

Journal of Educational Research and Innovation

Volume 3

Number 1 *EDUCATIONAL ADVANCES
THROUGH CULTURAL INTEGRATION AND
TEACHER EFFICACY*

Article 1

2014

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Recommended Citation

Nagasa, Keno (2014) "Perspectives of Elementary Teachers on Refugee Parent-Teacher Relations and the Education of Their Children," *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol3/iss1/1>

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Perspectives of Elementary Teachers on Refugee Parent-Teacher Relations and the Education of their Children

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Imagine that on a Wednesday morning you hear a knock on your classroom door. Your principal greets you with a new student at her side. Unlike other children in your classroom, however, this child is a refugee. Scarce documents suggest that the child might be around seven years of age. Based solely on this information, he is placed in second grade—YOUR second grade. Since the child has difficulty holding a crayon and books, you quickly suspect that he has never been to school. Moreover, he does not speak a word of English, and because his native language is uncommon in the United States, there is no one in the school system who is familiar with his language. Further, the school social worker tells you that the family has probably experienced untold horrors prior to finding safety in a refugee camp while awaiting a new permanent home in the United States. Having very limited information on this child's history and being unable to speak a word of his language, how would you respond to the many needs of this child—in addition to those of your other students (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006, p.15).

As refugee children and their families continue to be relocated to the United States, these children and their family members often enter our classrooms in communities with limited knowledge or experience of their educational and social

needs. As a result, an exploration of their educational background and the perspectives of teachers on refugee parent-school relations and the education of children will benefit students, educators, and families. Because of usually abrupt departure from their homeland, and a long period of time in relocation camps waiting for resettlement, which is 12 years on the average (Roy & Roxas, 2011), refugee children often face difficulties in their adjustment to public schools in the United States. They also have had poor and erratic educational experience, posttraumatic stress disorder, and depression resulted from persecution, war, and chaos in their homelands and the relocation camps (Garcia, 2005; Ngo, Bigelow, & Wahlstrom, 2007; Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Garcia (2005) pointed out that most refugees have social and emotional issues depending on their past traumatic life experiences besides facing language obstacles in the United States. Equally important is that refugees bring experiences and many positive attributes to classrooms.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “a person who has fled his/her country of nationality (or habitual residence) and who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of a “well-founded” fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership

in a particular social group” (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006, p.15). There are about 12 million refugees in the world and almost half of them are children, and the United States resettles as many as 70,000 refugees each year (Szente, et al., 2006). This indicated the need for exploring teachers’ responses to refugees.

Given the increasing number of refugee students in public schools in the United States, the goal of this study was to gain insight into the perspectives of elementary school teachers on refugee parent-school relations and the education of refugee children. Research about refugee children in the United States public schools is generally understudied in the field of education (Roxas, 2011). However, the demographic landscape of sub/urban public schools has changed because of the refugee and immigrant families coming to the United States. Some researchers report that it is safe to say that few teachers nationwide are prepared to meet the complex needs of refugee children in their classrooms, schools, and communities, and teachers as well as administrators face challenges of effectively working with refugees (Gándara & Contreras, 2010; Gándara & Rumberger, 2008; Miller, 2009; Rah, Shangmin, & Thu Suong Thi, 2009; Roxas, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2009). It is conceivable that the academic and social difficulties refugee children face are extensions of their difficult life trajectories. Roxas (2011), for example, identified that refugee students sometimes enroll in schools in which many of their teachers have limited familiarity with the nature of their refugee students’ background and often have not received professional development or in-class support in working with refugee children.

Because of the intermittent prior educational experiences and the difficult

life courses refugee children have taken even at their young ages, along with the lingering traumas they and their families deal with, it is imperative to zoom into the perspectives of teachers who have experiences teaching and relating to refugee children and their parents. It is critical to investigate the teachers’ perspectives of how they meet the educational needs of their refugee students and the strategies they use to work with the families to build a safe and comfortable relationship. Teachers have real life experiences they have gained from the field, their classrooms and schools, and their inputs are invaluable in the endeavor to improve research, policies, and practices that will positively impact refugee students in their new educational environments and communities. This study is significant because it explores teachers’ practices in order to create a successful school experience for refugee students. The study also creates a milieu of awareness about refugees in the U.S. schools in trying to respond to and partner with this segment of school community and parents.

