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Don't Forget About Us: Inclusive Practices for Educators of Refugee Background Children, Youth, and Families

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Connecting Theory to Practice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.1.1.4>
<https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Nermin Vehabovic¹ and Cherrel Miller Dyce²****Abstract**

Moving theory into practice, in this paper we explore the pivotal role of social justice in fostering connections between schools and students' communities. Emphasizing access, equity, and the dismantling of power dynamics, privilege, and discrimination, we underscore the need for inclusive practices among educators of refugee-background children, youth, and families, such as recognizing their humanity, collaborative learning with communities, and advocating for unique needs. We also highlight the importance of maintaining a commitment to love and care in educational and community spaces. Subsequently, this article offers insights for teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders to create and sustain supportive spaces for people from refugee backgrounds.

Keywords:

inclusive practices; refugee education; social justice; support for refugee children

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Introduction

Supporting students from refugee backgrounds in K-12 schools and districts requires committing to and pursuing inclusive practices. Amidst global conflicts and crises, K-12 schools and districts in the United States are witnessing a rise in the number of students identified as refugees, with over 3.5 million refugees having settled nationwide since 1975 (USA Facts, 2023). In 2022 alone, 29,000 refugees resettled in the United States, nearly half of whom were children attending grades 1-12 (Refugee Facts, 2023). It is crucial to consider the unique needs of students from refugee backgrounds and the ways in which teachers, administrators, and district leaders may commit to supporting an inclusive educational climate for these children and their families.

In our collaboration with pre-service and in-service teachers, along with our roles as faculty members and teacher educators, we emphasize the crucial role of social justice in creating connections between schools and students' communities. From a broader perspective on educational inclusivity for all students, this paper moves theory into practice by illuminating three strategies for supporting students from refugee backgrounds in K-12 schools and districts, emphasizing the importance of recognizing their humanity, learning collaboratively with them and their communities, and advocating for their unique needs while maintaining the commitment to providing love and care in educational and community spaces.

A Social Justice Stance

Teachers, administrators, and district leaders who are committed to supporting an inclusive educational environment for children and families from refugee backgrounds should navigate toward a social justice education framework to support the academic and social success of this population. According to Hackman (2005), "social justice education encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments" (p. 103). A social justice framework promotes access, inclusion, belonging, and well-being. Specifically, we define a social justice framework as a meaningful and intentional focus on access and equity to combat and dismantle issues of power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes, and oppression that limit human potential, dehumanize, and disenfranchise individuals and communities. As a framework of social change and action, social justice centers advocacy, ensuring that schools are equitable ecosystems that promote the academic and social success of students, as well as valuing the social and cultural capital of the students' communities.

A social justice stance promotes a lens of equity, thereby centering the needs of individual families and communities to thrive. For educators seeking to create classroom and school climates that are situated within a social justice paradigmatic lens, Picower (2012) suggests that teachers utilize six elements when designing a social justice-infused curriculum, which focus on (a) self-love and knowledge, (b) respect for others, (c) issues of injustices (d) social movement and social change, (e) awareness raising, and (f) social action.

Moreover, operating from a social justice framework is a strengths-based lens for school-level administrators and district-level leaders to utilize and create policies and practices to support newcomers to the district, such as students and families from refugee backgrounds. Such social

justice positioning promotes a deep look at how resources are distributed, the disaggregation of data to look at outcomes, and the development of new programs, policies, and practices that deliver equitable services and meet the needs of children and families from refugee backgrounds.

The needs of children and families from refugee backgrounds are varied and influenced by governmental agencies and/or other third-party agencies. Hence, schools and school districts must create a plan for how to engage the nuanced areas that include the legal, social, political, cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious intersectional identities of children and families from refugee backgrounds. Without a social justice lens for equity and access, teachers, administrators, and other school staff must be careful that the programs, policies, and practices they develop do not further marginalize, criminalize, or missionize the community. In supporting students and families from refugee backgrounds, educators who purposely select the epistemic framework of social justice will center the voices of children and families and operate from a strength-based way of knowing, uplifting fairness, advocacy, and self-determination. Social justice provides space for children and families from refugee backgrounds to have a pedagogy of hope, purpose, and decision-making.

Overall, a social justice framework centers on the humanity of children and families from refugee backgrounds. It is anti-xenophobic and provides an equity-minded set of tools for teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders to access so that the needs of this community are not forgotten in the discussion about equity and access. In the following section, we outline three strategies that teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders may draw upon in their engagement with children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds to move theory into practice.

