



TEACHING THROUGH BOOKS | PART 2

REFUGEES

By Kelly Johnson

THEME: Refugee Voices

GRADE LEVELS: Elementary School with adaptations for Middle School

LEARNING FOCUS

A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee conflict or persecution and has left their home country, crossing international borders to seek safety. They cannot return home without risking their life or freedoms. There are more than 122 million refugees around the globe, and the UN estimates that 47 million of them are children. There are more refugees today than recorded at any time in our world's past.

People become refugees for many reasons, including violence and war, as well as persecution because of race, religious beliefs, or political opinion. For each person it is a different set of circumstances. Though the refugee experience can never be represented through a singular voice, unifying themes include the loss of stability, identity, and connection to place, as well as the subsequent effort to find belonging in a new setting.

In what ways can we celebrate our students' unique identities through name and place within our classroom setting?

Identity: In learning about others, and as I gain insight into my own unique connection to identity and place, how can I join with other people and make change for the better in our world? In what ways can I adjust my behaviour and act to support and defend the community I belong to?

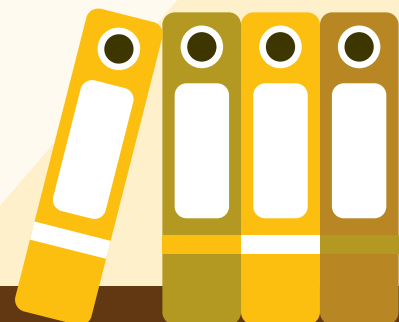
Skills: How might I describe or explain the importance of my name and the place I live as they relate to my experiences, identity, and life?

Intellectualism: How can reading about the stories of others and their lived experiences help us develop our understanding of the people in our learning community? How does exploring the theme of refugee voices help us intentionally build inclusive communities?

Criticality: Why is it important to discuss and ask questions about our identity and how it connects to others?

Joy: How does talking about my identity and my connections to others bring me joy? How might I share my joy with others through creating or making?

Note that these learning goals follow Gholdy Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy Framework, an equity framework for learning. Using this framework, goals are set to ensure that students are making deep connections and being introspective at the same time.



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (K-3)

FEATURED BOOK

The Little Girl

By H. Pham-Fraser, illustrated by Akemi
FriesenPress, 2022



MINDS ON PROVOCATION

BACKGROUND:

The Little Girl by H. Pham-Fraser is about a young child who arrives in Canada as a refugee. As she enters a classroom for the first time in her life, her teacher, though a kind woman, arbitrarily decides to change the little girl's name into one that is more familiar (anglicized) and will be easier to pronounce. Pham-Fraser invites us to consider our connection to place, and how our sense of self and identity are deeply rooted in the names given to us by our families. Both of these can be lost when we are uprooted from our home and relocated to a new country.

BEFORE READING:

Introduce the word “refugee.” Invite a discussion of what students already know about refugees. Use a visual tool such as a [concept map](#) to write and draw the definition of refugee, along with some of the reasons why people become refugees.

Warm up to the story by taking a picture walk through the pages. If possible, project images onto a screen. Invite students to notice the illustrations and the backgrounds in the pictures that help show where the story takes place. Make a list of all the locations from the story that students can name. What do the illustrations tell us about the time and place (setting) of this story? Walk through again and notice the people in the story. Invite predictions about who those people may be.

READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

DURING READING:

As you are reading the story aloud, observe with students that the illustrator, Akemi, has been very intentional in the placement of colour in the illustrations.

Invite a discussion: What do you notice about the colours in the story? What does that make you wonder?



AFTER READING:

What questions do we have after reading the story? Invite students to organize their thinking by using the [See/Think/Wonder](#) strategy. Help record their observations on a white board or chart paper. Many students may notice that for much of the story, the little girl does not speak at all to her teacher or to the kids in her class. This may bring up a lot of “I wonder” statements.

MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY**CONNECTING TO OUR NAME STORY:**

In the coming days, invite students to learn the stories and origins of their names. Ask them to interview their families in order to answer the following questions:

- Do I have more than one name?
- Do I have another name in a language spoken at home?
- How does my name look when it is printed in the language spoken at home?
- How did my family choose my name?
- Are there others in my family who share the same name?

Invite students to brainstorm other questions they may want to ask.

Have students share their name stories with one another during morning circle or sharing time. In hearing the stories of others, we feel connected and come to learn that there are many similarities among us.

Add students’ names to a visual gallery, which will be expanded in the next step after exploring connection to place.

CONNECTING TO OUR SENSE OF PLACE CONSCIOUSNESS:

In *The Little Girl*, she has had to leave her home country to live in Canada. Ask students to find examples of places in the story that let the reader know she likes her new surroundings.

Yet, as much as the girl may love her new home, she has also lost her original home and the places that she loved there.

Invite students to think about the places that are important to them: “Close your eyes and make pictures in your head of the places you love, the ones where you feel safe, joyful, and peaceful. Are there places where you feel more creative, or you where you feel freer to imagine?”