The overarching question guiding this study was: What are the perspectives of elementary teachers on refugee parent-school relations and the education of refugee children? The sub-questions that narrow the focus of the study were: (a) What are main areas of concern expressed by teachers, and how have they been addressed? And (b) What has helped teachers to effectively establish and maintain their relationship with refugee students and their parents?

The extended line of inquiry included understanding how the teachers and the parents negotiate their diverse perspectives in the best interest of the student’s success, with an effort to uncover attitudes,

behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, and histories of teachers and parents with each other involving a child's learning.

Methodology

The School

The community elementary school selected for the study is located in a suburban neighborhood of old and dilapidated townhomes, affordable apartments, gas stations, local convenient stores, parks, and coffee shops. The participants reported that the school is a warm and welcoming environment focused on academic achievement coupled with social and emotional growth for all students. They stated that the school personnel value the diversity and the rich experiences that the students and their families contribute to the school community.

The participants pointed out that there are approximately 600 students at the school in kindergarten through 5th grade. The school provides various academic programs for students including services for those who are Gifted/Talented, English Language Acquisition, Reading Intervention, School-Wide Title I programs and an Individualized Learning Center for students who have multiple disabilities. The school also offers after-school tutoring groups, before and after school daycare program, PE (Physical Education) Intramurals, hand bells and vocal choirs. The teachers mentioned that, through these services, they effectively educate students and provide opportunities that enrich the academic experience of all of students.

The school is a unique community where 79% of the students have been identified as being English language learners. In the English Language

Acquisition program, students acquire English proficiency while simultaneously respecting their native languages and cultures. English classes are also offered for the non-English speaking parents through a district English Language Acquisition Department grant. The teachers indicated that the school strives to celebrate diversity and is committed to excellence and equity. The school is proud to be rich in diversity not common to most schools in the District since over 26 different languages are spoken in the school. Although the student body is highly diverse, the teachers are much less diverse as there are only three Black and two Hispanic teachers among the 24 classrooms teachers in kindergarten through 5th grades. The remaining 19 classrooms teachers come from European-American descendants.

The school is engaged in "transformation efforts," which refers to the joint efforts of parents, teachers, administrators, and community members working together in order to promote the success of all students. To ensure this, the school offers a program called Partnership with Academically Successful Students (PASS), which seeks to bridge the cultural gap between the school and community members. PASS Teams comprised of parents and educators who together participate in training and professional development to advocate for students' academic success. Additionally, PASS is charged with identifying community resources that can be used to support students' academic progress. The program also involves community members with school planning and advisory processes, with the goal to improve relations between teachers and families. In addition to the PASS program, the school has a Parent Teacher Community Organization (PTCO)

and a Parent Advisory Accountability Committee (PAAC) for the discussion of district accountability, district equity initiatives, and school safety.

The participants

A purposive sample (Creswell, 2007) of five female elementary teachers (Amber, Amy, Emily, Megan, and Ruth—all pseudonyms) experienced in teaching refugee children in culturally and linguistically diverse suburban school setting at least for the past 11 years participated in this study. Participants were all European-Americans with ages ranging from 32-39 years old. All participants had a Master of Arts degree and a professional teacher's license; two had a English Language Acquisition (ELA) endorsement; and one had a Principal's license. All participants received the district's Shelter Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and on-job trainings for instructional practices with English language Learners (ELLs). All of the participants taught in mainstream classrooms, and reported that they had worked with refugee students who came from African (Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, and Somalia); from Europe (Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia); from the Middle East (Afghanistan and Iraq); from Asia (Nepal, Vietnam, and China); and from the Pacific Islands (Tonga and Samoa), and Karen and Burma.

Research Design

In phenomenology, the researcher transcends or suspends past knowledge and experience to understand a phenomenon at a deeper level (Creswell, 2007). It is an attempt to approach a lived experience with a sense of "newness" to elicit rich and descriptive data. Bracketing is a process of setting aside one's beliefs, feelings, and perceptions to be more open of faithful to the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978). As a

district cultural liaison who serves as a support resource for schools and refugee and immigrant families in the establishment of effective home-school partnerships, it was necessary to acknowledge and attempt to bracket those experiences.

