space was limited, and restrictions on movement made it difficult to forage for supplemental food in nearby forests. Those with a source of income could buy extra food at small camp shops, but overall, there were micronutrient deficiencies among residents and a high prevalence of low weight and stunting among children.

So Min's father, Eh Mahn, was trained as a traditional weaver but faced limited job opportunities in Mae La. "We were poor," he said through an interpreter. "Kids come home, they want to do something but can't do nothing. In

the refugee camp, we have no work.” Those seeking work often had to venture beyond camp boundaries, although the Thai government technically prohibited it. This tenuous legal status left the Karen vulnerable to employers unwilling to pay minimum wage and to bribe demands or assault from government officials. Women and girls, in particular, faced abuse by humanitarian workers and Thai soldiers as well as exploitation in the Thai sex trade.

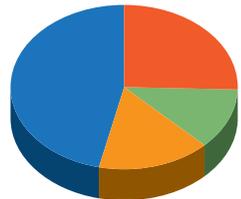
The decades-long conflict in Burma and prolonged exile in Thailand severely constrained Eh Mahn’s educational opportunities – he could neither read nor write in his native Karen and did not know English – but upon resettlement, he found work busing tables. Glad to leave behind the imposed unemployment of the refugee camp, he enjoyed the ability to provide basic necessities for his family. His interpreter explained, “In here, if he want to buy something [with] his own money, he can buy. He can buy ‘cause he have work.”

Eh Mahn also valued the greater educational opportunities afforded to So Min in the U.S. “It’s a good thing. Better education ... when he grows up. School is good ‘cause he can do more things.”

So Min arrived in the United States before developing foundational native language literacy or any comprehension of English. He thus sometimes struggled with both languages. He spoke in English with his brothers, friends, and teachers but did not always know the words he needed to express himself. He spoke Karen with his parents but sometimes found it difficult to understand them. “When they just talk to me regular I understand every word. But sometimes, when they talk in a hard way ... if you being silly or goofy, ... it’s not clear they using it in a different way. It’s kind of hard.” His efforts may have been complicated by the fact that his parents spoke two different Karen dialects.

So Min was not always able to finish class assignments on time, but Grant served lots of students who struggled to complete work at grade level, both native-born and refugee, and teachers extended deadlines when needed. “Sometimes I get all my work done. And my teacher sometime let me have

U.S. Refugee Arrivals, 2015



a break, and then I get all my stuff done and I turn it in.” With homework, So Min said, “I struggle a lot.” He occasionally joined Grant’s homework clubs before school or in the afternoon, but the school bus sometimes arrived too late or left too early for him to participate. When asked whether he had somebody who could help him, he replied: “Usually my grandpa. He showed me a lot of division stuff.” He added: “Sometimes he’s not at home, and then I have to figure it out myself, but I just do it. And then, if I get it wrong, then I come back at school and then I fix it with my teacher.” Grant teachers could often be seen working with students between bells, during their own lunchtimes, and before and after school.

“Try to be respectful. Get all of your work done on time. [Learn] how to read, how to speak English.”

Asked how to be successful and have a good life in the U.S., So Min said: “Try to be respectful. Get all of your work done on time. [Learn] how to read, how to speak English.” He used to want to be a scientist but recently decided he would really like to be a mechanic. He loves working with his hands and developed a strong interest in race cars. His parents encouraged him to work hard in school, and his father viewed education as a source of future opportunity. Yet researchers note that language minority students who lack first language literacy are likely to have to work doubly hard to learn academic content in English. This, combined with his homework struggles and his family’s unfamiliarity with how to prepare for life after high school, highlights the importance of the guidance and support offered through programs at Grant Elementary.

Celeste, Burundi, Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania

A year older than Malik and So Min, Celeste arrived with her parents and five siblings from a refugee camp in Tanzania around the beginning of third grade. She enjoyed the “fun stuff” at Grant Elementary, like math, music, PE, and going to the library. She helped Swahili-speaking newcomers navigate the uncertainties of life at a new school, translating assignments or showing them how to get lunch in the cafeteria, and demonstrated a sense of humor with her peers. When one student wandered around the classroom continually pestering

others during group work time, Celeste said to her, “You need to put some glue on your bottom so you will stay in your seat.” A sixth-grader, she worked at a third-grade reading level; but her teachers described her as a motivated student, and she felt confident in her abilities, explaining, “Now I know a lot of stuff, more than I knew in Africa.”

Celeste grew up in Tanzania, but her father, Nyionzima, was originally from the tiny East African country of Burundi. He fled Burundi in 1972 when, in response to attacks by Hutu insurgents, the Tutsi-led government retaliated against the entire Hutu population, killing an estimated 200,000 people.



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He then lived in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) for over 20 years under the kleptocratic and dictatorial regime of Mobutu Sésé Seko until events of the 1994 Rwandan genocide spilled over the border. In a little more than 100 days, 800,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsi, were killed and thousands more were raped, tortured, or maimed. More than two million people, mostly Hutu, were displaced and more than one million people flooded into Zaire in just 48 hours. Mobutu

Refugees from Rwanda trek to a UN camp in Burundi, 2015.



Zoera Daouda, 10, with her teacher in Djabal Refugee Camp, Chad.

provided protection and arms to leaders responsible for the genocide, who then intimidated or killed refugees. Laurent Kabila ousted Mobutu in 1997, largely helped by Rwanda and Uganda, and renamed Zaire the DRC. Regional tensions continued, however, and escalated into what would later be called Africa's First World War. The war officially ended via a 2002 peace accord, but several smaller military conflicts continued, and by 2003 regional fighting generated a death toll larger than World War II. Nyionzima and others living in Zaire/the DRC during the decade following the Rwandan genocide experienced government collapse, food shortages, malnutrition, massacres, rape, displacement, and increases in infectious disease, including AIDS and HIV.

