

EDUCATION IN CRISIS: LOOKING TO THE MARGINS TO FIND OUR CENTER AS EDUCATORS WORKING WITH REFUGEE AND MIGRANT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities within our education systems, and, in many cases, has further marginalized students of refugee and migrant backgrounds. In looking at these margins, however, we may find our center as educators committed to inclusion and equity. This paper elevates the voices of educators working with resettled refugee students in the United States in an effort to identify what is needed in this time of a global pandemic to support and sustain teachers working at the margins of education. After briefly sketching the impact of COVID-19 on refugee education globally, nationally, and in New York State, this report presents emerging themes around sources of stress, sources of motivation, and calls for advocacy among refugee educators, and then concludes with a discussion that includes suggestions to build more inclusive, equitable, and holistic learning systems that are culturally responsive and resilient in times of crisis.

Keywords: equity, holistic learning, marginalization, refugees, teacher professional development

Throughout January and February of 2020, Chinese schools shuttered, and students, teachers, and families were forced to make an abrupt transition to online learning as the novel coronavirus COVID-19 made its catastrophic debut. By March 17, 115 countries had closed school buildings, and by the end of April, there were 163 nationwide closures of schools around the world, with more than 84% of learners affected or an estimated 1.47 billion children out of school (UNESCO, 2020). While many countries have restarted their school systems, nothing is as it was before. Remote or distance learning is now common. Hundreds of millions of children are attending schooling systems, including in the United States, that are both partially open and very much in flux due to resurgences in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ministers of education, superintendents, teachers, and families were not ready for this disruption to schooling, and most systems are still struggling to figure out how to best deliver instruction more than a year after the pandemic began. And while much remains unclear, what is starkly obvious is that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities within our education systems. Culturally and linguistically diverse students, including students of refugee and migrant backgrounds—along with many other racialized learners, students with special needs, and other marginalized student groups—faced challenges accessing high-quality learning prior to the pandemic, and many find it even more challenging to access quality schooling and learning opportunities now (Alasutari, 2020; García & Weiss, 2020; James, 2020).

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Teachers working with racialized and marginalized students faced inadequate resources and insufficient preparation and support prior to the pandemic, and in many cases, have even fewer specialized resources in the grip of its effects (García & Weiss, 2020).

In this Brief Report, data gathered over the past year as part of a pilot project aimed at supporting educators of resettled refugees within the United States are examined in an effort to center the “margins” (a term used here to indicate the area where refugee, newcomer, and SIFE children and youth are frequently taught and might not receive equitable access to educational resources and opportunities). and consider what educators need to do their work well in times of crisis. The paper ends with a discussion of implications for teacher learning, program design, and policymaking, with an eye to adopting practices rooted in holistic learning and policies that push no one—refugee or otherwise—to the margins in our schools but keep them centered in learning.

Background

Though a comprehensive review of all relevant circumstances is beyond the scope of this report, a snapshot of the global predicament, the U.S. national landscape, and the local (New York) situation is necessary to contextualize the data and position the discussion. Starting with a global perspective is important as refugee and migrant children’s experiences worldwide have an impact on U.S. classrooms. Many students with interrupted/inconsistent formal education (SIFE) are resettled refugees and unaccompanied minors who enroll in U.S. schools (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020). COVID-19 school closures will likely increase the number of SIFE in U.S. classrooms in the years ahead.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, 163 country-wide school systems closed entirely or struggled to offer remote learning opportunities to the more than 1.47 billion children worldwide who were out of school (UNESCO, 2020). A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020a) report acknowledges that children in every country and of all backgrounds have struggled during the pandemic and finds that refugee children have experienced a particularly pronounced negative impact as a result of school closures. UNHCR (2020b) states:

Before the pandemic, a refugee child was twice as likely to be out of school as a non-refugee child. This is set to worsen—many may not have opportunities to resume their studies due to school closures, difficulties affording fees, uniforms or books, lack of access to technologies or because they are being required to work to support their families.