Rigor and trustworthiness was enhanced throughout the data collection and analysis process. Colaizzi (1978) held that the process of phenomenological research questions depends on the extent to which the questions touch lived experiences distinct from theoretical explanations. Methodological rigor was attained through application, validation, and validity (Meadows & Morse, 2001). As explained by Meadows and Morse (2001), verification is the first step in achieving validity of a research project. This standard was fulfilled through literature searches, adhering to the phenomenological method, bracketing past experiences, keeping field notes, using an adequate sample, identification of negative cases, and interviewing until saturation of data was achieved (Frankel, 1999; Meadows & Morse, 2001) to enhance depth of the study.

I was reflective and skeptical about first impressions and "simple" meanings first gained from the participants. Validity is the outcome goal of research and is based on trustworthiness and external reviews (Creswell, 2007). In the endeavor to triangulate and to corroborate the data, activities such as member checks, peer reviews, and participants' and researchers' reflection journals were used. Exploring how teachers personally and professionally view their work within the context of teaching and relating to refugee children and their families taps into a personal experience in the field, which I carefully

explored as said and seen in the participants words and eyes.

Data Collection

After receiving all of the required institutional approvals as well as the principal's consent, teachers who met the inclusion criteria were approached and asked to participate. Interviews were conducted for three months after school hours at the participants' elementary school. Each teacher was interviewed twice, and the interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes on each occasion. Follow-up interviews were conducted through telephone, emails, and casual conversations. Journal entries were also used as means of communication between the participants and the researchers to obtain greater richness of data and variations of perspectives. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The topics of the interviews included refugee children's school experiences, needs, as well as what the teachers have learned to meet the unique and complex needs of their refugee students and their families. Examples of the interview questions included: (1) What are your perspectives on refugee parent-teacher relations? (2) How do you meet the unique education needs of refugee children? (3) What barriers do you face in your work and what are some of the things that you have learned that help with refugee children and their families?

Researcher's Stance

I am an immigrant from Ethiopia and came to the United States in 2007. Although I do not share the same background with refugees, as an immigrant, I have a firsthand experience of how it feels to live in a different country. Despite my professional experience as an English

teacher and my credentials in Ethiopia, the cultural contexts, English language proficiency level, and the expectations were all my challenges during my transitional period when I first arrived from my native country. As a parent, my first walk to my child's school in the U.S. was not with easy feeling. Walking to the school, I was worried about my African English accent and the topics I should cover with the teacher, which elevated my anxiety level. Beginning a conversation, engaging in it, and concluding as a productive partner with a teacher for a child's learning are all difficult for a newcomer. In the same vein, teachers inevitably struggle to connect with immigrants and refugees who come from a different culture, language, and expectations among all others. Both refugees and immigrants have stories of hurdles and barriers, as well as counter stories of resilience and survival that are assets.

I am a district cultural liaison with the responsibility to facilitate communication and understanding between families, school, and the community. My unique personal background as an immigrant and my work position as the district cultural liaison places me in the study as an insider because I serve immigrants and refugees who come from Ethiopia and Eritrea, and I support teachers' work with this population. Although this study focused on teachers' work with refugees in general, my experience with refugees from the aforementioned specific countries gave me awareness of their journey from surviving to transitioning into U.S communities. Through my position, I have built positive relationships with the participants, and the teachers have become more open with me, which gave a greater depth to the study. While it was unrealistic for me to

completely distance myself from the subject of exploration, my insider role of work context of supporting refugee and immigrant children and their parents enhanced my understanding of the participants' responses and nuances of the subject.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) phenomenological method was employed in analyzing participants' transcripts. In this method, Moustakas states that researchers should highlight significant statements with their formulated meanings, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced their work with refugees. Next, cluster of meaning was developed from the significant statements into themes, which were then used to write a description of what the participants experienced including a description of context that influenced how they experienced their work with refugees. From the descriptions of the participants' experiences and the context, a composite description of the "essence" of the participants' experiences were written. While analyzing the data, I kept writing the researcher's journal in order to "bracket" my biases in a reflective mode.

Findings

From 27 verbatim transcripts, seven themes emerged regarding the teachers' perspectives on teaching refugee students and their parents as discussed as follows.

