

Georgia School Melds a World of Differences

By Warren St. John

Published: *The New York Times*, December 24, 2007

DECATUR, Ga. — Parents at an elementary school here gathered last Thursday afternoon with a holiday mission: to prepare boxes of food for needy families fleeing some of the world's most horrific civil wars.

The community effort to help refugees resembled countless others at this time of year, with an exception: the recipients were not many thousands of miles away. They were students in the school and their families.

More than half the 380 students at this unusual school outside Atlanta are refugees from some 40 countries, many torn by war. The other students come from low-income families in the community, and from middle- and upper-middle-class families in the surrounding area who want to expose their children to other cultures. Together they form an eclectic community of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims, well-off and poor, of established local families, and new arrivals who collectively speak about 50 languages.

"The fact that we don't have anything in common is what we all have in common," said Shell Ramirez, an American parent with two children at the school.

The International Community School, a public charter school that goes from kindergarten through sixth grade, began five years ago to address a pressing local problem — how to educate a flood of young refugees. It has evolved into a laboratory for the art of getting along, a place that embraces the idea that people from different cultures and classes can benefit each other, even as administrators, teachers and parents acknowledge the many practical difficulties.

For example, the school's weekly newsletter is published in six languages; yet it still is not intelligible to many parents. Some

refugee children arrive at the school having never seen a book. And while the school devotes extraordinary energy to a specialized curriculum designed for refugees, it must still satisfy exacting American parents.

"If it were easy," said a co-founder, Barbara Thompson, "everybody would be doing it."

A Magnet for Refugees

Refugees began arriving here in the 1990s, when aid agencies pegged the area as perfect for newcomers because of its low rents and proximity to jobs in downtown Atlanta, just 10 miles to the west. In the late '90s, nearly 20,000 refugees arrived in Georgia, most of them to this area.

Soon this once mostly white suburb on the western side of Stone Mountain, a historical bastion of the Ku Klux Klan, had become one of the more culturally and ethnically diverse areas in the country.

The children of these refugees present unique challenges for the school. Many suffer post-traumatic stress from the horrors they have witnessed. Few speak English when they arrive. Some have no formal education and are illiterate and innumerate, even in their native tongues.

To complicate matters, many refugee parents cannot help with homework or understand report cards.

Some children have had to be taught to stand in line or the significance of raising one's hand.

Linda Dorage, who teaches English as a second language at the school, said she has even had to introduce children to "just the concept of a two-dimensional image meaning something."

One early student, a goat herder from Mauritania, did not know how



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
A Kindergarten Class

to use a doorknob. A Sudanese girl was so traumatized from war and relocation that she insisted on sitting on the floor beneath her desk each day.

“The teacher decided she would go under the desk with her and do lessons under there,” Ms. Thompson said. “She drew her out in her own good time.”

One Family’s Example

Until the community school came along, most refugee children found themselves in conventional public schools. To understand the difference, it helps to visit the family of He Tha and Mya Mya, a Burmese husband and wife who arrived with their four children last summer after 25 years in refugee camps in Thailand.

The family now lives in a two-bedroom apartment, its walls bare except for a homemade shrine of hand-drawn figures in red and blue ink around a photograph of friends left behind. Written below the photo is, “Never say goodbye.”

The eldest children — 15-year-old Monday and 18-year-old Baby Boy, who was given his name for arriving a month premature — were too old for the community school. They were placed at a high school, where they received an hour of English instruction each morning and spent the rest of the day in regular ninth grade classes, even though they spoke hardly a word of English.

Asked what it was like to spend hours in classes he could not understand, Baby Boy laughed and blushed.

“It’s boring,” he said.

The younger two children, Tuesday Paw, 12, and Eh Dee Na Poe, 7, attend the community school.

Refugee children there receive daily classes in English as a second language and additional individual instruction based on their needs. There are after-school classes until 5:15 pm each weekday, along with art and music classes, and French and Spanish for all students. Classes are relatively small, 18 students on average, and each



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
A Reading Class

has an assistant to the teacher. Students wear uniforms — light blue or white collared shirts, and dark blue pants or skirts — so that clothing does not become a distracting status symbol.