In fact, prior to the pandemic only 77% of refugee children were enrolled in primary schools and only 31% of refugee youth were enrolled in secondary schools worldwide (UNHCR, 2020a, p. 9). The Malala Fund predicts that half of all refugee girls will not return to school post-pandemic and “for countries where refugee girls’ gross secondary enrolment was already less than 10 per cent, all girls are at risk of dropping out for good” (UNHCR, 2020b). Both within and outside refugee and displacement contexts, enrollment is down and there is fear that many children, especially refugee children, will not return to school.

The U.S. picture is equally unsettling, with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) asserting that “the ongoing public-health crisis is likely to result in the widening of already significant opportunity and achievement gaps” (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020, p. 1). Especially disconcerting is the estimate, as of September 2020, that “if schools operate remotely through the fall, students participating in distance learning of poor quality could lose seven to 11 months of learning, and those who do not participate at all may find themselves up to 14 months behind” (p. 6). The MPI report highlights that immigrant students, of both refugee and other backgrounds, are in particular danger. This is in part because many resettled refugee and migrant students within the U.S. context have unreliable access to digital devices and internet connectivity (Cherewka, 2020). The resulting digital divide contributes to attendance struggles among refugee and migrant students, especially where only online or digital schooling options are available.

Though public data is limited, reports point to higher rates of absenteeism among students living in poverty (a reality for many resettled refugee families) and students learning English (another category to which many refugee students belong) than for other students. In the spring of 2020, the Sacramento City Unified School District found that 44% of absent students were English learners (ELs) (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020, p. 3). The Fresno Unified School District has reported a chronic absentee rate of 22.8%, with the majority of absent learners being students living in poverty. Lack of devices and internet connectivity are identified as contributing factors to absences among Fresno's marginalized students (Velez, 2020). Nationwide, formal education has been disrupted and access to quality learning opportunities are uneven, at best (García & Weiss, 2020).

While it is difficult to get an exact picture of what things look like within New York State, it is strikingly similar to the national situation. There is variation, with fully remote, hybrid, and in-person instruction all being offered as modes of instruction. In the fall of 2020, many schools utilizing hybrid and in-person models were forced to close because of regional and local outbreaks, with at least one in 10 of the state's 700 school districts having to switch to online learning at some point (WRBG 6, Albany, 2020). Significantly, both students and teachers are finding these circumstances challenging for teaching and learning. As one immigrant student shared early in the pandemic: "Now that school is online, you cannot have the help you need, and a teacher working with English learners lamented, "I can't do small groups the same way, I can't be over the shoulder the same way, I can't do one-to-one's the same way" (Amin & Basu, 2020). It appears that while teachers are learning new technologies and methodologies, they are unable to work with newcomer refugee and migrant children and youth in familiar and effective ways.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The pilot project from which the data are drawn was envisioned and implemented by the Center for Learning in Practice (CLiP) at the Carey Institute for Global Good in Rensselaerville, N.Y., as a sustained learning opportunity within its Refugee Educator Academy (REA). The project engaged more than 200 educators serving resettled refugee students in three states—Arizona, New York, and Washington—between summer 2019 and spring 2021. Within this pilot project, refugee educators were given an opportunity to enroll in (and provide feedback on) a 12-week course entitled Refugee Educator Foundations of Practice, which was followed by a coaching phase within an ongoing, virtual community of practice. The course includes modules on getting to know students and families of refugee and migrant backgrounds; developing culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies; attending to well-being through social and emotional learning and trauma-informed practices; supporting students new to a language and SIFE; creating curricular access through the Universal Design for Learning, scaffolding, and differentiation of instruction; and exploring instructional program models across the United States targeting refugee, newcomer, and SIFE students.¹ Participating educators across many roles, including classroom teachers, instructional coaches, counselors, librarians, and support staff, have actively contributed to course discussions, pre/mid/post surveys, module feedback forms, webinars, and other feedback loops. A slice of this rich body of data, currently being analyzed by an external evaluation team, is shared in this Brief Report as a means of surfacing the experiences and perspectives of educators focused on the margins. Preliminary coding and analysis of qualitative data pulled from surveys, discussion boards, and conversations that took place between March 2020 and January 2021 of the pilot project is presented as a representative snapshot of the community of practice, though not as definitive findings while the project is still in process.