Teachers' perspectives on teaching refugee students and relating to their parents

Theme 1: Teaching today touches tomorrow. For Amy, the most important thing is being able to help kids who would not normally have access to good education, particularly helping kids who come from poor families or from families

with difficulties at home. She feels that she is helping to provide the opportunity for them to be able to go to college one day and have a good job when they grow up. Amy comes from an entire family of teachers. Amy's paternal and maternal grandparents and her parents were all teachers, and she said, "Teaching is kind of in my blood." She had known that she wanted to be a teacher because she is good at showing people how to do things by telling them, and encouraging them. She also said that she loves being with kids and listening to people, working in a team with teachers and also with kids because it is different every day.

As reported by the teachers, all of the refugee children have such great hopes in teachers and school for socio-economic upward mobility. Teachers also reported that they loved being with kids and enjoyed their work of brightening refugee children's future. All teachers indicated that for refugee children a school provides educational opportunities and a means of integration into the mainstream society. They added that school leaders and educators must be sensitive to the specific challenges and needs of refugees, as well as how being so situated as refugees plays out in relationships between school practitioners and refugee communities.

The most important thing being a teacher is being able to help kids who would not normally have access to good education and even if they come from a poor family or a family that may be things are not good at home that the teacher is giving them the opportunity to one day the students will be able to go to college and have a good job when they grow up. The formulated meaning in this theme is that teaching goes beyond just classroom instruction. It is also about giving

opportunities for children for a better future by reaching out and collaborating with families in the best interest of the children's learning.

Theme 2: Teachers do not get formal training on refugee issues in teacher training programs. All the participants reported that they did not receive formal education in their teacher education programs concerning refugees, but that the district Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and the Excellence and Equity trainings were helpful in their work with refugees and immigrants in general. Megan and Ruth mentioned that the trainings that are interwoven with, in Megan's words, "everything they do" with the students and their parents and the English Language Acquisition endorsement they completed, helped them effectively to teach their refugee children. Ruth gave specific example of being mindful of all her students in her material selection and analysis for classroom instruction. Similarly, Amber pointed out that she selected culturally appropriate pictures rather than just using pictures that indicate dominant culture in her classroom instruction to English Language Learners, most of whom were refugees.

The significant statement of this theme is that teacher-training courses do not include issues of refugees. Therefore, critical discourses that explore issues of refugees and immigrants and issues of diversity in terms of multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual education in school must be incorporated in teacher training programs.

Theme 3: Initial refugee understanding and partnership orientation pays off in the long run. Amy conducts an initial refugee welcoming and orientation session when new refugees arrive, which she calls "The

initial refugee awareness and family meeting orientation session." Amy said that the session is to get general background information about the refugees' children and their parents to facilitate the subsequent communication. Amy conducts this welcome session when she meets with new refugees to welcome them to her classroom and to learn where they come from. She has a set of questions related to where the refugees come from, what language they speak and a little bit of their stories, whether they have other family members and/or friends around, whether the child has siblings, and something important she needs to know about the child and family before embarking on her teaching and relating to the family. Through all these questions, Amy says that she learns about her refugee students, and she uses the questionnaire as a tool to get to know the student and the family. Amy continues to keep in touch with student family as a follow up to the initial refugee awareness and family meeting orientation sessions. Amy has provided many interventions for refugees in her school and also she made home visits to gain a sense of their home life.

Amy's initial refugee awareness and family meeting orientation sessions and the discussion points further include knowing refugee family (the student and the parent) names, people who are not allowed to be with the child, language (s) they speak, the child's academic and out of school strengths, how the student learns best, academic and outside of school concerns parents may have, how to make and maintain friends, homework/log and school supplies, parent-teacher conferences, test accommodations, and the best contact phone numbers. Amy also included in the discussion topics such as greetings, how to

say “please” and “thank you”, school lunch, money forms, cultural information, education history, library information, what to do in case of emergency, what to do if the child is sick, and if the child has proper attire for the season’s weather condition.

Additionally, Amy notes that these important topics led to other important information both the teacher and refugee parents want to know. For example, the parent-teacher relationship expectations in the United States are unknown for many refugee families as the often come from situations where teachers and parents operate independently. Most refugee families do not understand why they have to visit schools and create partnerships with teachers. Similarly, they even think that something is wrong with their child when they get a phone call from the school.

