

8-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Naidoo, L. (2009). A Structuration Theory Analysis of the Refugee Action Support Program in Greater Western Sydney. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(4).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2009v34n4.5>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
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## **A Structuration Theory Analysis of the Refugee Action Support Program in Greater Western Sydney**

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*Abstract: This article uses Giddens' structuration theory to analyse the Refugee Action Support program in Greater Western Sydney. The study shows that many refugee students in Australian high schools experience difficulty with academic transition in mainstream classrooms due to their previous experiences in war-torn countries. As a result of the trauma suffered, many refugees have difficulty adjusting to the host society. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many of the refugees may not previously have had any form of formal schooling. Their literacy development may therefore be impacted by both individual and structural factors. Structuration theory helps us understand how literacy was improved for these refugee students and how practice was mediated as a result of the Refugee Action Support program.*

### **Introduction**

Across New South Wales, Australia, African refugees who currently constitute the largest group of humanitarian refugees in Australia are entitled to one year of support in Intensive English Centres (IECs), after which they are expected to conform to the requirements of the standard curriculum. These refugees face transitional problems in acculturation and settlement as many have been unable to attend school before coming to Australia, or obtained only interrupted schooling at best. This means their literacy development may be below expected age-level, so that functioning successfully in school and obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary in making a satisfying life may be difficult for many of them. While the literature indicates there is no consensus on the best or most effective way of promoting literacy development among refugee students it appears that supplementary support outside of formal schooling is essential (Beck, 1999).

Therefore, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) developed an approach to literacy development that employs a small group tutoring program (Refugee Action Support) that uses university pre-service teachers in secondary teacher education as tutors for teenage refugee students. Intensive orientation is provided to the tutors by the ALNF to enable them to analyse students' learning needs and scaffold information, exercises, and conversation in ways the student can comprehend and master. For the refugee students, tutorial support is

provided once a week for three hours in and after school in nine Greater Western Sydney high schools. The tutors are supervised by school-appointed coordinating teachers, and assisted by an African community liaison officer (CLO). These arrangements have been endorsed by the NSW Department of Education and Training.

As beginning teachers, the tutors learn about the value of informal small-group teaching as an alternative or supplementary method of instruction for refugee students. The approach developed by the ALNF features both situated learning and a pedagogical method based on Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," which gears pedagogical demands to the level of development that a child is able to achieve (Vygotsky, 1978). The Refugee Action Support Program uses a Vygotskian approach to pedagogy. In this approach, the curriculum in the homework centres will be tailored to the literacy level of the students and presented in a way that enables them to achieve new linguistic skills. The idea of situated practice involves different forms of language learning suited to specific social or linguistic settings, giving a refugee student the ability to successfully match linguistic output to particular discursive, social or informal settings (Lave & Wenger, 1995).

## Review of the Literature

The application of structuration theory to the study of refugee students particularly in regards to literacy development has gained scant attention in the literature. Richmond (1993) used structuration theory to examine the movements of refugees, and the same theory was used by Al-Ali *et al.* (2001) to discuss the 'capabilities' of refugees to partake in transnational connections. Healey (2006) seeks to contribute to the theorisation of refugee studies by analysing the voices of asylum-seekers and refugees and their experiences within the conceptual framework of structuration theory. Even tutorial assistance as a form of in-school and after-school curriculum for refugee students in particular, is under-developed in the literature on literacy development.

Many researchers however have investigated language attitudes, use and maintenance in Australian migrant communities (see for example Kipp, Clyne & Pauwels, 1995; Borland, 2005), yet only a few have investigated these issues with a specific focus on African refugee teenagers. Acknowledging that language practices are manifestations of negotiated social roles and participation, the project seeks to co-constructively initiate students into the language discourses and Discourses of the school environment. Discourse (with the capital "D") is a term coined by Gee (1996) to refer to the attitudes, behaviors, conversations, identities, procedures and cultural capital which lie embedded within the language activities of a community of practice (such as schooling in general as well as a specific school). The close dialogic relationship established between student-tutor relationships will enable negotiated meaning, negotiated (personalised) outcomes and the joint construction of texts (oral, print and visual) where both Discourse and discourse features are modeled and made explicit. The tutoring program is part of the gradual process of personal development where the young person can develop socially as well as academically. This approach is supported by Lamb *et al.* (2004) who believed that if the student finds someone (adult) within the school to form a meaningful relation with, it gives them confidence, inspiration, and a role model. In this way, multiple identities could be constructed by

refugee students that satisfy family and community expectations and help them retain their ethnic identity within the wider society (Naidoo, 2007).

