

Part 5: Helping Refugee Children and Youth in Schools...

How can we use a bioecological framework to support refugee and war-affected learners?

Urie Bronfenbrenner is a developmental psychologist and a co-founder of the Head Start preschool program in the United States. He has had a major impact on the study of child development and the education of children. In his work, Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the importance of the social environments in which children are raised and offers a holistic perspective on the development of human psychology that takes into account many interrelated factors.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is based on the idea that a person's development reflects the influence of five environmental systems with which an individual child or person interacts. (Stewart, 2012; Betancourt & Kahn, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) The model is premised on the fact that "the person is both influenced by the environment and the person also influences the environment. Secondly, the environment is not a single entity; rather it is a compilation of several multilevel environments (systems) and the interconnections between them (Bronfenbrenner, 1989)." (Stewart 2011, p. 16) The systems include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

At the center of the **microsystem** is the individual child or person and the immediate setting in which they live. Therefore, the microsystem includes the individual characteristics and needs of the individual and of those individuals that interact with the person in the immediate environment. This includes the family and other caregivers, the teachers and the classroom, as well as sports/recreational teams and groups. It also includes the objects and symbols in the immediate environment. The microsystem reflects the patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships the student or person experiences in their immediate setting—home, school, child care facility, and neighbourhood. (Lewthwaite, 2011; Stewart, 2011)

The **mesosystem** is two microsystems (the student/person and people and objects in the student's/person's immediate environment) interacting, such as the connection between a child's home and school or the linkages of family to peers. Experiences in one microsystem may affect experiences in other microsystems. (Stewart, 2011) For example, a child who experiences neglect by parents may have difficulty with school.

The **exosystem** is an environment in which the student/person is only indirectly involved and does not have an active role, but yet it may influence their immediate environment. For example, the student's parent's workplace and their experiences there can affect their family life, which in turn affects the student. The exosystem may include friends of the family, community members, social agencies, school boards, neighbours, and so on. For example, a school board may set policies or introduce programs that may have a positive or negative effect on individual learners. (Stewart, 2011)

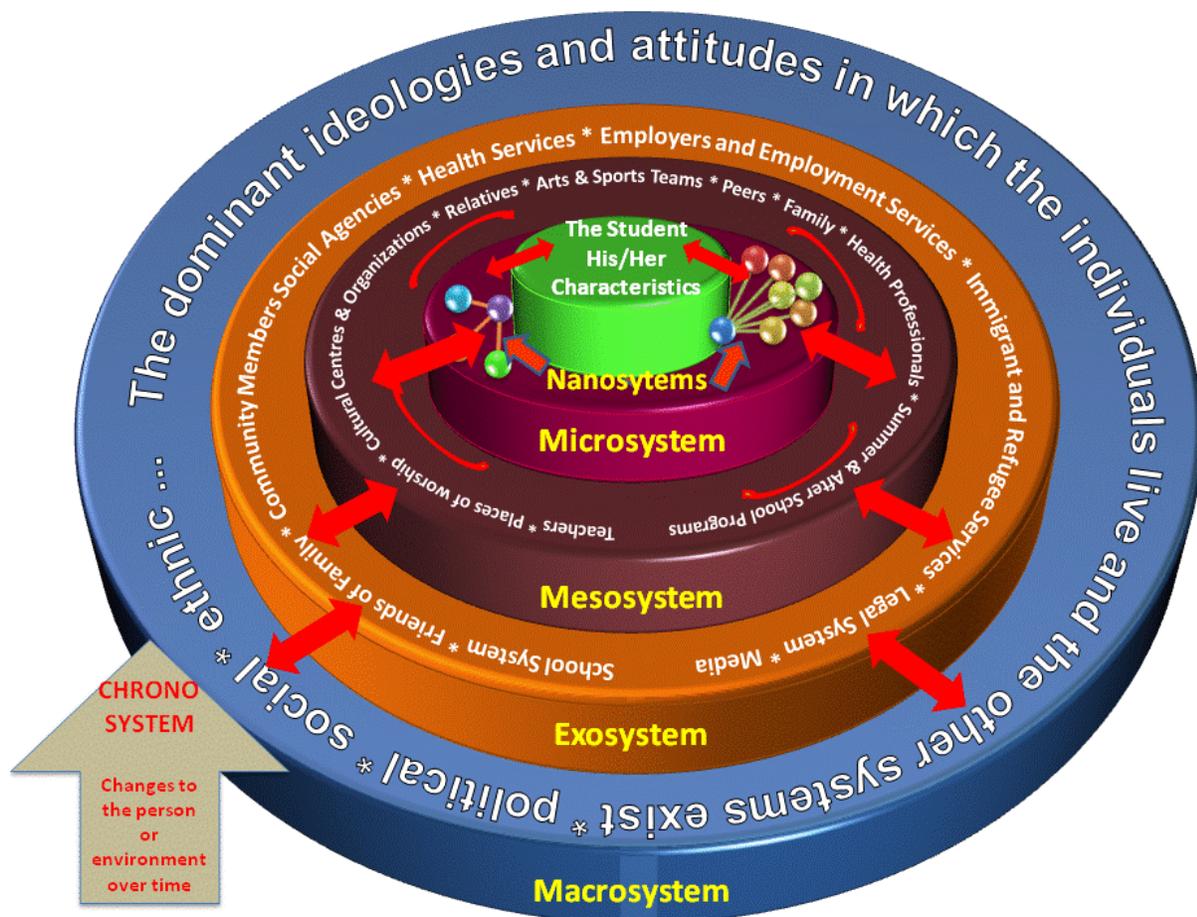
The **macrosystem** is the larger cultural context. It refers to societal and cultural ideologies, practices, values, customs, and laws that impact on the individual. (Lewthwaite, 2011; Stewart, 2011)

