

## Troubled Waters: The Precarious Role of Water in Refugee Children's Literature

The global refugee population has reached a record high; 65 million people have had to leave their homes due to war, persecution, or natural disasters. More than half of these refugees are children and teenagers. This paper will take up the conference theme by focusing on the troubling role of water in the lives of refugees, as reflected in refugee children's literature.

The research for this paper was conducted at one site of a national Canadian research project designed to engage English language arts teachers and their students in reading and responding to children's literature with the potential to address issues of social justice. Postcolonial theories of reading practices which speak to the role of literary texts in questioning the colonial past and contemporary theories of social justice that see teachers as agents of social change comprise the theoretical perspectives. The inquiry group, a community of practice with ten elementary teachers, follows a collaborative action research framework. Inquiry group meetings focus on the selection of children's literature for tackling societal injustices, and discussion of pedagogical strategies for teaching the texts. During the second year of our four-year study, sparked by the Syrian refugee crisis, we turned our attention to the global refugee situation. In the inquiry group, we read and discussed news articles, academic literature and a range of children's texts about refugee children and their families; teachers then chose children's literature to teach. Many of these books feature water in significant ways, for example, boat refugees who risk their lives at sea: *Boy overboard* (Gleitzman, 2003); *Ziba came on a boat* (Lofthouse, 2007); *Stepping stones: A refugee family's journey* (Ruurs, 2016) and *Stormy seas: stories of young boat refugees* (Leatherdale, 2017). Other texts emphasise the struggles refugees face on their journey or in refugee camps to access clean drinking water, for example, *Mud City* (Ellis, 2003) and *A long walk to water* (Park, 2010). This presentation will highlight select examples of participating teachers' experiences using refugee children's literature to broaden understanding and validate experiences, with a concentration on the central role of water in the lives of refugees.

### References

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