To have limited English language facility may pose significant problems in the construction of new social identities by teenage refugee students in Australia. While refugee students may be keen to engage with the regular academic and social practices within classrooms and schools, they face a dilemma in meeting the language and literacy expectations within particular curriculum content and in relation to particular pedagogical strategies. For teachers working with students in these contexts, this poses an incredible tension as they struggle to create conditions in which students can participate in mainstream classrooms, and at the same time meet these students' particular academic, social and linguistic needs. The Refugee Action Support Program provides a starting point for understanding in more detail the specific backgrounds and experiences of African refugee students, and also for developing educational strategies to be used by tutors that might best meet the needs of these students.

Although several studies have proposed conventional methods of teaching that can be effective for refugee and immigrant students (McBrien, 2005), there is little consensus amongst researchers and practitioners as to which methods are most effective. In regard to teacher's approach to refugee students, Gebhard (2003) examined methods of instruction used in three Californian schools and found that most teachers lacked experience in teaching students whose primary language is not English. He also found that the most useful system was one where students were taught using a combination of group projects, verbal and written tasks and facilitation by teachers and bilingual specialists. Bates et al. (2005) studied the Sudanese 'lost boys' in the United States and reported that adolescents did encounter obstacles because the schools in which they were placed were not able to meet their social and learning needs. Some students reported feeling frustrated because success at school required prior knowledge in subjects such as US history and others complained of a lack of cultural sensitivity in their schools. These studies suggest that teaching methods are more successful if familiar cultural experiences can be built into the learning process, and if teachers can recognise that there may be vast differences in the educational processes that students have been exposed to previously. Further, researchers have highlighted that incorporating familiar cultural experiences also helps students adapt to the culture in which they are submerged, with minimal loss of their own culture.

### **Structuration Theory**

This paper uses the conceptual framework of structuration theory to analyse the responses from coordinating teachers and pre-service teachers about refugee students. The paper also aims to show that schools as structures of society can be both constraining and enabling when it comes to refugee students in the Refugee Action support Program. The duality of structure is beneficial in the study of schools and classrooms where refugee students attend as it acts both to restrict and reinforce action. An exploration of the responses from coordinating teachers and pre-service teachers will illustrate the changing agency of refugee students within the Refugee Action Support Program.

The primary concern of structuration theory is the conceptualization of human knowledgeability and its involvement in action. Giddens (1984, p. 2) sees human

social activities as being “recursive” over time and space. This implies that they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In structuration theory, “to be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon these reasons” (Giddens, 1984, p. 3). This form of human reflexivity is replicative in that it facilitates unconsciously the creation and recreation of social systems. At this level too classroom teachers may compare their classroom practices with their personal belief systems. It is also at this level that teachers may personally experience the contradiction or ambiguities of their structural location.

According to Giddens (1984), action in the social sciences has to place at the centre the everyday fact that social actors are knowledgeable about the conditions of social reproduction in which their day to day activities are enmeshed. The reasons people have for their actions or what Giddens (1984) called the ‘rationalization of action’ are concerned with how those actions are sustained. Furthermore in trying to conceptualise the knowlegeability of social actors, Giddens (1984) not only distinguishes between conscious and unconscious knowledge but goes further to distinguish two levels in which agents are knowledgeable about the social environment, namely, discursive and practical consciousness. The supplying of reasons for actions refers to the discursive level or capabilities of actors. What “actors are able to say about their activities is by no means all that they “know” about them” (Giddens, 1982, p. 31). Practical consciousness on the other hand refers to tacit knowledge that is employed in the course of conduct but which the actor is unable to formulate discursively. The knowlegeability of human agents is bounded by the unacknowledged conditions of action on the one hand and its unintended consequences on the other.

