



## Everyday literacy practices of a former Syrian refugee: Strengths and struggles

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### Abstract

*Taking a social practice view of literacy, this study examines and describes the everyday literacy practices of a recently arrived Syrian refugee to Aotearoa New Zealand. It highlights the individual, home and community literacy competencies that are often overlooked in adult literacy education. Data was collected from interviews with the participant at home including observations of literacy and multi-lingual practices. Analysis reveals key theoretical perspectives, captures how the participant's literacy practices have changed as a result of changing demands and the particular cultural and contextual aspects of their literacies. The study supports the complexity of literacy and language skills that refugees need for successful resettlement. It calls for a greater awareness of alternative understandings of literacy, challenges the often deficit views of refugees as helpless victims and advocates an inclusive approach to address problems and possibilities for learners surviving trauma.*

### Keywords

Adult literacy; refugees; literacy practices; multi-lingual; trauma

### Introduction

This article is informed by one of three case studies describing the everyday literacy practices of newly arrived refugees from Syria, Sri Lanka and Colombia to Aotearoa New Zealand. It contributes to the understandings of literacy practices of former refugees during their process of resettlement. The purpose of the research was to describe and explain how their literacy practices have changed as a result of changing demands, and how they utilise their strengths and strategies to transform, make sense of, and give meaning to the many different and challenging literacies of a new language and culture. For this article, I focus on the everyday literacy practices of a former Syrian refugee who came to Aotearoa New Zealand in May 2015 under the government quota scheme. It was a year that witnessed a staggering increase in the global refugee crisis and reported Syria as the largest source country of refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015, p. 4). In response to this unprecedented crisis and an outpouring of sympathy from the New Zealand public, our government made a commitment to welcome 600 Syrian refugees (in addition to the current quota of 750) over the forthcoming three years.



The 1951 Convention<sup>i</sup> relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as any person who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his[her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [herself] of the protection of that country.... (Article 1(A)(2))

This definition reminds us that refugees flee their countries because of fear. But before fleeing their native lands, refugees experienced and/or witnessed extremely stressful events. A standard assessment for trauma, The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ), has a sixteen-item trauma event checklist to clinically assess trauma. However, research with groups of refugees showed that the number of traumatic events they had experienced far exceeded this amount (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). Trauma is a wound that does not disappear when reaching untroubled shores and there is little chance to heal during stressful periods of resettlement. A post-migration study of refugees describes some trauma related symptoms: “apathy, low energy, social withdrawal and impairment of daily roles such as parenting” (Schweitzer, et al., 2006, p. 180). As a teacher of former refugee learners, I have observed some instances of how trauma manifests itself in the classroom context, its ongoing, unpredictable ebb and flow and how it impacts on learning and brings additional issues. It is alongside these challenges that new literacies and a new language are gained. For this group of learners, trauma is possibly the most significant factor that can impact on successful resettlement. To date there have been few studies on adult literacy with and for former refugees and scarce focus on human security and well-being (Williams & Hall, 2014, p. 212).

In this paper, I first review some already well-established literacy theory as well as current related perspectives that may offer insights for adult literacy and English as an Additional Language (EAL) for former refugee learners. Then I outline the methods: semi-structured interviews (in the participant’s home), observations and photographs of literacy artefacts. I use the data to discuss key themes in relation to the participant’s everyday literacy practices and how they have changed since settling in Aotearoa New Zealand. The implications contribute to inclusive and transformative approaches to adult literacy and EAL education, and, affirm the need to embrace educational philosophies of well-being to reflect the needs of former refugee learners.

## Literature review

Theoretical perspectives that view literacy as a social practice provided a framework for this study. New Literacy Studies (NLS) scholars (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2004; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 2000) examine literacy in everyday life; what people do with literacy and how people’s *literacy practices* and *literacy events* (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) are shaped by individual, social and cultural meanings. Viewing literacy as a social practice helped conceptualise the link between the participant’s literacy practices and what they meant individually, as well as relationally, in the social worlds where they were enacted: domains of home, community, Syrian community, education and service providers. Modes of digital literacy were a key feature in this multi-lingual household. Studies of digital literacy and language use (Barton & Lee, 2013; Gee, 2008; Swain, 2006) describe the effects of language use in the online world, how people produce and learn additional languages and the particular varieties of languages while they play and learn computer games.

