

# Let a Thousand Teachers Bloom

## A Response to “Creating Communities”

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### ABSTRACT

Public education in the United States is nominally inclusive and open to all, but is also nuanced and complicated, particularly for students with special learning needs or for English language learners. For refugee students, who may also belong to either or both these two groups, the challenge can be compounded by previous traumas to themselves and their families. Roxas’s description of teacher Patricia Engler illustrates how complicated, but ultimately doable, is the work of educating refugee youth. The key strategy that the article illustrated was the need for attention to connections between school and home life. The students experienced these and other cultural intersections as affirming and consistent, further strengthening the community-school linkages.

**A**FTER READING “CREATING Communities: Working with Refugee Students in Classrooms” (Roxas, 2011), I’m reminded of something Maxine Greene wrote:

*We cannot think about American education without summoning up images of newcomers, of strangers . . . They have always been coming; they are still coming from the ravaged places, the police states, the camps, the war-torn streets. Some come for sanctuary; some, for opportunity; some, for freedom. What they understand to be freedom depends on their traditions and their life experiences, their hopes, often their dreams. (Green, 1988, p. 87)*

What someone understands to be freedom may depend on tradition, but whatever the tradition, it is likely to appear in U.S. public schools. The quest for freedom might be seen as a journey, a sequence of bridges crossed toward safer passage; at times this quest leads children to public school classrooms.

I recently attended a screening of a documentary film entitled *Concrete Steel and Paint: A Film about Crime, Restoration and Healing* (Burstein & Heriza, 2009). This film, sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee and funded by the Ford Foundation, documents the construction of peace murals in Philadelphia, was jointly produced by inmates of a local prison and victims of local crimes. While the outcome of the project was ultimately positive, the path to working in harmony was not a

direct one. Each group needed to be able to express and have heard their needs, wants, and limitations. That is, the victims needed to be able to express their paths of survival and pain, and the inmates needed their own pains and longings expressed as well. In this case, they expressed that pain through focused, collaborative, community-building mural work.

So too goes the story of the population in Roxas’s article. The story he tells begins with students from war-torn countries “painting and working side-by-side on a canvas” (p. 1). These suggestions of goodwill through collaboration, of safety in community, and of the need for bridges across differences return throughout the story of a teacher and her newcomer class.

In this brief article, I respond to some of the remarkable findings in the article and then end with a reiteration of Roxas’s

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focus on the need for teachers of refugee students to create and sustain communities inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Building Bridges in the Service of Reaching Refugee Students**

The metaphor of bridges is threaded throughout the article. In terms of immigrant students and refugees, bridges could be literal, as in bridges between countries they fled to and from; or they could be metaphorical, as in bridges between old ways and new. In Roxas's piece, bridges are meant as tools to build community in the classroom, more specifically, when he writes of Engler, the teacher:

*By providing a metaphorical bridge between the literal walls of their classroom and school and local communities, individuals, and programs, Engler provided important reminders of how teachers in public schools can give students access to community resources that can be invaluable for students and their families, and simultaneously introduce community members to refugee students and families who are willing, but often uncertain, contributors to the communities in which they live. (p. 7)*

Coming in the conclusion to the article, the above statement alludes both to the melding of disparate cultures in the service of something both bigger and more positive than either alone and to the need for students—some of whom do not automatically possess positive feelings about school—to have access to safe places to learn.

Public education in the United States is technically inclusive and open to all, but how that inclusiveness and openness is manifested in reality is more nuanced and complicated, particularly for students with special learning needs or for whom English is not their first language. For refugee students, who may also belong to either or both these two groups, the challenge can be compounded by previous traumas to themselves and their families. The challenge to effectively educate refugee students, then, can seem daunting and comprehensive.

Yet with the right instructor, great things are possible. Roxas identifies such an instructor, writing:

*I was struck by how far these children from refugee groups had come in a year both socially and academically and also by how much of their progress hinged on the work of their teacher, Patricia Engler, and her focus on the building of community—within the classroom itself but also between the students in the classroom and members of the local community that surrounded the school.*

Let a thousand Englers bloom in the service of refugee students in public schools! In responding to Roxas's essay, I am moved to enthusiasm, albeit a cautious enthusiasm. There is little with which to quibble in the material Roxas presents—it is a narrative of a committed, humane, and successful teacher. And based on my experiences with preservice teacher education and school observations in general, I'm sure there are yet more stories

behind the narrative told in the article. But even in its current form, there are many moments of success for Engler.