This aspect is important in social theory since it is incorporated within processes of the reproduction of institutions. It is at the level of practical consciousness that the classroom teacher and refugee student will find familiar recipes for coping in the classroom which may also include categorizations of knowledge, of students’ ability and student behaviour. It is also the stratum where the teacher finds those sentiments that could reflect staff student solidarity. It will be in practical consciousness that teachers would experience much of the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of teaching. Practical consciousness would initiate such questions as ‘do I enjoy teaching?’ and ‘what makes it worthwhile? Practical consciousness will allow us to see teachers and students as more than unreflective passive receptors or products of socialization incapable of comprehending their course of action. Teachers will be able to sustain themselves at the level of practical consciousness since it is at this level that individuals will feel a sense of ontological security, a sense of being in society. The inability of students and teachers to come to terms with the lived experience at the practical level of consciousness will lead to a higher degree of discursive consciousness particularly about the contradictions of schooling and the tensions between educational ideologies practice in schools and social structure.

Furthermore, Giddens (1984) believes that power is linked to action if power is defined as the capability of intervention or refraining from such intervention. In other words an individual may choose to intervene or refrain from intervention “with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Resources are drawn upon and reproduced by actors during the course of interaction but are not constituted as structures of domination. Resources then become the means whereby power is employed in the routine course of social action but they are at the

same time structural elements of social systems, reconstituted in social interaction. Power in social systems can thus be treated as involving reproduced relations of autonomy and dependence in social interaction (Giddens, 1984). In societal terms, this implies that since actors know 'how to behave', they contribute through their actions, to the continuous production and reproduction of the social structure of rules. Without knowledge of these rules, social life would be impossible. Yet in every action there is the potential for actors to participate in changing the 'rules' or structure in further action. In this way, there is continuity and change in society.

One of the main tenets of structuration theory is the fact that rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction "the duality of structure" (Giddens, 1984, p. 15). By this he means that the structural properties of a social system are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that make up those systems. Structure therefore could be seen as both constraining and enabling. The duality of structure "is the main grounding of continuities in social reproduction across time-space. It in turn presupposes the reflexive monitoring of agents in and as constituting the flow of conduct, the 'duree' of daily social activity" (Giddens, 1984, p. 26-27). Duality of structure overcomes the polarization in thinking about education, between those schools of thought that stress structure and those that stress action, between deterministic and voluntaristic views of behaviour and between man viewed as object and man viewed as subject. Duality of structure therefore becomes important when discussing teacher education because teachers and students are located at the interface of 'structure' and 'action'. The teacher in the classroom not only mediates the "goals" and 'functions' of the education system but also represents other elements of the social structure like class, race, gender, sexuality and indigeneity.

Today teachers are constantly engaged in negotiation and construction of knowledge with students. In essence, it is difficult to understand teachers and students in the classrooms without reference to the broader social and political arena since schools as an example of a social structure is both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time the very medium and outcome of this constitution. While this may sound similar to earlier reproductive theorists, it implies more than just reproduction. It means that institutions can always be transformed so reproduction is not always presumed. There is no inherent separation of the macro and micro dimensions of human interaction. The structural organisation of schools can impact on the refugee students' learning in the classroom. Most action is not directly motivated but is accomplished in practical consciousness. The latter is demonstrated through the adherence to routines which cannot always be articulated. While routines are responsible for social reproduction in organisations like schools, they do also provide a reassuring context for refugee students' learning in that they are not confronted with the unexpected. As such it eliminates moments of anxiety or "ontological insecurity". Ontological security has trust as a precondition and trust helps us sustain an active anxiety controlled engagement in everyday activities. That trust and confidence gives us and in this case, the refugee students, the ability to manage the various threats or dangers that challenge us as individuals and as collectivities.