González, Moll and Amanti (2005, pp. ix-x) conducted research in households and found that families’ literacy competencies were often ignored because they were considered less important than the more formal literacies of traditional education. Their ethnographic research discovered some of the more implicit aspects of literacy, the views of non-dominant groups, and helped demystify some fixed literacy ideologies. Rogers and Street (2012), Ahearn (2004) and Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich and Kim (2010) also challenge deficit views of literacy. Rich and complex literacy and language practices of families are often suppressed while school literacies are promoted. This means that practices that can often be imposed on families from non-dominant groups or speakers of non-dominant languages.

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<sup>i</sup> Refer to <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>

Auerbach (2005) asserts a more Freirian view that individuals should collaborate and challenge the conditions that restrict their possibilities (p. 369). She argues that we need to define context beyond the domains of situated literacies and look at forces of globalization, especially how they shape families and communities. She urges us to question how literacy education might contribute to resisting that power. Hunter (2012) interviewed employers of migrants and reported disconnects between employers views and government policy. She asserts that “in both literacy (native English speakers) and language (EAL) policies, the discourse is driven by a close focus on the individual deficit ... In this view, standards, and deficits, are determined by ‘objectively’ measurable language and literacy proficiency” (p. 301). Thus, as these literacies in use in the varying contexts of people’s communities are ignored, standardised ways of measuring literacy competence continue to reign. Three decades of ethnographic studies in the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) inspire ways forward but tend to be disappointingly constrained by the “corporate inspired global discourse” (Hunter, 2012, p. 299).

In 2001, the New Zealand Immigration Service conducted a literature review for their Refugee Resettlement Research Project (Refugee Voices) (New Zealand Immigration Service, Department of Labour, 2001) and acknowledged that there had been little research on the resettlement experiences of refugees. In a timely study, Mitchell and Ouko (2012) express their concerns in light of the growing number of refugees and the importance of culturally responsive education. Other studies (Benseman, 2014; Furness, Robertson, Hunter, Hodgetts, & Nikora, 2013; Hope, 2013; Kaur, 2011), offer insights by addressing the specific needs for low level adult literacy learners of refugee and migrant backgrounds. Their work contributes to an understanding of other components (rather than basic skills) that are important for successful participation and learning outcomes. They include well-being, resettlement, familiarity with new literacies in an Aotearoa New Zealand context, and the contribution that programmes have on their families and communities. Within a community setting, Furness et al. (2013) explain how, for particular, often vulnerable groups of adult learners, there is a critical case for measuring other affirmations of learning.

Program providers of government funded adult literacy and EAL have to measure and report on learner progress, and, as a consequence, unsuccessful outcomes can be detrimental to funding. Although standardised assessment tools are useful to inform policy, programming and teaching, a narrow focus on measurement-based literacy and language skills means that learners’ other strengths may not be considered (Hunter, 2012). For example, some EAL learners (in particular, those from cultures where storytelling is inherent) have good oral fluency compared to their writing skills but the current National Assessment Tool seems to affirm what literacy is supposed to be rather than capturing learners’ deeper funds of knowledge.

For communities at risk of becoming further marginalised, Rāwiri (2007), from a Māori view, asserts that adult literacy policy and practice should be developed according to the particular cultural values and social practices of the learners’ community. She describes the deep hurt felt by the Iwi (community, people) at not being able to speak their mother tongue and their feelings of betrayal associated with English language and literacy. She advocates a need for supporting communities with their literacy needs, not by ‘fixing’ them, but, instead “embedding adult literacy in a deep sense of, and respect for, community” (Rāwiri, 2007, p. 3). Her vision of a transformation for adult literacy to become affirming and elevating for indigenous communities resonates with the needs of former refugee learners, and, if implemented appropriately, could offer a space for learning, realising aspirations and healing.

