

Introduction

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While every refugee's story is different and their anguish personal, they all share a common thread of uncommon courage – the courage not only to survive, but to persevere and rebuild their shattered lives.
António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

In recent years, refugees and refugee resettlement have come to the forefront of public discourse worldwide. From the high numbers of unaccompanied minors from Latin America arriving in the United States to the mass exodus of Syrians seeking asylum in Europe, questions about the ethics and economics of refugee resettlement are frequently emerging in news reports. Anxieties about migration and resettlement have fueled a rise in anti-establishment and nationalist sentiment among voters in a number of countries. Often, public media employ a framing of 'crisis' in these discussions, rarely considering the question: What happens to former refugees and asylum seekers in the long run? Specifically, how do refugees build new lives after permanent resettlement? Education serves a crucial role in this process and is seen by many individuals and families as a means of cultural adjustment, social mobility and societal integration (Matthews, 2008). While research focused on the education of refugee-background students has been growing (cf. Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015; Rutter, 2006), there is still a dearth of scholarship in this area, as documented in reviews by McBrien (2005) and Pinson and Arnot (2007). Moreover, much of the existing research focuses on younger learners in primary grades, rather than on older children and adults (Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015; Hannah, 1999). This volume aims to address these gaps in the literature, focusing on the educational experiences of adolescents and adults with refugee backgrounds. To understand who these students are and what their stories might tell us, here we provide some background information about refugees and refugee resettlement.

A refugee is defined by international law as a person who

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [or herself] of the protection of that country. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011)

While this definition emerged largely as a response to forced migration from Europe due to World War II, in keeping with other goals of the Geneva Convention, eligibility for this legal designation was eventually expanded to include individuals from other areas of the world, whose displacement was the result of other crises (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017a).

Much of the coordination, administration and policymaking related to refugees is facilitated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Asylum seekers* – individuals who claim to have left their homes forcibly and are residing temporarily in a host country – must be evaluated by the UNHCR in order to receive the legal designation ‘refugee’. While the number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide fluctuates in parallel with the occurrence of civil unrest, natural disasters and other crises, there has been a sharp rise in recent years, with the number of forcibly displaced peoples currently totaling more than 65 million – the highest number ever recorded – and continuing to rise (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017b). While political and military conflicts certainly play an important role in these rising numbers, climate change has also emerged as a major cause of forced migration – one which shows no sign of abating in the near future (Brown, 2008; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015).

After receiving the official designation of ‘refugee’, which allows them to remain temporarily in the country of asylum (also known as a ‘host country’), refugees begin the long wait for a more permanent solution. Individuals and families often remain in this ‘temporary’ state for many years, waiting for one of three possible outcomes: The first is voluntary repatriation, if the conditions in the country of origin have improved sufficiently for refugees to return home safely. A second option is local integration, in which refugees become more integrated into the host country. The final option is resettlement to a third country, with the possibility of obtaining a work visa in the short term, and eventual citizenship in some cases.

A fact little discussed in the popular media is that only a small fraction (around 8% annually) of refugees are determined to be in need of resettlement. To qualify for this option, refugees must belong to one of seven protected categories,¹ all of which preclude the option of repatriation to their country of origin. The number of refugees who are ultimately admitted by receiving countries is significantly lower than the number of those who qualify: less than 1% of all forcibly displaced people are given the opportunity for permanent resettlement. This discrepancy between the need for resettlement and the number of refugees actually resettled stems partly from the limits that most receiving countries place on the number of refugees they are willing to accept. Contrary to some popular beliefs, the application and vetting process for refugee

resettlement is onerous and extensive. However, over the past decade, as the number of displaced persons has increased, so has the number of resettled refugees: In 2016, almost 150,000 refugees were resettled via the UNHCR, double the number from 2012 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016).

What happens to refugees after relocation to a third country? This question – particularly as it relates to the education of adolescents and adults – is at the center of this volume. We call this focal population *refugee-background students*, rather than ‘refugee students’, for several reasons. The first is that the latter term is inaccurate: Once they have relocated permanently – particularly within a resettlement community – these individuals are no longer legally considered refugees, as the term ‘refugee’ refers to a temporary state of asylum, rather than permanent residence. The label ‘refugee students’ is more applicable, therefore, to those who are living and studying in temporary host countries, often in refugee camps. The term ‘refugee background’, in contrast, acknowledges that the refugee condition is typically – and ideally – a short-term label rather than a permanent identity.