Giddens (1984) identifies social structures as being Signification, Legitimation and Domination. Through their modalities, these social structures allow individuals to communicate with each other, have their actions and interactions socially sanctioned and have power over other human agency and non-human resources authorizing a person's agency and allocating resources. How these modalities are interpreted will rely upon an individual's stock of knowledge and facility with language; norms that

will provide the individual with social rights and a facility for activating their agency through the exercise of power. Power then is viewed not necessarily as repressive but also as a productive force. “It is not an obstacle to freedom or emancipation, but is their very medium” (Giddens, 1984, p. 257). Structuration theory is concerned to “provide the conceptual means of analysing the often delicate and subtle interlacings of reflexively organized action and institutional constraint” (Giddens, 1991, p. 204).

### **Analysis of Data**

In schools today, content and instruction have become increasingly prescribed. This presents a problem to recently arrived African refugee students who have frequently spent years in refugee camps (Community Relations Commission, 2006). Furthermore, African refugees come from cultures where subsistence agriculture forms the basis of the economy, where the culture is highly oral, with most refugees speaking languages that do not have written forms (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007).

African refugees have to therefore learn a new language, adapt to different socio-cultural expectations, negotiate their new environment and living context and deal with various forms of racism (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006; Community Relations Commission, 2006; Ferfolja, 2007). For African refugees these challenges may be further impacted by ‘domestic and family responsibilities [and]... moral obligations towards extended family members remaining in Africa’ (Cassity & Gow 2006, p.3). Furthermore, Cassity and Gow (2006, p. 1) found that ‘the schooling system is not working well for many recently arrived African young people. There are success stories but, in general, students are struggling within new institutional settings ... Evidently, teachers, school support staff and youth workers feel ill-equipped and under-resourced to deal with the soaring numbers’.

The Refugee Action Support program gives teachers and refugee students’ respect, reward, involvement and engagement in education agendas that make agency into a powerful synergy for positive educational change. Structuration theory is a perspective that focuses on social change by analysing the relations between reified structures and individual actions, so that even though schools as organisations may be structured, schools are also always changing. While the school is an agent of reproduction, reproducing those values, norms and signifiers sanctioned by the dominant discourse, it is also the medium that enables patterns of practice to be mediated.

Since its inception in 2007, the Refugee Action Support Program focused on the discourses associated with the program especially through individual and focus group interviews with coordinating teachers and pre-service tutors. During 2008, 77 UWS pre-service teachers from a range of secondary method backgrounds volunteered as Tutors in the RAS initiative. The group interviews involved up to eight participants and up to five interviews were conducted simultaneously. The interviews adopted a semi-structured approach that ensured that the key areas under investigation were addressed by all researchers conducting these interviews. The interview schedules addressed a range of issues pertaining to the tutors’ experiences and perceptions of the RAS project about 1) refugee students, 2) the nature of teaching, 3) processes of mentoring and tutoring students. Face-to face interviews were also undertaken with the Coordinating Teachers at the Tutoring Centres at the beginning and end of the tutoring period. Questions focused on what they thought the refugee students had learned socially and academically through their participation in the

Centre; how the Tutors contributed to these achievements, and what they thought the Tutors had learned about: 1) interacting with refugee students: 2) teaching them, and 3) the nature of teaching generally. They were also asked what they thought the benefits were of RAS to the school, and to the well-being of refugee students who attended (Ferfolja, Mc Carthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker, 2009).

The refugee students who attended the Tutoring Centres were not interviewed. Many of these students possess limited English language skills and may be distrustful of 'government' and other authorities. Given that many of the Coordinating Teachers were experienced English Second Language teachers they were asked to complete an eleven item checklist that provided measures of students' literacy achievements. The questions used in the assessment were those designed by the ALNF. The first assessment includes the initial impressions of each Coordinating Teacher of individual student's ability along a variety of measures dealing with 1) written skills and knowledge; 2) oral skills such as fluency, and 3) learning skills in general such as being able to keep up in class. Of the 11 questions regarding skills in these three areas, Coordinating Teachers were asked to rate each student along each item using a five-point scale. The scale ranged from Excellent (independent activity), Good (with limited scaffolding), Average (with explicit scaffolding including cloze), Fair (attempts task w/scaffolding but no completion) and Poor (no progress with written tasks (Ferfolja, Mc Carthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker 2009, p. 15).