Furthermore, Emily alluded to the view of a refugee family about a girl’s education as not as important as that of a boy’s. She noted that, grounded in their traditional culture, some Black African refugees view a girl’s education with less emphasis than that of a boy’s. Emily pointed out that a Congolese refugee family kept their 3rd grade girl at home while they sent their 3rd grade boy (sibling) to school for an after school math and reading enrichment programs. Emily’s observation and intervention for the girl’s education made a great difference in the girl’s learning and achievement. Emily comes from a Jewish background and, she said that her unique background gives her a sense of what it means to be different, and in schools there are many kids who are/feel different in many ways. Amy highlighted that the initial family welcome meeting and general orientation session can bridge such gray areas between parent and teacher expectations for a child.

Theme 4: Teacher identity intersects with teacher practice. Teachers’ own self-understanding of their situation and worldview affected their classroom practices with refugee children. Critical dialogue that reveals teachers epistemological basis of school practices and how these help refugee children in their academic, social, emotional, economic, and political power that are often defined by race, class, and gender are necessary in the field of education in the effort to promote social justice. Teachers need both the skills and opportunity to continuously reflect on their understandings of and teaching practices and experiences of refugees as refugees are uniquely situated socially, culturally, economically and linguistically. Participants of this study were able to critique and reflect on their backgrounds and personal assumptions that shaped their teaching methods and cultural beliefs and practices.

The significant statement of this theme is that teachers’ own self-understanding of their situation and worldview affect their classroom practices with refugee children. This indicates that teachers must be able to be critical and reflect on their backgrounds and personal assumptions that shaped their teaching methods, beliefs and practices. Refugee students place such high expectations and hope in teachers and schools, and therefore teachers must be sensitive to the specific challenges and needs brought to bear within schools, as well as how being so situated plays out in relationships between teachers and refugee families.

Theme 5: Language and cultural differences create a barrier for communication. Teachers and refugees navigate two different worlds in terms of language and culture, which makes

communication and partnership difficult. However, as Amy specifically mentioned and as others also said, the teachers made strong partnership endeavors with refugees in school and worked through some difficulties by conducting some initial refugee sessions, by learning some of their basic etiquette, by using multimodal communication and support, and by conducting home visits. All these relational works and structures they laid for partnerships contributed to build trust and common understanding in the best interest of the children's education. Speaking of anxiety/stress of food culture, Ruth expressed that some refugees' unfamiliarity with school lunch resulted in getting stomachaches. She concluded that it takes a while for refugee children to get accustomed to American food. All the participants pointed out that language as well as cultural differences created barrier in their work, which they faced with resilience.

The significant statement of this theme is that teachers, refugee children and their families have stressful and uncertain connections due to racial, cultural, linguistic, and life experiences differences. Refugee families may have incongruent school partnership views with those of teachers. Also, refugee parents and teachers have differential attitude and experience about parent-teacher partnerships and a child's learning; consequently, educating parents on school partnership and child learning is required. This implies that it is necessary to facilitate communication, connection, collaboration and coordination of resources and services between families, students, school, and the local community to educate and empower families to positively impact their children's adaptation to school and learning.

Theme 6: Refugee children's prior sporadic schooling experience impacts in their current education. Expressing that teachers usually find out they will have a refugee child in their classroom a day or so before, all of the participants mentioned that for many refugee children, holding a crayon and books is a new experience. The participants expressed that refugees come with scarce and/or incomplete document about their prior education, and are concerned about instability and mobility of refugees in search of job and affordable rental apartments. This implies that partnerships with cultural liaisons and families can fill the information gap. Refugee children have issues depending on their past life experiences that need accommodation and passionate care. For example, to be an effective teacher is to be mindful of all students when analyzing and preparing classroom materials. Therefore, the formulated meaning of this theme is that careful material analysis and preparation helps inclusion of all students, and teachers must be critical of their instructional materials and their impact on student motivation for learning and achievement.

Additionally, the teachers warned that this mobility often jeopardizes refugee children's connection with their home school and their stability and learning. Also, schools should have a checklist of things teachers need to know about refugees and that of things refugees need to know about how school works in the USA, like school attendance, the role of parents, time concepts, school breaks, etc. To this end, schools are advised to work with cultural liaisons and local community centers to create a refugee understanding and partnership guide.

