

Comparative International Approaches to Better Understanding and Supporting Refugee Learners

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In early September 2015, a photo surfaced across international news media of a little boy, a refugee from Syria, who had washed up dead on the shores of Turkey. Almost immediately there was international outcry for the world to take responsibility for the growing refugee crisis in Syria, a mass exodus of over 5,000 people and counting. The conflict, sparked by growing tensions and global political struggles, has inspired global leaders from Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany to President Barak Obama of the United States to call for each country to “do their part” in ameliorating the suffering of this newest flow of refugees (Harris et. al, *New York Times*, Sept. 10). Not soon after this photo was released, another wave of photos showing Belgians and Icelanders lining up at airports to welcome refugees and give them clothes, blankets, and food, flooded the internet. The Pope made a public statement calling every Catholic church in the world to sponsor at least one refugee family—he himself is reported to be hosting a Syrian family in a private apartment in the Vatican (Harris et. al, *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2015).

Yet, while images like these inspire a fleeting sense of global humanitarianism—our responsibility as humans and particularly as teacher educators extends beyond the adrenaline induced drama of sharing news stories on social media or even donating money to organizations

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that support refugees. After the media hype has subsided, and refugees are settled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in cities and towns across the world—the global humanitarian discourse around the refugee ‘crisis’ often turns swiftly to localized discourse around the refugee ‘problem’ and local municipalities’ inability or popular unwillingness to make room for refugees. And while the conversation typically centers around economic concerns like finding work for refugees, or the additional pressure on tax payer dollars, the ability to educate refugee students and incorporate them in to the school system should be of equal if not greater importance.

Despite *global* refugee discourse, in most cases, determining how best to support refugee students is a *local* effort shared by refugee resettlement centers, religious organizations, government offices and schools. Research on how pre-service and in-service teachers can best support refugee students is similarly ‘local’ in nature centering on particular schools and districts in refugee-receiving counties with little conversation about what comparing *across* these contexts might reveal, particularly for pre-service and in-service teachers. What might be gained by taking a more global approach to understanding refugee education for pre-service and in-service teachers?

This primer advocates for the application of comparative international approaches to preparing pre-service and in-service teachers for meeting the needs of refugee students. To start, the paper will present literature on refugees’ varied educational experiences in their home countries and refugee camps as well as the processes through which they come to join schools and communities around the world. Then, the paper will move to a discussion of how refugees of color are racialized by their host society, and the impact that this can have on their schooling experiences, highlighting some important similarities and differences cross-nationally. Comparative interventions for meeting the unique needs of refugee students will be discussed; which will include specific approaches to teacher training, community education, school district programming, as well as a number of partnership models. Finally, the paper will conclude with directions for future research along with the benefits of engaging pre-service and in-service teachers with the topic of refugee education.

Refugees Volatile Educational Experiences in Camps Prior to Resettlement

In Syria, prior to the outbreak of unrest in 2011, UNICEF reports that 97% of school-aged children were enrolled in school. As of 2013,

fewer than 30% of children were enrolled in school—and even fewer Syrian children living in refugee camps in the Middle East are currently being formally educated (UNICEF, 2015). Despite the terms of the 1951 United Nations Convention which states that refugee children should be accorded “the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education” (UNHCR, 1990, p. 4), most countries which host refugees in camps have difficulties living up to this standard - primarily due to funding restraints but also due to the liminal status of refugees within their borders. Questions of purpose arise; should refugees be educated and acculturated for return to their home country, for integration into their host country, or in preparation to go on to a developed nation? Should students be taught in refugee camps or in local schools? Should priority be given to trauma programs and life skills acquisition or regular school subjects like math and science?