The **chronosystem** refers to the patterns of environmental events and transitions over time in the student's/person's life. These developmental changes may be triggered by life events or experiences that occur both internally (within the individual), or externally, in the environment. (Stewart, 2011) For example, the onset of puberty (internal) or the divorce of one's parents (external).

Bronfenbrenner's theory and corresponding model have evolved since the original 1979 conceptualization of the environment in terms of nested systems ranging from *micro* to *macro*. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) Since the student's/person's own biology is often considered part of the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner's theory has more recently been called bioecological systems theory.

Stewart (2011) built upon Bronfenbrenner’s model by adding an additional dimension or refinement to the concept of the microsystem. From her research with refugee youth, she noticed that, within the microsystem of a specific student, there appeared to exist several smaller and more “intimate systems” of relationships which provide support for the student. She calls these systems that operate within the microsystem and the student, nanosystems. From Stewart’s perspective, microsystems describe the context within which the student lives and include possible relations, whereas the nanosystem describes the patterns and groups of **close** relationships that exist within the student’s life. A nanosystem may be a relationship a student has with another person, or it may be a relationship with a circle or group of individuals.

Graphic representations of this theory are often identified as *Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model*. (Stewart, 2011; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) A graphic depiction of Bronfenbrenner’s model, which includes Stewart's concept of a nanosystem, created by Tony Tavares (Consultant, Manitoba Education), follows.



A brief overview of the basic components of the revised bioecological model as described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) follows.

The core of the bioecological model is the idea of *proximal processes*. *Proximal processes* refer to the types and forms of interaction between the individual and the environment that operate over time and are considered to be the primary mechanisms that produce human development. “However, the power of such processes to influence development is presumed, and shown, to vary substantially as a function of the characteristics of the developing *Person*, of the immediate and more remote environmental *Contexts*, and the *Time* periods, in which the proximal processes take place.” (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 795)

The three additional defining properties of the model begin with the formulation of the qualities or biopsychological characteristics of the individual student/person. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) identify three types of personal characteristics that they deem are “most influential in shaping the course of future development through their capacity to affect the direction and power of proximal processes through the life course.” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, p. 795) The three types of characteristics are *dispositions*, *bioecological resources*, and *demand*. These three forms of personal characteristics and their combination influence the nature of the proximal processes and their developmental effects. In addition, the three types of personal characteristics outlined above are also incorporated into the “definition of the *microsystem* as characteristics of parents, relatives, close friends, teachers, mentors, co-workers, spouses, or others who participate in the life of the developing person on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time.” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.796)