Aotearoa New Zealand is unique in that it has long established models of Māori well-being. Mason Durie (2006) explains how well-being can be measured on many dimensions; by drawing on ‘perspectives’ that are both universal and specific to Māori. He describes three levels of well-being; individual, whānau, and the Māori population. Each level has a range of dimensions, which can be assessed, and then a comprehensive outcome can be measured for that particular level of well-being. This ecological framework is particularly relevant where diversity of values exists among our indigenous and diverse communities but in which we can find unifying themes. Furthermore, Durie asserts that “social economic and environmental aspects of well-being should be given adequate consideration” and that “there is no single measure of well-being”. Durie advises that holistic assessments of Māori well-being do not always transfer well to other populations because their measurements are so particular to Māori. Williams and Hall (2014) put forward a new ontology based

on wholeness and relationship, an indigenous, life-world approach. They argue for its significance in post-colonial New Zealand and Canada in their research on migrant women and express concerns for those marginalised in contexts of colonization and globalization. They further conceptualise ecology to well-being and how issues of trauma affect relatedness. This epistemology of an ecology grounded in relatedness is echoed in the work of Rāwiri (2007) and Mika (2007). Rāwiri tells us how the river people and the Wanganui river are inextricably linked and thus we are able to acknowledge and appreciate, even without a Māori heritage, how this ideology; one of interconnectedness (Furness et al., 2013) is relevant and critical to the well-being of all. Mika's work draws on German romantic philosophy to articulate concepts that are often difficult to comprehend or dismissed as insignificant because of their intangible, inanimate nature. He discusses the sacredness of Māori language in current, colonized times and challenges rationalistic discourses that stifle the sacred and spiritual. These concepts help us relate to the nature of trauma which is mostly hidden but still very much present. In a discussion on trauma and embodied memory, Lam (2015) describes the connection between silence and physical pain:

What the trauma survivor cannot articulate for herself is ironically set against the compulsion to tell, to capture the experience in thought, memory, and speech in order to make sense of the nonsensical, of an experience that defies reason or logic. (p. 37)

## Methods

For this study, I used an interpretive framework and relied upon ethnographic methods: survey notes of my observations, photographs (of print texts or non-print/graphic images), recorded structured interviews (for demographics) and semi-structured interviews. I entered the research field with a broad focus on the participant's past and current literacy practices in order to answer my research questions. This approach offered some flexibility. In this case, because the participant had only had a short time to gain proficiency in English, the participant's husband assisted with the forms and member checks, her eldest son translated some words, and we used digital images to explain more complex feelings and concepts. I adopted a funds of knowledge approach (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2009) based on an understanding that families' vast cultural, linguistic and intellectual resources are often overlooked.

Access to appropriate potential participants was initially sought from my centre manager. I displayed a poster inviting potential participants where community learners take literacy and EAL classes. Selection was based on the understanding that participants would not be current learners in my class (or likely to be in the future) and had fairly good communicative English skills (with limited need for a translator during the interviews). I gave the participant an information sheet and consent form (written at a level of English and language they would understand) one week prior to the interview to allow time for reading, consideration and any translation. I asked if they would like a translator present during our interviews and whether they would like to choose a pseudonym for the study. The participant for this study insisted that I used their real name.

Interview questions were carefully pre-considered along with question probes in order to obtain a fuller picture of how the family use their strengths to navigate the many challenging literacies they encountered. I made observations and discussed visual artefacts on display (calendars, mobile phone, laptop, notes, awards, books) to discover current literacy practices; and help explain what these may mean in relation to the theory. Due to the sensitive nature of the refugee experience, I kept questions open and allowed the participant to share historical information voluntarily. I also checked to make sure during and after the interviews, and when we checked the transcript, that the participant was comfortable to disclose the information and happy for it to be included in my research project. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education ethics committee.

Consistent with my interest in understanding literacy as a social practice, I aimed to explore the participant's at-home literacy practices and find out what these literacy practices meant to the participant, both personally and relationally. As anticipated, the data captured different ways in which the participant engaged with literacy in their everyday contexts. Analysis describes how their literacy practices have changed due to changing demands, or have been influenced by beliefs, attitudes, refugee experience and forced migration.

## Challenging times and changing literacies

I interviewed Mona in her new home, two and a half years after she had fled her “quiet, small” city of Baniyas with her husband and three children to Alexandria, Egypt. Bombs and roadblocks had made the simplest rituals of daily life almost impossible. She told me how her husband was afraid to go to work in case he could not get back to them, how schools often closed for a week (the longest being two months after bombings in nearby Baider), and how her family stayed at home for sustained periods because it was too dangerous. They spent almost two years and their savings renting in an overcrowded, bug infested, expensive apartment. And they did little more than sleep, watch TV, tolerate the stifling heat and wait. After ten months of meetings with United Nations officials, Mona and her family arrived at Auckland University of Technology University's Centre for Refugees in May 2015.