### **Teachable Moments**

Roxas's description of classroom norms and cultural clashes shines bright through vignettes from Engler's classroom. As part of a section "addressing the elephants in the room," Roxas relates a story of a classroom argument between a boy and a girl. What might have been a common and expected occurrence in another classroom was particularly charged in Engler's newcomer class because it easily became an interethnic Somali conflict. After the boy told the girl her face was "as black as the bottom of my shoe" (p. 4), Engler intervened. The deft veteran used the slur as a teachable moment of what is acceptable where, and to exemplify her zero-tolerance policy for "language that demeans or belittles fellow students" (p. 4). It reminded me of the fall of Saddam Hussein, and how Iraqi men assailed the dictator's statues with their shoes, a grave insult.

This vignette, about a challenging yet well-managed situation, reflects the multiple challenges faced by teachers of refugee students. In addition to the "trifecta of insults" (p. 4) of race, filth, and ethnicity bound up in the simile insult above, the trope of gender further complicates Engler's attempts at creating community. The boy Maxammed's response: "I will not say sorry to a girl, we don't do that in my country" (p. 4).

Reading this section of his article, I thought about how to use the anecdote in my preservice mainstream-teacher class Equity and Diversity. How fundamental the ordering of the sexes seemed to Engler's student versus how alien such ranking may seem to us. I think as well about the other, less stark examples of cultural differences that students cite in admissions interviews, such as how it is considered rude in some cultures for students to make direct eye contact with elders.

Both experienced and novice teachers need to balance the need for respecting all students with the professional, even progressive, norms of many classrooms. Just as my students are aware they need to not demand that students make eye contact when speaking directly to teachers, Engler knows better than to tell Maxammed that he is wrong.

### **Teachers Transforming Schools and Societies One Classroom at a Time**

Good teaching preparation, like athletic preparation, is often invisible; the best make it seem effortless. Throughout the article, Engler's pedagogy is described as affirming refugee students' strengths and incorporating her students' cultures in her teaching and learning as well. After coding his data, Roxas infers generative themes that illustrate the impact the teacher's craft had upon the research. Emergent themes include "addressing head-on the lived realities of her students" and "bringing her students out to serve the local community" (p. 4). Even under optimal circumstances, the logistics of the above actions bespeak behavior of a committed professional teacher. In incorporating all students' cultures, teachers need to learn about other cultures and constantly adapt and incorporate them for classroom use. In Engler's case, her

pedagogy extended outside the classroom walls to involve the communities in symbiotic learning.

Both inside her classroom and outside of it, Engler took care to create and sustain connections, provide opportunities and, yes, build bridges for her students to cross. But rather than depicting her as a Superwoman, the needed antidote to the challenging normalcy that is American public education, Roxas takes care to present Engler as a beacon—not as a panacea to solve all problems of refugee student achievement, but rather as part of a toolbox from which other teachers can draw.

Roxas's description of Engler's work is not one of some unattainable ideal but is a slew of strategies and suggestions culled over years and honed with imperfect attempts. In some ways, the refugee classroom she stewards every day serves as a microcosm of public schooling in the United States. Students attend with social, emotional, and behavioral needs as well as variegated cognitive abilities that belie the notion of homogenous groupings. Teachers are stretched to meet the needs of all students and often find they cannot do so without help or boundless energy. Undue high stress over school test scores seems not as much of an issue at Engler's school as it is at some other schools, but doubtless there were plenty of other challenges along the way.

The key strategy that the article illustrates, rarely done well within most public schools, is one of interlinking communities: the community inside the classroom linked with the neighborhood community. In Engler's class, the connections between school and home life were made clearer, and the students experienced the cultural intersections as affirming and consistent. While such strategies are used elsewhere, complicating factors such as immigrant status and familial reticence make them unlikely to be brought to scale. And, as Roxas points out throughout the piece, sometimes the very difficulties of community building act as catalysts for connections and perseverance. Again I say, let a thousand Englers bloom!

## References

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