Many on the staff understand the refugee experience firsthand. One survived the Rwandan genocide. The lunchroom lady is from Srebrenica, driven from the town during the massacre of some 8,000 Bosnian men and boys by Serb soldiers.

“I constantly remind them how lucky we are,” said Hodan Osman, 27, a tutor separated from her parents at age 10 during the civil war in Somalia.

“We could have been killed,” she said, “and not only are we here, but we’re in a place where we’re celebrated. I tell them they can take everything away from you, but your knowledge is in your head, and it makes you brave.”

Naza Orlovic, a teacher’s assistant from Bosnia, said her experience as a refugee allowed her to recognize and to soothe hurt feelings that frequently arose out of cultural misunderstandings.

She recalled recently comforting a Liberian boy, who was upset when other students could not follow his jokes because of his thick West African accent.

“I said, ‘Tell them to me,’” Ms. Orlovic recalled, speaking in a thick Bosnian accent herself. “Because they don’t understand my jokes either.”

The school also has classes for the parents and older siblings of refugee students. On Thursday nights, there are free computer classes. On Saturdays, the school offers English classes and tutoring.

Mr. He Tha attends those classes, along with his wife, Baby Boy and Monday. Speaking through a translator, Mr. He Tha said he hoped to learn a little English someday, so he could get a job. But he added that the family’s prospects depended in large part on the education his children received.

“The future is done for us,” Mr. He Tha said, gesturing toward himself and his wife. “We are just support for our children. We don’t want to see them have the same problems we had.”

A Special Concept

The community school was born a decade ago when Ms. Thompson, then a freelance writer, met William L. Moon, the principal at a prestigious private school in Atlanta, and Sister Patty Caraher, a Sinsinawa Dominican nun and social activist who once taught under segregation at an all-black high school in Mobile, Ala. Each had done volunteer work on behalf of refugee children, and each had concluded that their needs were not being met through conventional schooling.

The three conceived a school that would include hours of individual attention and an empathetic environment. They hoped to model it on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s notion of “the beloved community,” where people of all races, nationalities and classes were accepted, and on the common schools established in the 19th century by Horace Mann.

“The mission,” Ms. Thompson said, “was never to create an enclave for refugees only because that would just separate them more.”

The founders saw this formulation as not just idealistic but practical. Studies have shown that low-income students benefit academically from exposure to middle- and upper-middle-class students. And Ms. Thompson and her colleagues believed that exposure to a wide range of cultures and ethnic backgrounds would appeal to affluent, socially minded parents.

Ms. Thompson, Mr. Moon and Sister Caraher received seed money from several local charities and help from refugee advocates and other concerned neighbors. Mr. Moon assumed the role of principal. The school leased space from a local church, and, in 2002, was granted charter status by the local school board and the state.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

THE WORLD IN ONE SCHOOL

There were plenty of early difficulties. The school was short on money. Though it receives county, state and federal money, it must still raise some \$400,000 a year. Classrooms at the church were small and the tensions high, particularly among children whose lack of English got in the way of their expressing themselves.

An effort to form a parent-teacher association failed because of language differences; the sheer number of translators needed for such meetings made them impractical.

Early on, some American parents who had been drawn to the community school because of its small class sizes and curriculum — French and Spanish from kindergarten on, art and music for all students — pulled out their children because they felt the emphasis on refugees got in the way.

And some new arrivals to the school had to overcome intense trauma before they could begin learning.

Teachers noticed that two sisters from Afghanistan seemed especially terrified as they arrived each day. As refugees in Pakistan, the children had worked making carpets. Exhausted, they regularly dozed at school, which drew beatings. The sisters had assumed such beatings were standard at every school.

Despite these challenges, the school grew. A new grade was added each year. A second campus was opened in space rented from another church a few miles away. Volunteers poured in, mostly retired teachers and students from nearby Emory University and Agnes Scott College.

All the while, administrators and teachers said, the school took its energy from the optimism many of

its students had toward their new lives in America. Sometimes that optimism was hard to miss. One second grader from Congo is named Bill Clinton.

Complex Interactions

The diversity at the community school extends to American families. Twenty percent of the

students are African-American, and roughly 10 percent are white. About two-thirds of the students come from families that qualify for reduced-price or free lunches, while some of the other students are the children of doctors, lawyers and bankers.