Scholars and practitioners of Education in Emergencies attempt to address some of these questions through their work. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) in their report *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children*, published by the UN, assert that education in refugee camps can be unevenly accessible both by age and by gender, particularly in the Middle East. They go on to detail the ways in which education in the camps can be used as a weapon of cultural repression with authority figures manipulating text books or denying access as a weapon of war as has happened in Somalia and Sierra Leone. Bush and Salterelli suggest the goal of education in refugee camps should specifically focus on pacifying the impact of conflict, nurturing and sustaining an ethnically tolerant climate, and cultivating inclusive citizenship. However they state that in the case of large, fast, influxes of refugees to camps, this type of education rarely happens.

Mereng (2010) in her narrative research on her own and others' experiences in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, explains the conflict over which schooling system to implement in that particular camp. She describes that most students and teachers in the camp were Sudanese and had left an Arabic education system, yet the Kenya government—which was (and still is) in control of the Kakuma camp uses the British system of education. Many arguments ensued between administrators over what made most sense—educating for return, or for resettlement in Kenya. Mereng asserts that refugees themselves were torn on what would be best for their children, continuing with the style of education they were used to, or getting on the Kenya/British education ‘track’ so that they might have a chance to qualify for university.

On the contrary, Water and Leblanc (2005) suggest that issues of nationhood should be avoided in the development and implementation

of education in refugee camps as “refugees are not part of the nationalism equation; rather, they are an aggregation of individuals who were forced away from the protection offered by a state that was tied to a nation” (p. 16). They go on to say that refugees by definition have lost whatever progress they formerly dreamed of and in starting over the lack of consistency necessary for a unified schooling system in a refugee camp is problematic. The authors finally suggest that since refugees can no longer claim a state as the guardian of their national identity, socialization should be kept out of the refugee schooling policy conversation.

Resettlement, Racialization, and Gendered Expectations in Comparative Perspective

While most of the world’s refugees are currently living in the Global South—in countries where they originally sought asylum, many will eventually be permanently resettled in the so called Global North. The United States is the top resettlement destination, with Australia and Canada also providing a number of placements (UNHCR, 2015). Researchers in all three national contexts have documented the particular struggles faced by refugee students in particular as well as the prejudice and discrimination that they face. Yet, little work has been done to bring these perspectives into conversations with each other in hopes of policy transfer, or knowledge transfer particularly for teacher educators.

McBrien (2005) wrote an extensive literature review focused on the education needs of and barriers for refugee students in the United States, part of which focused on theories of acculturation. She presents Ports and Zhou’s (1993) three tiered theory of acculturation where new refugees either “assimilate in to the white middle class majority” (p. 331), bond together to join pre-existing ethnic enclaves and use that social support to ‘succeed’, or “downward spiral into poverty...often an inner-city underclass” (p. 331). McBrien quotes Gibson’s 2001 study which asserts that non-white immigrant children see their only means of ‘acculturation’ as affiliating with “oppositional subcultures of marginalized peers” (p. 331) which then leads them to be read by teacher and administrators in much the same way as these so-called ‘subgroups.’

This social phenomenon was also documented in a Canadian context in Schroeter and James’ (2015) study of Black French-speaking African-Canadian refugee students’ experiences in remedial language programming. They found that despite students’ academic ability teachers viewed them through the same deficit lens typically ascribed to their Black, non-refugee peers. Students with refugee experiences were racialized and homogenized by teachers in problematic ways that limited their

educational motivation and opportunities. The authors juxtapose this racialization process to what they refer to as the ‘authorized discourse’ of multiculturalism in Canada which privileges color-blind ideology. Further, this research presents the challenge of meeting the specific needs of refugees (whether perceived or real) while at the same time recognizing how they may feel further marginalized by these practices.