Mona encountered a completely new literacy environment when she arrived, all involving new texts and new practices: having to cope with new languages and a new system for her children's schooling; attending English and New Zealand Sign Language classes (her youngest son is profoundly deaf); dealing with social workers and healthcare providers. It was clear that changing environmental conditions had a significant impact on Mona's well-being. In the following excerpt she describes some of her feelings about having to learn a new language:

For wait arriving ... come [to New Zealand]. [Husband's name] I want to I—I go to Syria or Egypt! Because my heart very ... always cry ... I don't understand any word—I don't speak any word. Two words: 'hi' 'bye'. Sometimes I forgot French 'bonjour, bonsoir'—what's this? The teacher speak sometimes; “Yes, yes,—words understand?” I ask my husband “What's ...?” No understand. Teacher sometimes speak in Māngere—I need [to] tell her “I don't understand”. But teacher [thought I] understand – “Good Mona!”. [But] I don't understand. I forgot 'don't. I [didn't] know 'DON'T'. I'm crying. I feel stupid. I feel in Syria I speak very, very good. I teach children. But I think, yes, maybe I feel very sad. Some I don't understand—always [names of family members] all understand. Oh no—I'm stupid! I don't stay in New Zealand.

Adkins, Sample, and Birman (1999) identify *migration stress* as a key type of stress that refugees face. For Mona the stress of learning a new language began before she arrived in her new host country and expressed her anxiety with “I want to ... go [back] to Syria or Egypt”. This example demonstrates how learning a new language is connected to the process of resettlement. Even though leaving Egypt offered more opportunities for Mona and her family, it also meant greater uncertainty. In addition, there were issues of loss of agency and identity for Mona, expressed in her sadness of not remembering a language she once knew well, her feeling of hopelessness and not being able to teach her children because she was not as competent in English as her other family members. Mona talked about feeling “stupid” in class, a negative self-perception which is particularly prevalent during resettlement. These perceptions are commonly noted by psychologists who work with former refugee learners (R. Margetic-Sosa, personal communication, August 19, 2011). The classroom environment can be anxiety provoking in itself. There may be anxiety around peers, and an irrational fear of ‘getting it wrong’, even if there are no consequences at stake (Kaur, 2011). Mona spoke of her daily communication with extended family in Syria by using digital media. It is customary for Syrians to have large extended families, offering a resource for support they can rely on in times of stress. Mona remains strong for her family in spite of being alienated from the support she once had in Syria. I learned that Syrians may not be able to speak freely of their political views among their new Syrian community (because of different or opposing views) or may feel restricted in their communications with friends and family in Syria.

In general, Syrian society is patriarchal and when Mona left school at fifteen she was discouraged from any further study. “In my country, my dad, no student for girls. I like school, but now I think and dream. Weh! I'm student. I like!” Mona clearly loves learning and her part-time EAL and literacy classes are a high priority. She had learned French at school and told me that was why writing in English came easily to her. During our interview, frustration and urgency to learn English often emerged. For example, “Sometime I told for my friend Arabic; ‘learn English more, why you lazy? Why, slowly, slowly, why?’ I don't have job but I need. I like. I you anything told me, I understand. It

feel good”. It is clear that Mona is active in what she does and is a catalyst for other people’s learning. She regularly volunteers at the local school, takes sewing classes, and helps with Koranic reading at the mosque. Her literacy practices are “purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 12).

Mona attends regular appointments with a psychologist and expressed delight at being able to successfully send and receive text messages in English with her. She explains a lack of opportunity to practise; “English little write because all friends Arabic”. The following story describes an example of navigating the often complex and unfamiliar institutionalised literacies in health settings;

Before I went to hospital with my son. I don’t know Audiology. I forgot—I don’t have any paper. But then I remember. But then I don’t understand the line green. I saw one man. I said; “Please tell me! I have an appointment!” He said; “Walk with me”... But now I understand. I know anything for hospital. Always I going! ... Last month I went to hospital for x-ray my daughter. I don’t have my husband. In English, I ask office; “Please I have appointment-please can you tell me?” She told me; “line green” I say; “Yes, thank you. Thank you, yes I know!”