Theme 7: Refugee children need unique attention and love due to past chaotic life experiences. When talking about horrors refugees experienced and the traumas they have endured, Ruth shared that a refugee boy told her that he witnessed his father taken away from him and his family by a military junta, and that probably he was killed. The story revealed the horrific life refugee children experienced, and the challenges the teachers faced in comforting and facilitating the child's school adaptation and acculturation while concomitantly partnering with his parents. Refugees have been the target of abuse or violence during civil unrest in their home country, and have lived in refugee relocation camps for extended periods of time where living conditions are frequently poor. Teachers can have stressful and uncertain connections with refugee students and their family members as they have shared drastically different life experiences. The tough life experience and trauma that refugee children and families have endured interfere with learning and achievement as well as with social and cultural adjustment, which are challenging in significant ways.

Discussion

Seven major themes emerged from the discussions that included issues regarding helping refugee children cope with trauma, supporting their academic adjustment, and establishing positive parent/teacher relationships. Teachers' initial response to refugee children and their families can be overwhelming due to language barrier, limited and/or no formal education of refugee children as well as illiteracy in their own language prior to coming to the United States, and different school experiences and expectations. The initial refugee awareness and family meeting orientation sessions

together with the subsequent follow-up manifested hope in refugees and established communication and collaboration of teachers and parents.

The participants made efforts to regulate refugee children's academic and socio-emotional issues by being sensitive to them and by showing great love. The teachers were aware of the problems of war and atrocities refugees encountered in their life courses and tried to instill hope within them by building strong relationship with the children and their families. Theme 1 emerged as teachers lit a beacon of hope in the children's future. These are vulnerable children who are coming from no hope and a devastated life. They need the assurance of life and hope in their new lives of social and academic trajectories. These teachers were able to season the children's learning with a bright future that they can see and feel. They also emphasized the use of visuals and real objects to enhance classroom instruction.

Teachers must be alert to refugee children's social and emotional issues before they attempt to teach them the academic curriculum as cognition is impacted by affection. Refugee children and parents have strong hope in teachers and school for their children's bright future, but the concern is the instability and mobility of refugees in search of job and affordable rental apartments, which can jeopardize their strong connection with their home school.

The participants indicated that they did not get formal training in teacher education program on how to effectively work with refugees except for the on-job training they received. They highlighted that they went all out to make a difference in refugee children's lives. The participants reported that their racial identity and belief systems

intersect with their work. Emily, for example, reported that her background is Jewish and so she thinks that, in her words, “being Jewish is religious ‘minority’ ” and, as she said, this gives her some sort of experience and a sense of what it means to be different and labeled “minority”, a term, conversely, often used in schools for refugee and immigrant children. For Emily, this is one of the things she especially likes about being in this school as there are many kids who are/feel different in many ways, which gives her opportunity to help them. Emily’s reality implies that teachers must critique and reflect on their backgrounds and personal assumptions that shape their work, beliefs, and practices. To be an effective teacher is to be mindful of all students and parents. Teachers must also be critical of their classroom material analysis and preparation and their impact on student motivation for learning and achievement.

For refugee children, making and maintaining friends while negotiating the different worlds of their own and classmates is not an easy task. Grounded in their traditional culture that shapes children to defer to adults, most refugee children are quiet and demur in classrooms. Also, many of them are not able to sustain their attention and devote sufficient effort to tasks when they do not feel confident because of their limited and/or lack of English. Furthermore, their appearance is not as stylishly and coiffed because of their poor economic status since their parents live on a meager wage gained from two or sometimes three jobs just to put food on the table and pay bills.

Refugee parents seem to fluctuate from intense anger at their situation to more of a defensive posture when things in the United States are not going their way. The

participants have provided many interventions for refugees in their school. They made home visits to gain a sense of their home life. The big challenge for the participants is communication because refugees do not have enough English and they have a differential attitude of school partnership. They are coming from a culture in which home and school operates independently of each other. They also have differential treatment of boys and girls culturally. Girls are kept at home while boys are sent to school. There is a huge impact from the previous lack of instruction on the refugee children’s academic progress. The participants learn all these issues as part of their teaching duties so that they can provide effective intervention for refugee children.