Moreover, as educational linguists, we recognize that the term ‘refugee’ carries a set of discursive connotations that many individuals wish to leave behind after they have relocated to a new community. For many people, the term ‘refugee’ invokes images of helplessness and victimization, rather than the resilience and agency shown by refugee-background students (MacDonald, 2015; Malkki, 1996; Shapiro, 2014). Not surprisingly, adolescent and adult students are often aware of these connotations and many actively resist labels that carry a deficit orientation (Bigelow, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). At the same time, experiences of forced migration and resettlement form an important part of many students’ stories. We therefore employ the label ‘refugee-background’ to allude to these experiences, while simultaneously highlighting that being a former ‘refugee’ is not the only aspect of identity that matters to students – or to us as researchers.

Why Focus on Refugee-background Students?

Much of the educational research in resettlement communities has tended to lump students with migrant backgrounds into one group – for example, ‘immigrant and refugee students’, ‘linguistic minority students’ or ‘English learners’. We focus on refugee-background students for a few reasons: First, these students’ educational backgrounds can vary widely. This variation is a crucial factor in understanding educational outcomes for certain populations (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015). While some students may have had access to high-quality – even elite – education before leaving their country

of birth, others have had few if any such opportunities and may not have developed print literacy in their home languages, if it exists (Hannah, 1999; McBrien, 2005; see also Browder, this volume). Moreover, the nature and availability of education in host countries (countries of first asylum) also vary a great deal: reports from the UNHCR show that resources for education in most refugee camps are scarce (e.g. Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

The psychological and social effects on students of experiencing civil conflict, forced migration and long-term residence in refugee camps can linger for decades after resettlement (Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005). While refugee-background students are not the only immigrant population that has experienced trauma, the prevalence of emotional stress within this group of students is often noted by teachers, counselors and administrators as well as the agencies involved in resettlement (McBrien, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). However, in many cases, families, schools and communities respond to trauma by cultivating strategies and resources that promote resilience and high aspiration (e.g. Matthews, 2008; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). By focusing on refugee-background students in this volume, we aim to expand this line of inquiry to better understand the effects of trauma and the approaches used to resist these effects.

Finally, and perhaps most important, educational research has rarely engaged directly with the question: To what extent do the educational needs, experiences and assets of refugee-background students differ from those of other immigrant groups? By bringing together research from a variety of geographic and institutional contexts, this collection aims to answer that question.

This book grew out of a panel that Shawna and Mary Jane (editors one and three) convened for the convention of the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) in March 2015 (in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, entitled 'Current Research on Students with Refugee Backgrounds: Language, Literacy, Culture, and Education'). Both panelists and attendees noted the lack of research volumes on the topic of refugee-background students. We brought Raichle (editor two) on board to help us develop a call for proposals that was distributed widely to a variety of international listservs and organizations. We received dozens of proposals from around the world; from these, we selected proposals that were of the highest quality and that represented a diverse range of contexts and issues. This collection includes work from educational researchers in seven countries, three of which have traditionally been the 'top three' countries for resettlement – the United States, Australia and Canada. The other four are countries where the population of former refugees has been growing in recent years: Germany, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom (Scotland). The book also includes chapters presenting analyses from a variety of institutional settings, including public schools, community language/literacy programs and institutions of higher learning.

Our Assumptions

Undergirding the approach taken by the contributors to this volume are several key assumptions. First, that research on refugee-background students has sometimes promoted a deficit perspective, construing refugees as lacking in social, cultural, psychological and linguistic resources, as noted by scholars such as Feuerherm and Ramanathan (2015). Educational research often reinforces this perspective by focusing on themes such as trauma, poverty and illiteracy. While research must take into account these challenges – and indeed, we have referred to them here – this book includes studies that explicitly foreground concepts such as agency, resilience, social capital and other ‘funds of knowledge’ that refugee-background students, their families and community members bring to schools (Moll *et al.*, 1992; see also Keddie, 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

A second key assumption is that education as an enterprise – particularly the education of refugee-background students – is shaped not just by what happens in classrooms, but also by the broader political context of school and society (Matthews, 2008; Pinson & Arnot, 2007; Rutter, 2006). Contributors to this collection therefore acknowledge the contextual factors that inform their analyses, including macro-level social, political and cultural dynamics, as well as local factors, such as school climate and family histories. A final key assumption is that researchers are not neutral observers. We have an ethical responsibility to make explicit our own positionality and to consider the impact of our scholarship on the educational communities within which we work (Ngo *et al.*, 2014). In this regard, when accepting proposals, we asked chapter authors to discuss their biases and assumptions in presenting their analyses. Keeping these assumptions in mind, the chapters collected here not only acknowledge the complexity of the issues at hand, but also present findings in ways that are accessible and relevant for practitioners working with refugee-background students.