For Mona, the practice of following markings on the hospital floor to direct you to the corresponding department, to *follow the green line* was an odd concept. In Mona’s anecdote, the central practice was to go to reception, hand over a letter of appointment and follow the receptionist’s instructions. We often assume that dominant historical or cultural practices are meaningful for everyone in our community. Mona tried to grapple with new language and unfamiliar literacy practices. Barton and Hamilton (1998) highlight issues of inequality that can occur in institutional settings. In Mona’s example, not being able to understand how to get to the correct hospital department meant that there was an inequality; she did not have access to the resources that other people have. Mona’s anecdote draws our attention to the concept *literacy event*, in which several participants were taking different roles. In this way literacy is realised as a social construct.

In addition to her own learning, Mona borrows books from school to assist her deaf son’s literacy development, which has been impacted not only by gaps in schooling but having to learn New Zealand Sign Language (in addition to Arabic Sign Language and the made-up signs his siblings use).

Sometime I go to—I went to school [with my son]. Teacher gave [him a] story—sign language. But I saw word. “Ah! I know this! Please can I take this story in home? I need this reading for understand”. Yes ... she give me story. I by reading two times, I return. Sometimes teacher [teaches my son] ... Sign ... paper: [she gestures in Sign Language] One-Up-Write: ONE in sign language. I play with [my son]; “What’s this?” He say; “Up”. Yes! We understand. I learn for play. Some words I learn two language[s]; English and Sign.

Both Mona and her son participate in acquiring new languages through modes of sign, print, writing on paper and in the air, gesture, visual, sound vibration and kinaesthetic modes. Anderson et al. (2010) report examples of naturalistic dyadic interaction between parent and child through shared book reading in different formats; print, digital, illustrative. Interestingly, the less print-rich formats offered more opportunities for interaction, and therefore more language learning was gained. Anderson et al. exemplify naturalistic family literacy practices and make a strong case for these practices that are often viewed conservatively by policy makers. In Mona’s example, the literacy practice of learning to sign and write involved multiple learning strategies and interactions between school teacher, parent and child. Mona’s request to borrow the storybook then became a literacy practice at home to develop her English skills but also offered the affordance of other possible literacy events involving play, talking (in gesture, official Sign, in Arabic or English) about and around the text.

### Online literacy practices

Most of Mona’s literacy practices appear to be more socially mediated and the family engage with digital technologies on a daily basis; WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook feature as favourites. WhatsApp and Viber help her maintain connections with her new community, and friends and family in Syria. She expressed a fondness for Facebook but felt concerned about her children who spend “all day” on

it. Our second interview was during school holidays. I sat in the living room with Mona and her three children. Everyone was busy doing something online; engaged in their own practices, commenting, speaking and writing in Arabic and English and Sign Language to those present in the room as well as online. Fieldnotes describe some of the online practices I observed:

Mona's deaf son grabbed my index finger and stuck it on the monitor. I didn't understand at first because the webpage was in Arabic. But then I realized he wanted to show off how many Facebook friends he had: 1375! As I interviewed Mona, her eldest son was watching soccer (with English commentary) streaming live on the net. Her daughter was on Facebook (in Arabic). She told me she'd found a good hairstyle for me. (Later she read the instructions in English and braided my hair). Mona took a snapshot with her mobile of one of the interview questions and translated it into Arabic on Google. I ask her how it worked and she explained. Her deaf son was playing Stickron. The family told me no one could beat him. Sometimes he chats with players around the globe in Arabic or English or ignores them, kicks them out, makes offers and trades objects to get to the next level of the game.

Mona and her children displayed online writing spaces that offered possibilities for multi-lingual texts, self-representation and domains for commenting, expressing opinions and interacting in a variety of ways (Barton & Lee, 2013) including non-text based images, emoticons, live chat, and pop-up speech bubbles for bargaining and negotiating. Facebook and Stickron had the affordances of translating, using and maintaining their native language, and finding ways of utilising their linguistic resources in different contexts for different purposes (Barton & Lee, 2013). For example, I asked Mona whether her children preferred Arabic or English when writing online, and her son exclaimed; "50-50! It depends on the penalty kicks!" Barton and Lee (2013) inform us that members negotiate their language choice by taking into account the kind of identity they wish to project. It was clear that Mona's youngest son wanted to show his competitive self to others; his number of Facebook friends and his high ranking status as a global Stickron player. Mona's love of Viber and WhatsApp seemed to be driven not only by a need to communicate but managing an identity as a proud mother and an excellent cook; conveyed by sending digital image updates of dishes prepared for visitors and family outings. She also included Viber 'stickers' and wrote accompanying Arabic text.