This data indicates that all 12 students improved on some items. The range was from a Yr 11 student who showed improvement in only one area (writing process) to a Yr 10 student in another school who showed improvement in all 11 areas. Additionally, nine of the twelve students improved on 50 percent of the items or more. This indicates that three-quarters of the students made progress in many of the items related to writing, oral, and learning skills. It is interesting to note that among students with limited or no prior schooling, their scores were 7 and 5 respectively. This suggests that the added assistance provided by the tutors helped these students improve their basic skills. The tables also indicate that among the items being assessed, students generally had higher ratings and scores on items dealing with oral skills such as "fluency and accuracy of speech", and "respond effectively to dialogue" than they did on items 1 and 2 which dealt with written skills such as "vocabulary", and "sentence structure" (Ferfolja, Mc Carthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker, 2009, p.15). Nevertheless, these questionnaires provided useful generic information and trends about refugee students' achievements.

It is evident that the small group tutoring provides the basis for interaction between the UWS tutors and refugee students, thereby supporting the literacy development of those refugee students. It also provides informal contexts for discussing the social requirements of the school setting, and transformative experiences for UWS tutors to gain and construct more sophisticated understandings of appropriate pedagogies for teaching refugee students. For many UWS tutors, the program provided a means to ease the transition from small scale tutoring to formal school professional practice. Coordinating teachers, as the links between the tutoring centres and the participating high schools, believed that the program provided a "safe space", where refugee students are together with other refugee students, thereby allowing them to get more attention and develop a special relationship with the tutors (Ferfolja, Mc Carthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker, 2009, p.28). The responses from participants indicated changing beliefs about teaching and learning within schools and classrooms generating space for reflective practice to continue such dialogues. This shows how the structure of schools can exist as a duality that both enables and



constrains human agency. In schools involved in the refugee program, tutoring practices become the language of learning and this in turn becomes the way for new legitimate pedagogical practice as power flows through relations and as meaning is translated into local action. As such schools produce learning and itself produces educational change.

The opportunity for reflexivity in the pre-service teacher education course as well as the Refugee Action Support program within the structured order of schools facilitates through the tutoring the schools' (NSW-DET) evocation of the 'structure of Domination'. This permits them to select those schools that will participate in the program, their roles and responsibilities and the allocation of resources for this to function. However it is the transformatory reflexivity on the part of tutors that is the one that will bring about educational change. By including in the structured order the voices of refugee students pedagogy is translated in schools so that both refugee students and school teachers learn from this practice and as a result enhance the delivery of content to students from marginalised groups. Essentially while schools as an organisation remain intact, it is the practices and outcomes that will be improved. Giddens (1984, p. 16) asserts that:

Power within social systems which enjoys some continuity over time and space presumes regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in the context of social interaction. But all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinated can influence the activities of their superiors. This is what I call the dialectic of control in social system.

Interview data from tutors and coordinating teachers about refugee students can be analysed through their discursive consciousness. The responses even though they emerged through interaction and interpretation of the practical consciousness of respondents, did show the varying strengths of agency and structural factors on their experiences. In terms of structuration theory, this indicates that refugee students in the context of the tutorial centres had gained ontological security because they developed rapport with tutors and learnt to trust them and could then work with tutors much more easily. Through the tutoring assistance, refugee students were able to acculturate to a new school order. Such a result is also related to practical consciousness as refugee students may not have realised the degree to which they had acculturated the language and the culture of their host schools.