Using multi-media choices (draw, doodle, paint, sculpt, or write) students can create a visual depiction of their special places. Display these artifacts alongside their names as a powerful representation of how we connect to our identity through both name and place.

Students can make statements to complete the following sentence:

I love this place _____ because _____, or I am connected to _____,
or I can do _____ when I am in this _____ place.



REFLECT AND CONNECT

Reflect on what the class has learned together, reminding students that their feelings of belonging and identity include their connection to their name stories and the places where they feel safe, joyful, and at peace.

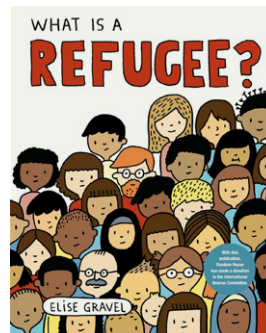
This is the perfect time to read *What Is a Refugee?* by Elise Gravel. After reading, initiate a class discussion around the following questions:

- How can we create a classroom that is welcoming and safe for all?
- What things can we do together every day that help all kids feel like they belong?
- What practices can we include for students who arrive partway through the school year in order to welcome them and embrace them into our classroom community?
- What words of welcome/hello can we include on our classroom door to help all students feel represented and that they belong?

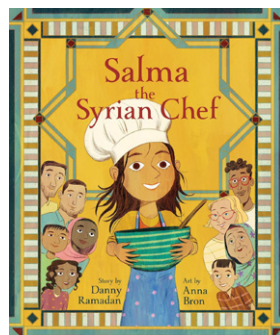
ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS THEME



The Most Beautiful Thing I Have Ever Seen by Nadia Devi Umadat, illustrated by Christine Wei (Second Story Press, 2023)



What Is a Refugee? by Elise Gravel (Schwartz & Wade Books, 2019)



Salma the Syrian Chef by Danny Ramadan, illustrated by Anna Bron (Annick Press, 2020)



Salma Makes a Home by Danny Ramadan, illustrated by Anna Bron (Annick Press, 2023)

ADAPTATIONS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL (4-8)

FEATURED BOOK

Alone: The Journeys of Three Young Refugees

By Paul Tom, illustrated by Mélanie Baillairgé,
translated by Arielle Aaronson
Groundwood Books, 2023



Background information and the Minds On Provocation concept map can still be used with students in Grades 4-8. Use the picture book *What Is a Refugee?* by Elise Gravel as a warm-up to open the discussion and provide background information for student-created [concept maps](#). Then read *Alone: The Journeys of Three Young Refugees* by Paul Tom as a shared novel. This book is written in free verse with extensive illustrations to accompany the text. If possible, project the images and words as the book is read aloud. Students can use notebooks to journal reflections they may have as they listen to the story.

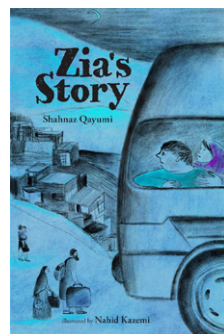
The additional novels listed below could also be used as shared class novels or as literature circle novels for students to read in small groups.

Use a tool such as an [identity map](#) to encourage students to explore their own concept of identity. A [double journal entry](#) could be an effective tool for giving students time to reflect on their own learning while also gaining skills and knowledge around using and quoting text to support thinking.

MORE CANADIAN BOOKS FOR GRADES 4-8



Taming Papa by Mylène Goupil,
translated by Shelley Tanaka
(Groundwood Books, 2024)

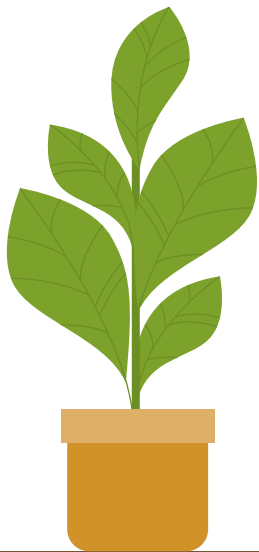


Zia's Story by Shahnaz Qayumi,
illustrated by Nahid Kazemi
(Tradewind Books, 2024)



MORE RESOURCES

- [“6 New Refugee Stories for Young Readers”](#): A book list from 49th Shelf.
- [“10 picture books about refugees and migration”](#): A book list for young readers, from Scottish Book Trust.
- [Canadian Council for Refugees](#): Resources and information about important issues for Canada’s historic and current refugee resettlement.
- [“Paul Tom Animates the Stories of Child Refugees in *Alone*”](#): An interview with Paul Tom about his experience as a refugee child and his book *Alone*.
- [UNHCR’s Refugee Population Statistics Database](#): Global statistics about the refugee experience.
- [Refugee Trauma](#): This resource from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network outlines stressors for children experiencing refugee resettlement.
- [“Top tips for teachers: How to support refugees in the classroom”](#): Strategies for teachers as they support and welcome refugee students.



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