Mona told me she had been reading some online driving theory tests and taking practical lessons with a volunteer teacher. When I informed her she could do the theory test in Arabic, she thought it would be confusing. She displayed an awareness of how words sometimes do not translate well: "One [of the] questions, if you drive in 'foggy' weather, er ... 'dip'. The test [says] 'dip'—I read [in] Arabic different!" Mona's was selecting a language choice on the basis of how she considered it in relation to the situated literacy practice, mode, and what possibilities a particular language may have over another (Barton & Lee, 2013). It was interesting to observe Mona's online activities in light of Barton and Lee's research; at times often unaware that I was also a participant in some of the emergent literacy events. These observations revealed how the families' online practices often stemmed from their offline ones, and, how these resources were often intricately connected (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 178). During my visit Mona and her children were constantly participating in their own online practices, then stopping to comment on them, share information and ideas, ask questions, and translate. It challenged the popular notion of digital literacy as anti-social; it was interactional, dynamic and at times chaotic.

For a recently arrived refugee, I was impressed with Mona's enthusiasm and energy amidst coping with so many new challenges. She briefly spoke to me about the war in Syria and how she decided to stop watching the news;

Yes, sometimes news on Facebook my husband. I don't watch because I'm very sad. I don't do for ... anything maybe I remember my country time war ... I don't watch because I hate blood ... for young people died. No, I don't watch news but I listen from my friends ... sometimes say: "You know, Damascus ... this very big bomb?"....

According to Barton and Lee (2013), literacy practices occur in the form of *roles* and *networks* in the context of social relations. Mona's family and Syrian community played roles in the network of online

and offline activity reporting the news on Facebook. However, these networks can be “constraining as well as supportive, disruptive or resistant to individuals’ needs for change” (Barton & Lee, 2013 p. 16). From Mona’s comments, she did not seem to want to be part of that group or discourse because it was distressing for her. Facebook is a powerful social network that offers ways of constructing individual as well as collective identities. Therefore, the practice of posting and sharing media is powerful, and there can be dynamics of power in the offline community as well, for example, the expectations of keeping up with the news in Syria as an identity of unified political stance. For the past year working with many former Syrian refugees, I have experienced their abhorrence of the brutality of the Assad regime. With the ongoing crisis, continuing devastation of their country and fear for the safety of their loved ones still in Syria, it is understandable that learners have wanted to share news, graphic images and intense discussion (even in limited English). But for some learners, like Mona, it is too emotionally taxing to engage in daily views about the political situation back home.

## Discussion

My aim for this study was to show how literacies at home might illustrate the theory and gain an understanding of the individual and relational meanings of those literacies for the participant. Furthermore, I wanted to reveal some of the complex issues for former refugees during periods of resettlement. Key themes emerged during the interviews and observations that have implications for adult literacy and EAL provision specifically for former refugee learners.

The first theme is that changing literacy practices, as a result of forced migration, brings much stress. The nature of trauma and related stressors need to be explored further, perhaps drawing on other disciplines, if we are to provide appropriate and effective learning settings. Educational interventions for refugee learners, readily identified as a vulnerable group, are often not expanded due to lack of funding. Community EAL and Literacy providers have largely relied on volunteer tutors and are restricted financially as to how many professional teachers and bilingual assistants they can employ. Opportunities for paid professional development are also limited for teachers. It seems that adult education for former refugees has not been prioritized or understood as a specialised form of education, meaning there are scant resources and professional development opportunities for teachers to attend. For example, at a recent workshop on dyslexia we learned that there is no current provision for assessing dyslexia for EAL adult learners, a pedagogical concern for teachers with learners who are not fully literate in their first language. It is not surprising for learners with limited or no formal education that standard literacy and EAL gains are often slow, incremental and difficult to assess. However, these gains need to be reported in tightly controlled and narrowly defined measurements of outcomes which do not consider the social, cultural, physical, mental and spiritual aspects of a learner’s progress is unfair to New Zealand quota refugees who are residents with rights to an equitable education that should attempt to target their specific needs (Mitchell & Ouko, 2012). Political and clinical definitions of refugees as survivors of trauma do not describe the profound grief that accompanies the dispossession and forced abandonment of all that refugees greatly cared for and valued; their homes, ancestral lands, cultures, and loved ones. These perspectives demand a reverence and respect and need to be conceptualized “within the spheres of the practical and the sacred” (Mika, 2007, p. 181). The spiritual dimensions of health are fundamental to Māori ecological understandings of well-being and are also represented in the ecological metaphor in Western psychology (Furness et al., 2013). If we draw on these dimensions, there should be a greater possibility for learners’ identities to be more positively affirmed and acknowledged.