Similarly in Australia, Matthews (2008) discusses the process of racialization in the context of literacy, globalization, and colonialism. She recounts a situation where two young black men with refugee backgrounds were at the beach and two young white, blonde, girl children upon spotting these boys ran away in fear. Using Fanon’s work on colonialism and blackness – she draws parallels between the racialized experiences of black refugees in modern day Australia and the ways that black bodies were objectified through “colonial regimes of knowledge and power” (p. 37). Matthews goes on to detail how principals and teachers see literacy as a major barrier to refugees ‘success’ in Australia, but makes the point that the two Black boys that she identifies in her beach anecdote did not need to know English to have learned something about their place in Australian society through interaction and body language. She asserts that it would be a mistake to think that refugee students, particularly those who are read as People of Color, due to lack of English literacy are not learning through their interactions in school and in society—society and educators can play a role in directing what these lessons are.

Beyond projecting racial stereotypes on to newcomers—Lisa Patel Stevens (2011) discusses the role of gender expectations in literacy teachers’ engagement with immigrant youth. In a case study comparing two African migrants, one male and one female, Patel Stevens analyzes differences in access to social capital and status through the lens of literacy teachers as gatekeepers. She explores the different ways that the behavior of two immigrant students is read by their literacy teachers, in racialized and gendered ways, and advocates for teachers to think more broadly regarding the ways that they are or are not preparing immigrant students for engagement with the dominant culture.

Interventions for Meeting the Needs of Refugee Students in Comparative Perspective

We see that refugees have all different kinds of educational experiences prior to arriving in their resettlement country. Some have had formal education in their home country that has been interrupted; others were born in refugee camps and had limited access to education based on ethnic or religious identity. Further, the ways in which refugee

students are encultured into schooling systems and society at large are based at least in some part on the ways they are read racially in their new country. What then could in-service teachers and schools be doing to both meet the unique needs of refugee students while at the same time mitigating the negative impact of the exclusion inherent in ‘special refugee programming’ which can end up making students feel isolated racially and culturally? The section to follow outlines examples of approaches to programming and partnership in different national contexts that either suggest positive outcomes for refugee students or critique failing systems.

Ethos of Inclusion

Taylor and Sidhu (2012) conducted a study of four high schools in Australia—one public and three Catholic schools pulled from a larger study of refugee education in Queensland because of their reputation for serving refugee students particularly well. For starters, each of these schools developed a targeted policy on refugee student inclusion that focused specifically on their needs as refugees—some but not all of whom may be English Language Learners (ELLs). These policies were grounded in an explicit mission of promoting social justice both inside and outside of the classroom. Further, each of these schools took a holistic approach to education which included content knowledge, cultural knowledge – that is, helping students get to know Australian culture, English language learning, personal growth, and of particular importance, the inclusion of students’ families in the school community.

Others have echoed the importance of including families and parents in the schooling processes of refugee students. However, given the experiences of refugee parents, the ways in which parents can be involved in their children’s schooling are not always obvious. Georgis et. al (2014) looked specifically at the ways that Somali Bantu parents in Western Canada conceptualize involvement in their children’s school and how teachers and administrators can foster this type of involvement. They explain that typical barriers to refugee parent involvement in school like language challenges, access to transportation, and jobs are often misinterpreted as not valuing education. However, Somali ‘cultural brokers,’ one male and one female, who worked in the study site school helped to bridge this gap in understanding between teachers and parents. One of the more significant findings of their study was the need for schools to shift conceptions of parents ‘involvement’ as parents filling roles established by the school to a more reciprocal process whereby schools and parents are working in collaboration to meet their respective needs.

Likewise in a study of Hmong refugees in the U.S. researchers

found that in a group of nine public schools in the state of Wisconsin, a sense of reciprocity is key to creating an ethos of inclusion and that breaking down the expectations that many refugees have that they must be deferential to ‘authority’ is a first step (Nguegen et. al, 2009). They write that because so much of refugees’ lives have been dictated by ‘authority’ whether that be an authoritarian dictator in their home country or the UNHCR in a camp—authorities have been responsible for much of their life ‘choices.’ Now that their children are in school, the researchers found that Hmong parents felt most comfortable deferring to school authority, but this of course left them also feeling excluded from the process of their children’s schooling. However, like the Georgis et. al (2014) findings, this study points to the need for what the authors call a ‘parent liaison position’ to help bridge the cultural gap between refugee parents and schools, and to guide the expectations for what a truly reciprocal relationship might look like. Finally, they warn against making these inclusion efforts feel like charity—which they suggest reifies colonial frameworks, which should be challenged through policy and practice particularly in terms of ‘Western’ relations with newcomers from the so called Global South.