¹The course is being offered nationwide in the summer of 2021. Details available at <https://clip.careyinstitute.org/2021/03/11/foundations-of-practice-summer/>

This approach to learning with and from practitioners is at the heart of the Sustainable Learning Framework, the guiding theoretical and research-based methodology employed by CLiP, which combines systems thinking, looped learning, purposeful pedagogy, democratic engagement, and digital geographies to make learning visible (Center for Learning in Practice, 2020). Communities of practice lie at the center of such a framework, and this report highlights the power of educators, in dialogue and through reflection, to identify solutions to the challenging problems in learning we face today. Elevating the voices of refugee educators within a professional learning community brings to the surface knowledge and experience that can assist in efforts to identify ways forward that center the margins, especially in times and contexts of crisis.

Refugee Educators' Experiences and Perspectives

The qualitative data that emerged in the pilot project between March 2020 and January 2021, as the pandemic unfolded and as teachers experienced multiple shifts in schooling policies and practices, point clearly to three overarching themes expressed by refugee educators: (a) they are exhausted and stressed; (b) they are motivated and inspired by their refugee students and by each other, within a Refugee Educator Academy community of practice; and (c) they are ready and willing to take on leadership and advocacy roles within their schools to shift refugee—and other—vulnerable learners from the margins to the center. The statements, reflections, and concerns of refugee educators highlight their thoughts on what is needed in this moment, and beyond, to do their jobs better: they call for a critical eye on inclusion and equity, a greater sense of well-being and accomplishment, and a focus on improved holistic outcomes for their refugee and migrant students. Below are representative educational themes and the quotes about them from REA educators.

Three Emerging Themes

Stress. Not surprisingly, due to the pandemic and the sudden and not always well-planned shifts to remote and hybrid learning, the most common theme in refugee educator discussions throughout 2020 and into 2021 has been stress. This condition has taken on many forms, from general exhaustion due to oscillations in instructional delivery modes to a deeper level of anxiety and concern for self and for students. As one educator stated as COVID cases spiked in fall 2020: "Teachers are strong, opinionated characters, caring and compassionate, but overworked and underappreciated at the same time. How do you approach them, how do you make sure our ELs are provided equitable opportunities to learn and to graduate?" Even in this brief passage, you can hear in this teacher's voice the deep exhaustion, the worry that her colleagues are reaching their limits as "caring and compassionate" educators, and the concern that her students are not getting the instructional and resource support they need.

Like most educators worldwide who found themselves in new digital/remote teaching contexts because of COVID-19, teachers and counselors working with refugee students faced technology challenges that interfered with teaching and learning. As one elementary teacher put it, "I spent days helping families get signed on. And now we are six weeks into school and my K-1 students are just getting their devices, so I feel like I will be helping families again, [but] which will be taking away from teaching." Many months into the new school year, teachers still found themselves triaging technology problems. Teachers also commented that "our students, who are largely from refugee backgrounds, have lost *more* education and stability [italic in the original]" and "The pandemic has affected my newcomers and SIFE students the greatest. Working with students with limited digital literacy, in addition to limited language skills in English, [is] the most challenging [for me] to reach, instruct, and assess." There is recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic, and accompanying shifts to online/remote schooling, have disproportionately disadvantaged poor and multilingual households, and this adds to the stress felt by refugee educators.

Additionally, refugee educators have highlighted factors beyond technology, teaching, and learning that have added to their stress. In their efforts to be mindful of family stressors such as unemployment, sickness, death, and isolation from support networks, teachers have felt greater anxiety. As a participant in the REA shared: "As a teacher, I am never sure when my request is the one that creates anxiety in a family when I am trying to help. This makes me second guess every email I send out." The "loss of normal," as many educators have labeled it, has caused increased levels of stress among refugee educators and has had a negative impact as well on maintenance of work-life balance and a state of wellness to sustain them in the teaching profession. Many teachers have, in fact, left the teaching profession, citing stress as the top reason they quit (Diliberti et al., 2021).