The second theme recognises the strengths that the participant utilised, and her resourcefulness in navigating new and complex literacies. The word *refugee*, which implies a moral duty to provide assistance and hospitality without condition (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000), is disrupted by often deficit views portraying refugees as victims, helpless, or a burden on society. This discourse serves only to further marginalise those who have already survived so much suffering inflicted on them by violence asserting groups. More broadly, we are reminded that there are complex issues for adult literacy, such as deficit definitions of literacy competence. Family literacy practices are rich in vernacular language, are resourceful and offer affordances for learning that are naturalistic and not easy to replicate in more formal educational domains. These offer some interesting challenges.



Based on the interviews, ecological approaches would offer the best possibility to make adult literacy programmes for former refugees more meaningful, empowering and effective. In light of trauma and the difficulties associated with resettlement a strong focus on well-being is called for. The data implies moving away from narrow measurements of progress and deficit theorizing of refugees and towards a multi-dimensional way of measuring well-being specific to refugee learners. Additionally, there is an opportunity to conceptualise teaching and learning where trauma is a factor, “not as a topic of analysis and explanation” but “of embodied experience” (Mika, 2007, p. 182).

## Conclusion

In summary, the participant in this study has many challenges in her life: ongoing effects of trauma as her country and loved ones left behind suffer the continuing devastation of the war in Syria; coping with often unfamiliar and complex literacy practices in a new language; and raising three children, including a son with a severe hearing impairment. In spite of these factors, she draws on her many strengths—good literacy in her native language, a passion for learning and teaching others, and an ability to engage in complex, often inter-connected literacy and multi-lingual practices. She also draws on the excellent brokering support of her children, who seemed happy translating words to and from English, Arabic and sign language. It is evident the family utilise their multi-lingual abilities to learn English as an additional language in the home domain and problem solving in a variety of contexts online, while reinforcing language learning through experiences of meaning-making. These observations challenge the often deficit discourses of refugees and adult EAL literacy learners. Admittedly, this is only a sample of a small-scale research study but the findings are consistent with other research (Benseman, 2014; Hope, 2013; Hunter, 2012; Mitchell & Ouko, 2012). It helped bring to light the strengths, struggles and strategies employed by a newly arrived former refugee, which otherwise might be overlooked. The findings illustrate perspectives that may be relevant in the Aotearoa New Zealand context where diversity of values exists among our indigenous and diverse communities. These complex issues need to be addressed, especially as more people are forced to migrate due to war, civil unrest and environmental issues. Furthermore, it argues a case for a more understanding approach towards literacy education in light of trauma, and offers ways forward for developing programs that place well-being epistemologically (rather than ideologically) in order to develop adult literacy education that is more appropriate and socially just. There is a timely need for a pedagogy of well-being that posits the wisdom of huaora (health, vigour) as its gatekeeper, believes in and inspires agency, has the capacity to accommodate the interrelated strands between and across cultures and the individual, family, community and more official learning environments. Without such a foundational belief we do not have a unified dialogue to justify, protect and refine what matters in adult education. We also run the risk of continued misappropriation (for example, limiting Māori models of well-being to health and physical education) when trying to force philosophical and pedagogical models into boxes to serve an educational system that is fast becoming more corporatized and less democratic. However, to ignite change we have to “challenge the ontological and culturally based assumptions on which mainstream policies and programs are based” (Williams & Hall, 2014, p. 213). It calls for much contemplation; looking beneath the surface of what we perceive to be our views of adult literacy (or what the dominant discourse tells us) in order to discover what we validly feel about future directions, and, in this disturbance, find ways of expressing them.

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