One way to possibly begin to challenge colonial ‘helping/pity’ frameworks is to be inclusive in these inclusion efforts; meaning, making sure these efforts are targeting refugee families specifically but including all those families who for different reasons may be currently left out of family/school partnerships. Broadening this definition of inclusion is supported by work in the UK on refugees and belonging. Spicer (2008) suggests that refugee parents and families first feel a sense of belonging within their own ethnic groups, but then secondarily connect with domestic-born minority groups who live in their proximity. The author argues that since refugees find solidarity with People of Color in their neighborhoods, they are less likely to trust inclusion efforts coming from predominantly white teacher and administrators if these efforts are not also inclusive of their neighbors. He offers that since marginalized minority groups are often excluded from schooling partnerships, a broader conceptualization of inclusion and partnership is needed and beneficial.

Teacher Training

While principals and administrators play a large role in policy making and policy implementation in their schools, teachers often have the most personal interaction with refugee students. Therefore their training around issues of multiculturalism but specifically on the refugee experiences is essential to their ability to support students with these backgrounds. McCall and Vang (2012), a White teacher-educator and a

Hmong classroom teacher respectively, wrote about preparing pre-service teachers for teaching Hmong students in local public schools in Wisconsin. They advocate for using Sleeter and Grants (2009) recommendations for a multicultural social justice approach to teaching as a starting point (p. 32), but then supplementing this with pre-service teacher education on particular refugee groups—in their case, the Hmong. Further, they suggest having pre-service teachers read work by Hmong refugee authors in order to mitigate the possibility of reifying stereotypes about the Hmong refugee community. The authors' assertion that pre-service teachers should learn about specific refugee groups, possibly those who live in the area of the university or college that hosts the teacher preparation program, signifies a departure from more generalized models of preparing for teaching across difference.

However, other work suggests that in-classroom learning is not enough, but rather that pre-service teachers should participate in service-learning in refugee communities during their preparation programming, giving them an opportunity to learn from refugees themselves. Lund and Lee (2015) write about their approach to engendering 'cultural humility', a framework often used in health care and medical education, through service-learning in a community setting—challenging their female, predominantly white, Canadian students to question their power and privilege. They do this by first priming students with readings on social justice education, and preparing them to be critical about their engagement with refugee families in their community setting placements. They are assigned a 'community mentor' someone familiar with the refugee population to act as an intermediary and de-brief session meetings. This allows for an immediate opportunity to unpack and question real-life challenges or confusion that pre-service teachers face in the community. Again, while serving a different role than the 'cultural intermediaries' referenced in the section above it seems that having someone in a bridge building role in this instance helps more authentically connect pre-service teachers to refugees.

Other teacher preparation programs build refugee-specific service learning into the curriculum of the program. At the University of Western Sydney in Australia, pre-service teachers tutor refugee students who are making the transition from Intensive English Centers (IECs), usually their first educational stop upon arrival in Australia, to mainstream schools. This program, called Refugee Action Support (RAS), is a collaboration between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, the University of Western Sydney and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and serves to educate pre-service teachers on the early struggles of refugee students—some of whom, a Ferfolia and

Vickers (2010) study reports, “have not held a pencil or sat in a desk before” (p. 160). This helps pre-service teachers understand some of the non-pedagogical challenges facing refugee students and prompts them to think about ways they might overcome these obstacles in their own classrooms.