Around the late 1990s, Nyionzima and his family escaped to Tanzania, a country that had for decades been a major refuge. At the time of the Rwandan genocide, Tanzania already housed hundreds of thousands of refugees from earlier conflicts, and the sudden massive influx from Rwanda overwhelmed both the government and international aid agencies. Hutus who had committed atrocities in Rwanda streamed into the country. Former leaders re-established political and military structures in the camps as part of efforts to win back power. They continued anti-Tutsi violence within the camps, creating a general climate of fear through theft, disruption of food distribution, intimidation, rape, and murder. Camp security presented such a challenge that by 1996 the United Nations supported efforts by the Tanzanian government to forcibly repatriate refugees, a move that contrasted starkly to the organization's long history of opposition to coercive return. Tanzanian soldiers and police pushed hundreds of thousands back across the border during 1996, 1999, and 2001.

Against this backdrop of massive social instability, Celeste's parents kept their family together. Nyionzima had worked as a farmer in Burundi and a fisherman in the DRC, but earned his living as a small-scale merchant in Tanzania. He never had the opportunity to attend school, though he tried to read and write a little bit in his native Kirundi. Celeste was born in Tanzania and grew up speaking Swahili rather than

her parents' native Kirundi. Her father asked an uncle to teach her Kirundi after camp school each day so she could maintain her family language. Nyionzima described Celeste's schooling in Tanzania as difficult because camp aid agencies provided instruction only in French. Through an interpreter, he said, "I knew some kids they spend, like, five years in school but they don't speak well French." He said Celeste did not like school in Tanzania, found it difficult to learn in French, and repeated first grade because she failed the required end-of-grade test.

In Idaho, however, he described Celeste as a good student and wanted Grant staff to know he appreciated their work. "Everything they do for the kids is great job. I like it and I say thanks. May God bless you." He hoped Celeste would go to college. "I see if she continue her education, she will have a better life, because this world now, if you are not educated it's difficult. But if you are educated, you will have a better life." His limited formal education and lack of English skills prevented him from providing concrete assistance with schoolwork, but he supported Celeste by encouraging her to do her best. "My role is just to remind her every time to read the books, to know English, because English is the key of everything. Because if you know English, the school will be easy for you."

Though Nyionzima described Celeste as a good student and said she liked school, he noted that she sometimes did not like schoolwork. "When she get a big book, she say, 'That's too big for me. I can't read this because there is so many information. ... Maybe if it is smaller, I can read it. But the big ones, I don't like it.'" Celeste, like So Min, lacked a solid foundation in a first language, and this complicated her efforts to develop competence in academic English.

Tyler described Celeste's situation this way: "She can do grade-level work, but any assessment that people give her, they're going to think that she is much, much lower than she is. She thinks that, too. ... She just needs somebody to spend time reading with her. That's what she needs. We have had tutors for her in the past, [but] people get busy. I mean, over the past few years, we've had a couple of different volunteer tutors work with her both at school and outside of school. And it just fell through. And the more [students] that we get, the more need.



AUBREY GRAHAM/IRIN

A student pokes his head through a tear in the tarp that walls his classroom in a Congolese refugee camp, 2009.



Refugee students in the Bridge Program at Boise's Hillside Junior High, 2016.

Just managing all that is hard. ... She's really within the normal range of development for somebody who's not literate in her first language. ... She did not have a dominant first language."

Celeste participated in the school's program for students reading below grade level and sometimes attended the homework club offered before school. Teachers provided extra time and tutoring when needed, often at lunch or outside of standard teaching hours. Nyionzima explained that Celeste's older siblings sometimes helped but most had their own assignments to complete and faced the same language hurdles. Celeste, despite her challenges with academic English, possessed strong verbal skills and spoke only English with her sisters. She used Swahili with classmates from the same language background. With her parents, she used Kirundi and a smattering of Swahili.

Celeste was unsure about what kind of work she might like to do when she got older but knew that she wanted to continue her education. To do well in the U.S., she believed she must, "go to school so you can know more English, find a job, and go to college ... [because] school makes people know more stuff, because if you don't know anything, you can't help yourself." She participated in school field trips, to the local community college, the local hospital for job shadowing, and other places so was developing a sense of future opportunities. However, working as she was to catch up to grade level, and with her family lacking experience with the American educational

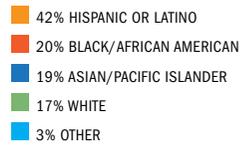
system, school-based programs and services would continue to be important to Celeste as she worked toward her goals.

Learning Trust

Malik, So Min, and Celeste each left their home country under different circumstances, experienced varying durations of displacement, and encountered disparate opportunities to stay safe and healthy and to gain knowledge and skills for the future. Each, however, experienced state destabilization and a rise in military conflict that led to the targeting of civilians and community structures. Malik’s family fled state collapse and intense sectarian conflict. So Min and Celeste’s families fled countries in which the government deliberately and systematically targeted members of their ethnic group with a wide range of human rights abuses. Celeste’s family also fled profound communal violence and faced multiple displacements. All left countries in which children could not always trust adults; and school, when available, was not always safe. In coming to Grant Elementary, Malik and the others learned that they were safe at school, that teachers would help them develop the skills they needed, and that the school could be an important resource for struggling families.

In working with refugee students, Grant staff came to recognize that the combined experiences of missed schooling and prolonged insecurity meant positive school relationships were essential for refugee students’ academic success. They learned that trust served as a foundation for student development and that it was enhanced when students felt safe, respected, and supported. Though staff sometimes felt overwhelmed by the dual tasks of teaching and helping families patch their safety nets, they hoped that their experiences could help inform efforts in other communities.

Ethnicity of Boise District Limited English Students



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