Volume Overview

The chapters in this book are grouped under two themes: ‘Language and Literacy’ and ‘Access and Equity’. Below, we discuss the rationale for each theme and the contribution the chapters make toward understandings of the experiences of refugee-background students in relation to that theme. While we hope this clustering allows readers to see threads that extend across chapters in each group, we recognize that there is also a great deal of overlap between the two themes. This overlap is evidenced in particular in the chapters by Dahl, Krulatz and Torgersen, which concludes the first part, and Hiorth and Molyneux, which begins the second part.

Language and Literacy

The umbrella of 'Language and Literacy' includes chapters examining students' development as language users as well as the pedagogical strategies employed in curriculum and instruction with refugee-background students in a variety of educational contexts. One theme running through the chapters in this section is that literacy cannot be studied outside of social and cultural contexts and is always connected to meaning-making. Hence, studying the literacy development of refugee-background students requires considering questions such as: How has forced migration and resettlement shaped students' values and practices in regard to literacy? How are language and literacy practices shaped by institutional, social and cultural contexts? What linguistic resources are often overlooked in traditional academic curricula (e.g. García & Wei, 2014)?

Another issue raised frequently in discussions of language and literacy development for refugee-background students is the variability in students' educational backgrounds (Curry, 2007). Some students may have had limited access to education – not only in countries of first asylum, but even prior to migration, since civil conflict often causes (and/or is caused by) societal marginalization of particular communities. Several chapters in this part therefore consider the impact of students' educational backgrounds prior to resettlement on their response to particular pedagogies and policies.

The first chapter, by Christopher Browder, presents a quantitative analysis of the role of educational background as a factor in the language development of high school English learners, focusing on students from the Chin ethnic group (originally from Burma [Myanmar]) living near Washington, DC. Browder's study both confirms and complicates some of the assumptions articulated in prior literature about students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). Perhaps his most noteworthy finding is that variance within the SLIFE population – even among those from the same ethnic background – may in fact be greater than the differences between SLIFE and other groups of English learners. Drawing on a rare quantitative study, Browder adds to the calls made by other researchers for more fine-grained assessments of newcomer students' first language (L1) literacy and content knowledge upon arrival; his findings also caution against 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to meeting newcomers' academic and linguistic needs.

In Chapter 2, Bryan Ripley Crandall shifts to a qualitative focus, considering the complex 'writing lives' of four Somali-born male students at a high school in the northeastern United States. Ripley Crandall employs activity theory to highlight the writing experiences that students find most meaningful, both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants in this study were particularly eager to share their personal stories and cultural/

historical understandings with peers and teachers from other backgrounds. Yet, the testing-dominated curriculum employed in their schools provided few opportunities for this sort of writing. The author concludes by discussing the teaching implications of his study, including the importance of authentic purposes, real-world audiences and multiphase processes in the writing lives of refugee-background youth.

In Chapter 3, Koeun Park and Verónica Valdez focus on meaning-making resources among another group of students: older adult learners of Nepali Bhutanese heritage in a US-based community language program. The authors link this approach to the concept of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992), explaining that the translanguaging pedagogy they use ‘recognizes and builds on students’ existing linguistic abilities as strengths’. Drawing on excerpts from classroom dialogue as well as examples of student work, Park and Valdez show how a teacher and her students co-constructed a community where a variety of linguistic resources were employed in the construction of new knowledge.

Chapter 4, by Delila Omerbašić, traces similar themes, examining how two adolescent girls of Karen background in the intermountain west of the United States employ technology in their out-of-school lives to create multilingual multimodal texts. These ‘digital landscapes’, as Omerbašić calls them, foreground ‘translocal knowledge’ that is particularly prevalent within communities whose members have experienced forced migration and resettlement, and illustrate how students creatively use technology to express their multifaceted cultural and linguistic identities. The author, who herself went through the process of refugee resettlement as a child, sees her work as part of a larger conversation about how to foreground the ‘strengths, resilience, and heterogeneity of people with refugee experiences’. She suggests ways that schools might draw on the assets that students bring as part of developing a ‘21st-century skills’ curriculum.

In the fifth chapter, Katerina Nakutnyy and Andrea Sterzuk consider how literacy practices used by a Sudanese-background mother and son have changed during and since their resettlement in Canada. The authors highlight the social nature of participants’ information-sharing networks prior to resettlement and consider how new social conditions in the country of resettlement create both challenges and opportunities for literacy mediation. In their conclusion, Nakutnyy and Sterzuk argue that language instruction must take into account the evolving sociocultural literacy practices in the lives of refugee-background students.