Motivation and inspiration. The second prominent theme in the refugee educator discussion and reflection data, and this a positive one, highlights the motivation and inspiration educators are finding within their communities of practice with both students and each other. Many refugee educators speak to the renewed motivation, inspiration, and commitment in their work with refugee students—often in direct response to the stressors they note in their students' households and that they themselves feel as educators trying to meet the holistic learning needs of their students under remote and hybrid learning conditions. The agency of students and their efforts to fight against their marginalization serve as inspiration and motivation within refugee education spaces. One educator shared this, for example:

My students have shown up each day with a fierce determination to make the best of the situation that we are in. They laugh through the technological issues. They smile and say "let me try again" when they didn't understand an assignment. They provide support and encouragement when others are feeling down. They act as translators for their families and teachers' assistants and technological support for their younger siblings. They welcome us into their homes each day.

Clearly, refugee educators draw strength and hope from the students they meet, even during these socially distanced and stressful times.

Just as heartening, in addition to what they acquire from their students, refugee educators find motivation and renewed commitment to their work through continued remote professional learning within communities of practice such as the REA. Speaking with a new awareness of her community of learners, a teacher commented: "We have probably thousands of refugee students in my district, and I was so naive to everything that these students have been through. Unless you are educated about refugees, you have this preconception of them in your head, and mine was totally inaccurate." Mirroring this desire to learn and connect, another participant reflected on her time in the course and shared this note with her colleagues:

Thank you for everyone's dedication to the work for our refugee students! Every time we met, whether in person or online, there was a sense of community towards a common goal: doing the best we can for our refugee students.

Other participants shared feelings of empowerment with the community of practice. One teacher wrote that despite the pandemic stressors and strains, she feels "newly empowered to develop curriculum, teach, build relationships with students and families" as a result of her engagement with the REA.

Leadership and advocacy. The third theme, also positive, that surfaced in the data is the willingness of refugee educators to take on leadership and advocacy roles, especially as related to concerns around access, inclusion, and equity. For many educators working with resettled refugee and other newcomer and immigrant students, their work falls squarely within a transformative role aimed at centering the margins, especially in this time of crisis. One member of the REA expressed it as:

I believe that a refugee educator contributes to the bringing about of real change that alters the aspects of the educational system that, for many reasons, isn't working well for our diverse student needs. This requires knowledge and the ability to design and implement changes to any of the levers that can impede great educational outcomes (policy, practices, pedagogy, behavior, funding, attitudes).

A fellow cohort member reflected similar ideas and spoke more directly to the current pandemic(s):

A refugee educator needs to be aware of the bigger picture when working with students—for example, whether students' and their families' basic needs are being met, whether there is a communication gap or misunderstanding between the educational institution and the family, and what understanding and expectations the students and their families have in regard to academics. Overall, this has made me aware of the greater need for educators to advocate for their students.

As these refugee educators note, such advocacy work takes on many forms, including "centering refugee experiences," as one instructional coach phrased it. This centering was, in fact, a recurrent sub-theme in relation to serving resettled refugee students and their families. Another educator explained the concept in this reflection:

Being a refugee educator means to intentionally put the child at the center of their educational experience. It's not about content, it's about the relationships that will pave the way for the child to access the curriculum. Refugee educators put respect for people at the center of their work.

A Renewed Commitment

It is clear that educators within this community of practice see their work as relational and pivotal in shifting systems to improve educational experiences and outcomes in response to both the exacerbated educational inequities and stressors they perceived as a result of school closures and the increased calls for racial and social justice across the nation, refugee educators began to define essential attributes of working with refugee students and families. One participant stated firmly: "As a refugee educator, I consider myself to be on the front lines of a global crisis. Advocating for and educating refugees is a powerful way to resist the current political climate. We owe it to these children." What we owe, as another participant identified, is to be "culturally competent in helping the family gain access to any necessary or desired resources and/or services." In more holistic terms, yet another educator shared this reflection:

I have learned that a refugee educator should be culturally sensitive, versatile and competent. Educators of refugees understand that language, mannerisms, actions and expectations are open to interpretation. We can lessen misunderstanding and warm our welcome by learning about our families directly from the source.