However, research suggests that pre-service teacher engagement should push beyond simple encounters, that the only way to overcome colonial ‘helping’ imperatives is to develop ways for pre-service teachers and refugee community members to critically engage together, around topics of mutual interest and concern. Daniel (2015) developed an art-based participatory action research collaboration between pre-service teachers at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and refugee and immigrant students and community members from Nashville. The project prompted these different constituencies to create art that represented their feelings on immigration reform in the United States, which met a dual need for pre-service teachers to both develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the challenges facing refugee students, while also getting to know refugee students themselves. Daniel writes that it also helped to increase civic participation among the refugee group, prompting them to think more critically about what it means to become an American citizen.

Comprehensive Approaches—Collaborative Leadership

Most research on meeting the needs of refugee students is focused on either ‘inclusion’ work or preparing pre-service teachers, yet a small but growing literature focuses on truly comprehensive approaches—namely the ways in which government, school districts, teachers, community based organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, parents, and students can work together to create inclusive educational spaces where refugee students can thrive. Collingnod and colleagues of the Education Alliance at Brown University (2001) map the connections between different actors in refugee resettlement, community inclusion and education through quantitative and qualitative approaches to understanding different perspectives. They find that successful collaboration between so many different players requires not just contact- but carefully developed leadership infrastructure, made up of both inter-group and intra-group spaces for dialogue. They further suggest that community based organizations, while they often lack the kind of consistent funding that university and school districts have, play a very important role in connecting students and families to school resources.

Similarly, Rah (2013) whose work with the Hmong in a U.S. context pointed to the need for leaders from that community, from local schools,

and local community based organizations to work together in developing an after-school program meant to support parents' language learning and connection to their childrens' schooling experience. Rah found that this program was most successful when a group of Hmong leaders liaised with the community to identify areas of misunderstanding and then communicated this to school and community based organization leadership, who then worked in collaboration with Hmong leaders to develop programming. The article suggests that this way of working can feel slow, tedious, and not time efficient, but in the end the pace is necessary to build mutual trust and understanding between all parties involved.

Directions for Further Research and Synthesis

While the refugee crisis is currently front and center in newspaper headlines, work on refugee students in resettlement countries is still a relatively small body of work, particularly within teacher education. This primer above is meant to give teacher educators a concise but broad overview of research on refugee education by putting work conducted in a number of local contexts in refugee-receiving countries in conversation with each other. Much of the research on meeting the educational need of refugee students is concentrated in the areas of multicultural inclusion, ESL teaching and learning, as well as in preparing teachers for diverse learners.

There is less research on some of the themes that this review attempts to bring to the fore, namely; the comparative schooling experiences of refugee students before resettlement and the racialization of refugee students upon arrival and how this impacts them as students and as member of society. The literature currently lacks critical investigations of refugee-specific programming and the ways in which teacher-led processes of preparing refugee students for inclusion may actually serve to further marginalize them. Further, as is illustrated above, there are very few examples of teacher preparation curriculum that pushes beyond conceptions of intercultural competence or mere contact to advocate for decolonial, equitable, and reciprocal forms of learning.

Publications detailing successful collaborations between refugee communities, community based organizations, school districts, and local governments are also scarce. Many authors advocate for a collaborative approach to supporting refugee students but few seem to be writing extensively about their collaborative work—perhaps because, as is illustrated in the few partnership pieces included here, collaboration is difficult. However, given the global dimensions of refugee education and the collaborative efforts that are built in to the system of resettlement,

teacher educators as well as teachers from around the world could be working together to find solutions for best supporting refugees. More should be done to bring research from across national contexts into conversations with each other, and further, more work should be done to bring non-Western voices in to research and practice.

Refugee education is a global process and as such educating teachers abroad their current or future refugee students should draw on lessons from around the world. Understanding refugee education will only be made a priority by teachers if teacher educators start by engaging the diverse experiences of refugee students and finding ways to push pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in developing skills to support this particular population. With the eyes of the world currently on the global Syrian refugee crisis, this is a moment to be seized by educators globally to work together, to better the educational experiences and outcomes of refugee and immigrant students across national contexts.

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