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model also introduced a very significant aspect of the structure of the microsystem: that of the interaction with objects and symbols (whereas his earlier conceptualization focused on interactions with other humans). As well as his new conceptualisation, he introduces concepts and criteria that differentiate between those aspects of the environment that ‘foster’ in contrast with those that ‘interfere’ with the development of proximal processes. With respect to those that interfere, Bronfenbrenner points to the hectic nature of contemporary life, and the instability and chaos in the family, child-care facilities, schools, peer groups, and neighbourhoods. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796)

Stewart (2011) believes that the nanosystem helps the students adjust to school. The connections established with people in the school and the close relationships formed as a result of the nanosystem, help the students connect to other systems and navigate between systems and access them. The concept of the nanosystem is very much in keeping with the concept of proximal processes. The nanosystem is the result of the complex interactions that occur between the students and selected individuals in their microsystem. The people in the nanosystem have genuine connections with the students and, as a result, can play crucial roles in their lives.

For Bronfenbrenner, perhaps the most important aspect of the current bioecological model and the one that sets it apart the most from the initial conceptualization is the dimension of *time*. In the new conceptualization, *time* has a prominent place at three successive levels: micro-, meso-, and macro-. “*Microtime* refers to continuity versus discontinuity in ongoing episodes of proximal process. *Mesotime* is the periodicity of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks. Finally, *macrotime* focuses on the changing expectations and events in the larger society, both within and across generations.” (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 796)

Stewart (2011) finds Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model a more useful tool than his earlier conceptualization for exploring the development of refugee and war-affected children and youth. In addition, she indicates that the bioecological model is further enhanced by the adaptations made by Anderson et al (2004) “to include three phases of migration: pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration, which acknowledge the disruptions in the individual’s life in addition to other developmental or ecological changes (e.g., puberty, starting a new school year).” (Stewart, 2011, p. 17)

The bioecological model is useful for developing an understanding of the variables and factors that affect child and adolescent adaptation to armed conflict and resettlement. Researchers propose that in addition to the direct relationship between trauma and mental health, a range of additional factors or variables affect children's adaptation to traumatic events in the short- and long-term. (American Psychological Association, 2010) These variables can include both risk and protective factors. Bronfenbrenner's model "provides a helpful framework for understanding these risk and protective factors in children's lives by identifying the presence of individual, family, and community systems that overlap and interact as children develop and grow." (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 21)

However, the model also indicates that when considering the individual refugee or war-affected learner, we need to go beyond the individual learner (microsystem) and the immediate school, family, and social environment (mesosystem) and also consider how the exosystem (broader community) and the macrosystem (the dominant culture and nature of society) impact on the learner.

Refugee children and youth's well-being, depends to a major degree on their school experiences, successes and failures. (Richman, 1998 as cited in Hek, 2005)

Educators working with refugee and war-affected learners need to be aware of the many factors involved in the personality development of the learner, as well as the factors involved in that learner's behaviour and their successes or difficulties in school. The **bioecological model** emphasizes that there is a complex set of relationships that affect a child's behaviour, personality, acculturation, and adjustment. A learner's behaviour is not just the result of personal characteristics and choices, but also the result of a number of factors including, but not limited to, the learners relationships in the classroom, school, and home; the economic situation of the family; the appropriateness of the programming; the socio-economic status of the student and the student's family; and the status of the cultural or religious group to which the student belongs in the broader society. (Stewart, 2011)

Bronfenbrenner's model has very practical implications for educators and schools who seek to help and support refugee and war-affected learners. It reminds us when assessing learners that we need to go beyond the personal characteristics of the individual learner. It also reminds us that successful interventions, programming, and supports need to go beyond students and their immediate environment. Jan Stewart (2008, 2011), in her research focusing on teachers, and refugee and war-affected learners, found that the 'systems' were not working together and worked in relative isolation. She stressed that, in order to provide learners with appropriate educational programming, the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem must work together to improve the educational and life chances of these vulnerable learners and to support the work of the teachers in the classroom. She concluded on the basis of her research that

...a multi-ecological and coordinated program to support refugee children would likely ameliorate many of the challenges that they experience. Instead of working with children as isolated individuals, there need to be more culturally-appropriate and contextually-inclusive approaches that focus on children who are part of a much larger ecological system. (Stewart, 2008, p. 28)

Jan Stewart's 2011 book, *Supporting Refugee Children: Strategies for Educators*, provides a more detailed analysis of the issues and possibilities drawing on **Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model**.