This study is consistent with previous studies (Garcia, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Roxas, 2011; Roy & Roxas, 2011) on refugees. Refugee children often face difficulty in their adjustment to public schools in the United States. Refugee families have social and emotional issues depending on their past traumatic life experiences besides facing language obstacles and different school expectations of parents and children in the United States.

Implications and Recommendations

For a school with new refugee students, where teachers may know very little about the lives of their students outside of school, an attempt to come to know their students and a better understanding that the households of their students contain rich cultural and cognitive resources is a critical first step. Many teachers care for their students, but unless they care enough to attempt to learn, understand, and know their students’ socio-cultural, politico-economic, historical, and personal

situations or their funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997), they are not taking the important steps to use what the students bring from their own backgrounds into the classroom. Teachers who spend time learning about refugee children and their families help to ease the transition into the new school environment. Amy's "initial refugee awareness and family meeting orientation sessions" is a good example to get general background information about the refugees' children and their parents to facilitate the subsequent communication.

Teachers can use funds of knowledge, the knowledge students gain from their family and cultural backgrounds, to make their classrooms more inclusive (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997). In order to provide the best possible education for all students in a classroom, teaching practices must reflect an authentic sense of caring for a child in a way that recognizes the importance of the students and the students' families' historically and culturally acquired and developed knowledge and skills. Such practices can provide teachers with the tools necessary to better understand and build upon the strengths of their students. Since teacher identity and experiences intersect with their practices, teachers should examine who they are as teachers and become self-reflexive and advocate for refugee students.

Teachers need to establish questions regarding the refugee family's life in their country of origin, the school systems in their country of origin, and their family life both in the United States and in refugees' home country. In order to become "researchers" and "learners" about refugee students and families, teachers must be willing not only to talk more to their students but to be willing to travel to the homes of their students to meet and visit

with the family members of the child's household. Asking questions about family history including questions about education levels can help teachers establish a baseline for discussing literacy, parenting styles, and attitudes towards school. Teachers need to also ask questions regarding the family's labor history so that they are able to learn the jobs and skills that parents hold in their countries of origin and what jobs they occupy here in the United States in their endeavor to partnership with them. Refugee families, like any other families, have skills and knowledge that could be used for class lessons.

Refugee families strongly depend on teachers and schools for their children's bright future; but the instability and mobility of refugee parents in search of job and affordable rental apartments jeopardizes their strong connection with their home school. Often fathers work two jobs to support the family, and the mother is the only person in contact with the child and the school. Refugee children from the same family can have different last names, which is incongruent with the last name patterns in the United States. The school must be aware of such factors and refugee issues and must have a way to have accurate information about refugees' documents by working with district cultural liaisons, refugee case workers and or local community centers to get the information they need.

Teachers and school leaders must be sensitive to the specific challenges and needs brought to bear within schools by these students. They also need to reflect on how their own positions within the school culture influences the relationships between educators and refugee communities. Refugee children and their families bring both positive experiences as

well as challenges to classrooms and schools that require structures in place to effectively support them and help them thrive while tapping into their heritage culture and other local resources to enhance partnership and student learning.

But teachers and principals are not the only ones who should be responsible for creating better educational environments for refugee students; teacher education programs, educational leaders and policymakers must also consider academic and social inequities of refugee children. Instructional practices that engender broad student participation and accountability measures must be promoted for refugee children. Teacher preparation courses at undergraduate and graduate levels must address refugee issues in particular so that prospective and experienced teachers are all aware of refugee issues and they all can critically reflect on their professional beliefs and practices about refugees.

Teachers' efforts towards recognizing, valuing, and utilizing refugee student families' funds of knowledge must be supported by school and district administrations through ongoing teacher professional development, training, and support. School and district level educational leaders should include efforts to tap into families' funds of knowledge in a priority list to provide guidance and funding so that teachers will have the necessary time, knowledge, and skills to develop deeper understandings of refugee students and their families.

Based on the findings of this study, teachers could consider the following specific recommendations to improve the quality of education of refugee students, and to establish communication with newly arrived refugee children and help the children through difficult times of dealing

with traumas. These recommendations are only based on this study finding, and they are not comprehensive. Therefore, teachers are advised to use these and other strategies as contexts give them to use every opportunity they get to educate and advocate for refugee students in their classrooms, while reaching out to partner with their families.