Despite the dominance of structural forces in the schools of Greater Western Sydney, over which the refugee students have little control, they were able to demonstrate discursive consciousness through their tutors and teachers responses. Coordinating teachers thought that for many of the students, their new successes were enhancing their self esteem and encouraging them in their studies. The students recognised that learning was a real possibility for them, something in which they could achieve. For example (Ferfolja, Mc Carthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker, 2009)

One of the students even approached me about two months ago and said that she would like to improve her verbal English skills because ... she feels that she's not getting a chance to practice her English. So she's actually developed a good relationship with one of the tutors and they spend a lot of time talking about current issues, they'll bring an issue or they'll look at the newspaper and they may well discuss it and she really enjoys that because it just gives her an opportunity to just practice her English and they also go onto the Internet and they just find things like grammar games and word games so that she can expand her vocabulary that way.

What this illustrates is the agency of the refugee student who sought additional assistance from tutors to improve not only her English but also to help her regain ontological security. Further examples of refugee students trying to gain ontological security and adapt to the new environment are illustrated by some of the comments from tutors. Sometimes refugee students had to “learn English” because it was the language of instruction and hence a response to structural forces as is demonstrated by the comment below. Language as such can be both agency and structure and the means of communication between individuals and society. (Ferfolja, 2007):

There was one girl [who] said when she came she actually didn't want to do school work; she actually wanted to come and practice English.

Through discursive consciousness it was also possible to analyse the emotions expressed by refugee students through their practical consciousness experiences. Their refugee subjectivity is only one aspect of their identity (Hewson, 2006), and there is a myriad of other ways that individuals may be both read and positioned. For example, a tutor noted that :

I think socially the students are very sensitive towards, their being considered as a group, addressed as refugees. My experience is with this school is that they'd like to be considered as a member of the class, as an individual rather than just being addressed as refugees.

This shows that the practical consciousness had an impact on individual thinking without them necessarily being conscious of it. The term refugee positions individuals as being “othered”, as requiring special treatment. Furthermore there is a public perception that African refugees have little to contribute to the Australian way of life, much of this arising from the images of impoverished children, famine and dictatorships. According to Latrobe University's African Research Institute, more Africans migrate to Australia with upper tertiary qualifications than migrants from countries with English as a first language, confounding common misconceptions (Saeed, 2007). Their discomfort with the terminology and classification also indicates a lack of control on the part of the refugee students but to a much greater degree, a sense of agency. Furthermore many refugee students used their own cultural experiences in the level of practical consciousness to obtain ontological security. The Refugee Action Support Program acted as an external agency from the perspective of both practical and discursive consciousness. As is illustrated in the comments from tutors, the refugee students were motivated by the practical consciousness to participate in the program yet discursively expressed their agency and ways of regaining ontological security through their interaction in the program.

## **Conclusion:**

In terms of Giddens' (1984) theory of ontological security, these refugee students have lost their sense of security by moving to a new country and will have to relearn ways of belonging in their new environment. The balance between structure and agency will differ for these refugee groups from the mainstream student population. Mainstream students and teachers have an established learning style a 'duree' that is not easily changeable. The Refugee Action Support program therefore creates a flow of conduct in that it allows those participating like coordinating teachers and pre-service teachers to create curriculum, knowing the specific needs of their refugee students and the refugee community, and bringing in pieces of their own and their students' interests into the classroom. Curriculum comes to be seen “as an

evolving, context specific interaction between teacher, children, and content” (Paris 1993, p. 16). In this way, schooling in general and the Refugee Action Support Program in particular is truly valuing and enabling teacher and refugee student agency. Structuration theory therefore offers a perspective that can inform our study of refugee students in Australian schools. By using the theory of structuration to understand the approach to literacy offered by the Refugee Action Support Program, it is hoped that individual and group agency would be enabled to challenge and change existing structures of domination and legitimation in schools so that learning benefits all students rather than a select few.

By focusing on refugees, it is hoped the research will also provide insights on socio-cultural issues that arise in schools and classrooms. As such, information obtained from the study will lead to an awareness of and respect for those from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as an understanding of the practices of school systems within which teachers work. The Refugee Action Support Program makes a valuable contribution to knowledge about teacher education. Not only does the program try to understand and document the participants’ pedagogical approaches to refugee education, it also demonstrates an increasing awareness of teachers’ experiences of social and cultural diversity issues in schools and classrooms.

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