Parents from low-income families tend to choose the school over other nearby public schools because it is safe and has small class sizes. More affluent parents seek the school for the potential benefits of exposure to so many cultures. Most of the middle- and upper-middle-class parents are social progressives from nearby Decatur, a liberal enclave. But not all.

Harvey Clark, whose son Zade is in the fifth grade, is a veteran of the first Gulf War and a hard-core Nascar fan.

"They're getting exposed to cultures that they normally would not be exposed to except in National Geographic," Mr. Clark said of the American children. "Instead of my boy having to go off to war to meet foreign people, he can do it here in town."

But the interactions between parents from so many backgrounds are complicated. There is still no parent-teacher association because of language barriers. American parents organize food drives for newcomers, give them rides and help them connect with doctors when children get sick. But getting to know each other takes effort.

"My children don't just know about the Iraq war; they know the difference between Kurds and other Iraqis," said Ms. Ramirez, who has a son and a daughter at the school. "But it's not for everybody. It's something you have to buy into."

Buying in may be easier for children than for adults. Consider the friendship between Ms. Ramirez's 9-year-old son, Dante, and Soung Oo Hlaing, an 11-year-old Burmese refugee with dwarfism.

Dante likes to read Harry Potter books and to play Shrek on his Wii video game console. He lives in a



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
International Community School
Students in Decatur, Ga.

comfortable house; his father works at a large consulting firm.

Until he arrived last summer, Soung had lived in a refugee camp in Thailand. He spoke no English. His father supports the family by working at a chicken processing plant for \$10 an hour.

The two boys met on the first day of school this year, on the playground. Despite the language barrier, Dante managed to invite the newcomer to sit with him

at lunch.

"I didn't think he'd make friends at the beginning because he didn't speak that much English," Dante said. "So I thought I should be his friend."

In the next weeks, the boys had a sleepover. They trick-or-treated on Soung's first Halloween. Soung, a gifted artist, gave Dante pointers on how to draw. And Dante helped Soung with his English.

"I use simple words that are easy to know and sometimes hand movements," Dante explained. "For 'huge,' I would make my hands bigger. And for 'big,' I would make my hands smaller than for 'huge.'"

Ms. Ramirez said that coordinating Dante's social life was much more complicated than if he were at a more typical local school.

"Slumber parties are definitely a pain," she said. "It can be quite confusing if one of the kids doesn't know his phone number and the parents don't speak English."

But even so, Ms. Ramirez said she became close with Soung's family because of the boys' friendship. She drives them to appointments, has had them over to bake cookies, and spent a recent weekend afternoon trying to program the couple's remote control. To celebrate an ethnic holiday, Soung's mother, Mu De, recently gave Ms. Ramirez a traditional Burmese sarong.

For now, the women communicate mostly through gestures. But it will not be long before Soung is translating. His English has improved markedly, enough so that he regularly torments Dante with a

reliable schoolyard prank: he tapes a piece of paper bearing the words “kick me” on Dante’s back.

“They’re two peas in a pod,” Ms. Ramirez said.

Challenges Ahead

The long-term prospects are far from certain. Because it is experimental, the school is more at risk of closure if its students fail to make adequate yearly progress, the standard by which the education law judges public schools.

Academically, though, the school seems to be on track. It has met the annual requirement under the No Child Left Behind Act each of the past four years. And this year the school was one of two for disadvantaged children that were commended by the Georgia Board of Education. It was cited for closing the performance gap between low- and

high-scoring students, a feat that the school accomplished without lowering its higher scores.

Ms. Thompson, Mr. Moon and Sister Caraher said a short-term goal was to combine their two campuses. Mr. Moon said he wanted to open a health clinic for refugees at the school. And supporters are trying to start a school for refugee children who arrive in their teens, with less time than younger refugees to make up for lost years.

In the meantime, refugees continue to arrive, most recently from Burma, Burundi and Eritrea, and some of their children will inevitably learn their first words of English at the school.

“When you see those kids who are as positive as they are, and you know what kind of problems they’re going through,” Mr. Moon said, “you just say, ‘This is worthy of my best shot.’”