Suggested strategies for teaching elementary refugee students

Teachers should:

- Be aware of refugee children and families' different school experiences in their home country and/or relocation camps, and deliberately "learn" and understand refugee backgrounds to gear instruction and partnership.
- Be cognizant that refugees may have preferred educational value for boys to girls based on their cultures, traditions, assumptions, etc. and that teachers may need to intervene for girl's education.
- Proactively locate resources to effectively communicate with refugees. Translators or interpreters are essential in facilitating home-school connections and collaborations. Such services may be available in their school, in the school district's English Language Learners' (ELLs) services and/or district communication and/or outreach services, as well as in local refugee services agents.
- Not make any assumption and overgeneralization of any kind of information about refugees, but, as "researchers" and "learners", teachers need to get to know refugees personally and on a case by case basis as they all have diverse

- and interesting personal stories even if they are from the same country or the same ethnic group and/or clan or family for that matter
- Collaborate with the school administration to establish meaningful connections with refugee families and to improve the learning and academic achievement of refugee students.
 - Be aware that refugee students must be provided with enrichment classes and activities in order to help them catch up with language and content.
 - Use visuals, body “language”, and realia in their instruction to scaffold content and bridge language barrier.

Suggested strategies for relating to refugee parents

It is recommended that teachers:

- Conduct an initial welcoming and meeting session with refugee students and the families to personally understand their challenges and needs, and follow-up with them throughout the school year.
- Use multiple modalities of communication with refugee families. Using a home-school communication log, sending a parent letter in the language parents understand, making phone calls, using email and text, making a home visit, and using a cultural liaison are a few examples.
- Make home visits to have a sense of the home situation and to establish positive teacher-family and/or school-home relationships. Such endeavors enable teachers to learn more about the student as well as to

establish an avenue for communication.

- Reveal love to children and be around them to instill and assure love, hope, and new life. Refugees come from a traditional, intact family background and such assurance is especially meaningful for them.
- Consult with psychologists or the local church with which the family is affiliated to help children learn how to control their feelings and deal with past and present difficulties, as they were likely victims of war, chaos, instability, and most will have lingering traumas.
- Tap into the resources and cultures of the refugees to help the children navigate their complex life trajectories and diverse worlds of their country of origin, relocation camp(s), and the United States.

Summary and Direction for Future Research

This study revealed that, although they embrace the diversity, teachers face challenges in their work because of refugee children’s limited and poor educational experience and the incomplete documents of their past. Additionally, refugee families’ limited and/or lack of English language along with incongruent school experiences and expectations are causes of communication and partnership hurdles that teachers and parents face. Future research would benefit from gaining insights from prospective teachers’ expectations of their work reality in sub/urban diverse schools. Such a study can examine prospective teachers’ readiness in terms of their knowledge and

skills to work with culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and immigrant population. This may also give prospective teachers opportunities to critically examine their personal and professional stance before they find themselves in today's diverse sub/urban public schools.

Another recommendation would be to shed light on the perspectives of refugee children and their families in order to grasp their versions of their lives work, and education in the United States. Refugees' personal narratives and interpretations of their own lives and work can help to understand the growing body of knowledge of educational research on refugees' issues in the United States' public schools. Such knowledge and understanding will in turn help gear instruction and collaboration in innovative ways, while shifting from normalized traditional ways of teaching and relating to culturally and contextually relevant ways of teaching and collaborating with student families.

School administrators and office managers who are in the very front row of every school clientele are potential data

sources and they can be gateways or gatekeepers to vulnerable children and families like refugees. Local refugee resettlement agencies and community organizations are also other potential research sites. Learning from teachers who are experienced with teaching and relating to refugee children and their families, school administrators, and office managers, and refugee resettlement agencies as well as refugees themselves is essential in the endeavor to have a complete understanding of the challenges and the unique needs of refugee children and their families in public schools. Refugee children and their families bring both difficult issues and well many positive attributes to schools, and educators need the functional knowledge and skills in order to effectively work with this growing segment of the population in the best interest of the refugee children's learning and growth.

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