What do we need to consider in developing effective policies and plans for these learners?

Local governments, agencies, school boards, and schools need to develop policies and practices, which will compassionately and effectively support refugee children and youth in schools. Planning for EAL and newcomer programming and other supports is essential.

A whole-school commitment to the well-being of all students provides a supportive environment for learning and is built upon three layers or levels of support: providing universal care for all learners, providing additional support for individuals or groups, and providing tailored intervention for learners requiring intensive support.

Each of these layers may be conceptualized as being five areas of practice. For schools responding to students with refugee experience, these can be described as

- a learning environment which values cultural diversity, is supportive and understanding of refugee experiences, and promotes positive relationships
- curriculum and pedagogy which are inclusive and provide specific support for developing English or French language literacy skills
- policies and procedures which support transition, enrolment, and ongoing support, including the use of translators and interpreters when required
- partnerships, which are fostered with parents, communities, and outside agencies

It is important that school divisions and schools identify tools and strategies to strengthen the capacity of school communities to support immigrant refugee background students and their schooling experience in Canada. One such resource is the Australian resource, *School's In for Refugees* (see www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees/) or [Part 4](#) of *Life After War: Education as a Healing Process for Refugee and War-Affected Learners* for additional details), that provides teachers, support staff, and school administrators with strategies to help build a supportive school environment that promotes the mental health and well-being of students from refugee backgrounds and that improves their educational outcomes. The resource takes a whole-school approach by focusing on the following five aspects of school management:

- school policies and practices
- school curriculum and programs
- school organisation, ethos, and environment
- partnerships with parents
- partnerships with agencies



iStock. Ethnic circle with handicapped people—paper concept. File 11778701.



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A beginning point for schools and school divisions is to undertake a review of the existing policies and practices. To that end, [*Black line Master 3: A Planning Checklist for Schools, Families, and Communities*](#) is provided. It is intended to stimulate discussion and provide some ideas of things that should be considered. These should not be seen as special programming but simply as good education which is normal to a country and province such as Canada and Manitoba that support immigration to stimulate growth.

UNESCO's *Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction* provides detailed information and guidance to support ministries of education in countries affected by conflict or natural disaster, as well as UN organizations, donor agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in support of these ministries. See www.preventionweb.net/files/8401_guidebook.pdf.

What is a whole-school approach?

A whole-school approach means that all members of the school community share responsibility for creating a positive and appropriate learning environment for all students and for collaboratively working to create and maintain such environments. In the context of this document, a whole-school approach is collective, connected, and collaborative action in and by the school community that has been strategically developed to improve student learning, behaviour, and well-being for all learners in general and specifically for refugee and war-affected learners.

From this perspective, the ultimate goal of a whole-school approach is the promotion of excellence and equity in the school, and the contribution to building an inclusive and democratic community. Schools that have adopted a whole-school approach consciously and systematically seek to identify and address the conditions that leave behind or exclude some learners.

The Whole Schooling Consortium (see <www.wholeschooling.net/>) sets out eight principles that are at the core of whole-school approaches. These have been adapted for this document and described as follows.