Given the turmoil, the stress, and the suffering of so many people in 2020 and 2021, it is not surprising that refugee educators in this community of practice, both individually and collectively, came to identify themselves as agents of change and of hope within the education system. A teacher described her work as a refugee educator this way: "Being someone who is an ally for all students—someone who has trauma informed and culturally relevant practice and is aware of his or her own biases. This teacher creates a space where students feel safe no matter their status." In dialogues with each other, refugee educators continually expressed shared goals that included demarginalization of refugee children and families and greater inclusion, protection, and equity.

Discussion and Implications

While only a snapshot in a crisis still unfolding, one that will have implications for years to come, these voices emanating from a project created to identify and meet the needs of educators serving refugee and migrant learners offer perspective and hope in challenging times. The findings presented here point educators, education leaders, policymakers, and funders to critical steps they can take to help all stakeholders—and most especially teachers—find their center, a stabilizing power that can move them through crises with feelings of success and well-being and toward equitable experiences and outcomes for their students.

On a systemic level, important considerations for teacher learning, advocacy, and well-being include a review of existing professional learning opportunities with an eye on what is being done to center all marginalized students and communities within the current schooling paradigm. This work must involve educators who are working with the most marginalized students; these students themselves; and the parents, family, and community members that support and sustain those students outside of school. It should focus on collective identification and analysis of “gaps”—more precisely identified as “education debts” by Ladson-Billings (2006)—in achievement, curriculum offerings and pedagogical approaches, and in resources—including technology tools, counseling and support services, and leadership opportunities and decision-making roles. In addition, there must be an ongoing collective review of existing data and efforts made to generate different and more inclusive data sets—through multilingual interviews, for instance—by diverse stakeholder teams. Educators must be given time within their work schedules for collaborative dialogue and learning in vibrant communities of practice, as well as allowing them time for reflection and self-evaluation. This necessitates shifts in how we allocate time within teachers’ workdays, and likely means a need to more heavily invest in staffing schools, whether remote or in person, in ways that provide and support significant blocks of time in each educator’s day for professional learning, community connection, and self-reflection. Finally, educators must be assured of having genuine support for their well-being, including rich opportunities for social and emotional learning and physical care—resources they can then model and share with the students and families they serve. These pivotal systems-level changes have the potential to alleviate the stress refugee educators are facing; heighten the inspiration, motivation, and commitment they express in relation to their work; and cultivate their leadership and advocacy skills.

On both systems and personal levels, there are actions that focus specifically on demarginalization—actions we must adopt and practice as we move through and beyond this crisis, a crisis best identified in the U.S. context as a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racial injustice. For instance, we must build caring and sustained connections and relations with each and every one of the communities within which our students live and learn, including traditionally and currently marginalized communities in which many children of resettled refugee, migrant, indigenous, Black, Latinx, queer, special ability, differently abled, and/or high-poverty backgrounds or identities live. It is every educator’s responsibility—as participants in the REA learning community refer to it in the pilot project data—to develop intercultural competencies; advocate for students and families; and fight racism, linguistic dominance, and other oppressions in curricula and program models to disrupt patterns and systems of marginalization.

If education leaders and policymakers center refugee and migrant communities in all education planning efforts, and especially in this crisis, what might we learn and what transformative and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017; Shields, 2017) spaces might be opened? This is a question worth seriously considering in this education-in-crisis moment as we examine the impact of the dual pandemics on refugee and migrant children and also on their teachers and parents, who have been—and still are—struggling to support learning and well-being throughout 2020 and 2021. In answering this question, we might discover as well how to best center ourselves for the challenges of this moment and for the hard and vital work ahead.

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