Three Strategies for Engagement

Strategy One: Respecting Children, Youth, and Families and Foregrounding Human Dignity

In the pursuit of creating and sustaining educational environments that prioritize care, respect, and foreground the central tenet of human dignity, teachers, administrators, and district level leaders play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging for children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds. Drawing on scholarship in education, it is evident that educators are positioned to not only acknowledge the diverse cultural and linguistic assets that students bring, but also to actively incorporate and celebrate them within the educational context. By doing so, teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders can create and sustain educational environments that prioritize care, respect, and the central tenet of human dignity. Such environments foreground the cultural identities of learners, creating a space where children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds feel seen and valued. This aligns with the broader understanding that education is not solely about the transmission of knowledge but also about recognizing and affirming the lived experiences and identities of students, particularly those with refugee backgrounds (Freire, 2000; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Recognizing the humanity in children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds is paramount for teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders. This perspective is deeply rooted in the

philosophy that education is not solely a transmission of knowledge but a transformative process that respects and acknowledges the unique identities and experiences of each person (Freire, 2000). By seeing the humanity in children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds, educators can care deeply for the children, youth, families, and communities they serve (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019). Moreover, educators who acknowledge and honor the diverse backgrounds of children, youth, and families contribute to the creation of nurturing and humanizing environments (Gay, 2010). Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that adopting culturally relevant pedagogy is essential for recognizing the individual humanity of students, fostering a sense of belonging, and promoting academic success. Acknowledging the humanity of those from refugee backgrounds serves as a fundamental step toward creating and sustaining educational environments that prioritize care and respect.

Strategy Two: Learning With and From Community

Drawing on our extensive professional experiences as classroom teachers and social workers closely collaborating with culturally and linguistically diverse people, including those from refugee backgrounds, we emphasize the crucial importance of teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders engaging in reciprocal learning, or rather, learning with and from community. When teachers and school and district administrators recognize that there are many ways of knowing, they turn to the people and communities they serve for knowledge, such as children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds, they in turn can learn with and from and simultaneously create and sustaining educational environments that prioritize care, and respect (Bajaj et al., 2022; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers and school and district administrators can center what children, youth, and families already know, as well as aspects of culture and the languages that they draw upon in their everyday lives (Muhammad, 2023). For instance, when we learn with and from community, it specifically entails collaborating to construct knowledge, creating relationships based on care and dignity, and exchanging stories that contribute to extending and reinvigorating languages and cultures (Vehabovic, 2020). Subsequently, for teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders, this means enabling children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds to cultivate identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy (Muhammad, 2023).

Strategy Three: Practicing Advocacy

Respecting and centering human dignity and learning with and from the community are two important strategies for teachers and school and district administrators to enact. In addition, teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders must also practice advocacy on behalf of children and families from refugee backgrounds. Advocacy is an action word; children and families from refugee backgrounds should be engaged with care, as some have witnessed traumatic psychological, economic, political, and cultural situations (Bajaj et al., 2022). A social justice framing of advocacy requires school and district personnel to work with other community institutions to meet the needs of this population.

Mental Health and Wellness Advocacy

Teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders should partner with community mental health institutions to meet the needs of children and families from refugee backgrounds. Considering the

phases of the refugee experience, such as pre-migration, migration, and resettlement, it is important to attend to the mental health concerns of children from refugee backgrounds, especially those who experienced war (Pacione et al., 2013). School personnel advocating for mental health resources serves as a trauma-informed approach that foregrounds the social-emotional well-being of children from refugee backgrounds as important as learning and academic success. In schools, a multisystem tiered approach is needed to provide a variety of services to meet the mental health needs of children from refugee backgrounds. In a multitiered system of support, Hoover (2009) placed importance on school-family partnerships and teacher professional development as an important move to create a trauma-informed environment. Specifically, Hoover (2009) stated that schools that adopt and center a trauma-informed approach are more effective than those not focused on this approach. External to the school community, partnerships with local mental health practitioners and hospital-based mental health clinics are a strong advocacy move that is also culturally responsive to the adjustment that children and families from refugee backgrounds face. The school and district should have resources for children and families of clinicians and practitioners in the community who practice from a trauma-informed culturally responsive approach to meet the diverse cultural and social needs of families who are acclimating to new cultural, social, and political contexts.

Policies and Practice Advocates

Teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders need to be policy and practice advocates. In the conversation for more equitable outcomes, the data for children and families from refugee backgrounds need to be broken down to consider how policies and classroom practices might be adjusted for this population. Bettmann et al. (2017) posited that children from refugee backgrounds may have to adjust to the learning and classroom environments in the post migration stage and factors, such as whether the student went to school in their home country, is important to consider for academic success. Advocating for more inclusive classroom practice to meet the needs of this population should include more flexible and adaptable attendance, homework, classroom culture, and nutrition policies.

Discussion

To effectively bridge social justice theory with practical implementation and collaboration between schools and communities is essential. We believe this partnership can be fostered by addressing several key considerations. First, educators must identify potential triggers within the school environment for trauma among children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds to better serve this population. The utilization of restorative justice principles by educators and administrators can bolster support for this demographic by helping to repair harms and build trusting relationships. Educators should assess community needs and identify barriers hindering academic success. Professional development opportunities are needed for educators and district leaders to enhance their capabilities in serving this population. Educators should establish emergency contacts outside of school for children and youth from refugee backgrounds. Finally, advocacy efforts by district personnel, including the superintendent, are needed to garner increased funding and support from local authorities, such as the school board and county commissioner, for this marginalized group.

When teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders are committed to social justice, they can

foster and sustain connections between schools and students' communities, especially children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds. By recognizing their humanity, learning with and from them and their communities, and advocating for their unique needs, teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders foster adequate support of children, youth, and families from refugee backgrounds (Bajaj, Walsh, Bartlett, & Martínez, 2022; Freire, 2000; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2023; Vehabovic, 2020).

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