- 1. Create learning spaces for all:** Organize the school and the classrooms in ways that support effective teaching practice and learning for all students.
- 2. Empower citizens for democracy:** Help learners become empowered citizens in a democracy by involving them in sharing power and decision-making in the daily life of the school and classroom. As well, include power sharing as an integral part of the culture of a school among adults. Also include the promotion of collaboration among staff in partnership with parents and the community.
- 3. Include all in learning together:** Welcome diversity in the school and create school and classroom contexts and conditions that allow learners to interact and learn together across cultures, ethnicities, languages, abilities, genders, and ages.
- 4. Build a caring community:** Build community. It is an essential aspect of creating effective schools and classrooms, especially in the presence of diverse learners. School staff care for and support learners, which are experiencing learning or other challenges in their school.
- 5. Support learning:** Utilize all resources available to the school, teachers, and learners to support learning. This includes utilizing specialized school and community resources to strengthen learning in all classrooms. It requires that support personnel collaborate with the classroom teachers to include children with differing or specialized needs in classroom activities and to design effective instruction for all students.
- 6. Partner with families and the community:** Commit school leaders and staff to collaborate and partner together within the school and with families and the broader community to improve learning and community conditions. Engage students, parents, teachers, and others in decision-making and guide the direction of learning and school activities.
- 7. Teach all by using authentic, multi-level instruction:** Students reflect a diversity of strengths and their development reflects different developmental paces and pathways. Schools must design instruction for diverse learners that engages them in active learning in meaningful, real-world activities at multiple levels of ability, providing scaffolding and adaptations as required.
- 8. Assess students to promote learning:** Assessment as, for, and of learning is essential. Assessment for learning uses authentic, curriculum-based assessment tools and practices to determine what students know and do so that learning strategies can be targeted to help students progress. Assessment as learning tools and practices engages learners in the learning process and helps them develop ways in which they can improve their learning. Assessment of learning provides important information on the progress of learners within a classroom and across a school.

Why do we need a whole-school approach?*

While this resource focuses on refugee and war-affected learners, it is designed to complement the types of services and supports provided by schools to all students. Manitoba's policies on appropriate education and inclusion provide a framework that promotes a whole-school approach to student support that is based on the needs of students and the whole-school community. This framework acknowledges that students bring with them a wide range of skills and experiences that may influence their potential to learn and the ways in which they learn most effectively. Manitoba Education recognizes that all teachers have a responsibility to respond when students experience difficulty with their schooling. It is therefore important that teachers have access to tools that enable early identification and effective intervention for students.

A whole-school approach to student support should include strategies to help teachers identify students' needs, take action to meet these needs within the school program, and monitor and review progress. A key aspect of this process is enabling teachers to meet student needs by providing them with a planned, sequential, and detailed whole-school approach to student support with appropriate professional development to assist with the implementation of strategies.

The chart that follows highlights the key points of the whole-school approach to student support.

A comprehensive whole-school approach to student support



* Text and image adapted from Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. (2011). *School's In for Refugees*. 2nd ed. Victoria, Australia: Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

What is a refugee readiness school audit and how can it help us develop a school plan?



iStock. Teacher and students in a classroom. File 3962686.

It is important that, from time to time, schools review their programming and support for their learners to ensure that the needs of all learners are being met. This is especially true for schools that have relatively minimal experience with refugee and war-affected learners or those that have not focused on this group of learners for a while. The Australian support document, [*School's In for Refugees*](#) (2011) developed by the Foundation House, in Victoria, provides extensive background information about the impact of the refugee experience on learners and offers numerous practical suggestions for supportive teacher practices.

The remainder of this Australian resource presents *refugee readiness audit* tools for assessing and building a school's capacity for supporting refugees. The ***Refugee Readiness Audit*** addresses five areas that are consistent with the comprehensive whole-school approach to student support services presented earlier. For each area, the document provides an overview of good practice and strategies as well as an audit tool.

The five areas are

- 1. *school policies and practices (p. 65)***
- 2. *curriculum, teaching, and learning (p. 91)***
- 3. *school organisation, ethos, and environment (p. 109)***
- 4. *partnerships with parents and careers (p. 129)***
- 5. *partnerships with agencies (p. 139)***

Although specific suggestions clearly are for the Australian context, there are many useful ideas applicable to Manitoba schools. The *Refugee Readiness Audit* will be helpful in identifying gaps and developing strategies to address student needs and build capacity. It may be used by schools as part of their annual school planning process or as part of a more targeted divisional or school capacity building and planning initiative.