In Chapter 6, M. Kristiina Montero considers another asset that is often under-recognized in schools: expressions of self-healing among refugee-background students who have experienced trauma. Montero identifies these expressions in personal stories dictated by Rohingya young men, originally from Burma (Myanmar), who were living in Ontario, Canada.

Using narrative analysis, the author examines how students frame their personal stories in terms of aspiration, altruism and spirituality. Montero concludes that 'by welcoming students' trauma stories into the curriculum, educators might re-envision their academically oriented classrooms as spaces that support refugees' self-healing processes'.

The final chapter in this part, Chapter 7, by Anne Dahl, Anna Krulatz and Eivind Nessa Torgersen, examines the curricular goals and assumptions of refugee-background students in two small towns in Mid-Norway, comparing them with those held by their Norwegian language teachers. One key finding is that while both groups recognize that proficiency in Norwegian is important for employment and civic integration in their local community, students tend to view proficiency in English as equally important, while teachers tend to deemphasize the value of knowing English. The authors explain how this mismatch in beliefs is representative of larger language ideologies related to citizenship education, suggesting a nationalist and assimilationist hidden curriculum that is not usually articulated explicitly to students. This study highlights the tensions invoked when students' linguistic and economic realities clash with the assumptions made by gatekeepers involved in citizenship education – particularly in countries continually (re)defining themselves in relationship to the European Union.

Access and Adjustment

The theme of 'Access and Adjustment' includes a variety of issues related to educational policies and opportunities, as well as to students' educational aspirations and acculturation processes within a variety of educational settings. Prior research has suggested that educational programs and curricula for refugee-background students are often informed by a limited or inaccurate understanding of students' needs, goals and expectations (e.g. Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Pinson & Arnot, 2007). More research is needed, therefore, to examine the factors that inform educational decision-making on the part of teachers and students. Chapters in this part consider questions such as: What challenges do refugee-background students face in accessing appropriate and effective education in resettlement communities? Where are potential mismatches between the intent of educational policies and practices and the lived experience of students? What challenges and interventions have the greatest impact on students' cultural, emotional and social adjustment within educational institutions?

The first chapter in this section, Chapter 8, by Amanda Hiorth and Paul Molyneux, provides a segue from the previous theme, examining the experiences of Karen-background students as they transition from a newcomer program into a mainstream high school in Melbourne, Australia.

The authors' methodology includes student-generated drawings as a key data source, which participants reference in one-on-one interviews. These drawings offer insight into students' inner lives as they pursue social, academic and institutional integration at school. Hiorth and Molyneux conclude that transition is 'a highly complex, multifaceted, long-term, and non-linear process', in which students' social and academic experiences inform and often echo one another. They highlight the role of particular institutional spaces as well as of certain strands within the academic curriculum, in facilitating this complex process.

The theme of integration is central as well to Chapter 9, by Amadu Khan, which considers the perceptions by refugee-background students in Scotland of citizenship curricula and related policies. Khan's analysis shows how citizenship education in the United Kingdom is shaped by political tensions related to migration and national identity – tensions he has experienced first-hand as a former refugee. Khan finds that while participants recognize some benefits from the classes, such as the opportunity to interact with people from other language backgrounds and to gain knowledge that helps them advocate for themselves, they described a number of ways in which the curriculum and policies could better serve their function of social and cultural integration. Khan also highlights examples of participants' agency in pursuing other means of learning English beyond citizenship classes, even creating their own new, voluntary course offerings.

Chapter 10, by Erin Papa, reports on a youth participatory action research study, which employs a methodology known as 'photovoice', to engage the perspectives of refugee-background youth of Cambodian and Guatemalan heritage in an urban center in the northeastern United States. With this approach, students serve as co-researchers, submitting photographs that foreground important themes and issues in their lives. The student work presented in the chapter highlights various forms of social and cultural capital, including a commitment among participants to promoting community change. As with the chapters by Hiorth and Molyneux and by Omerbašić, Papa's study highlights the value of multimodal, student-generated texts as a source of insight into the lived experiences of refugee-background youth.

Next, in Chapter 11, Eva Holmkvist, Kirk Sullivan and Asbjørg Westum consider a topic often raised in the research literature about refugee-background students: the impact of their trauma history on students' classroom needs and behaviors. Specifically, this chapter examines knowledge and beliefs about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the part of Swedish teachers working with adult refugee-background students in a mid-sized town near the Arctic Circle. The authors find that teachers' conceptions of PTSD are often limited, with many feeling unsure about how to recognize it. Nevertheless, these educators were able to articulate

a variety of features of their pedagogical practice used to create a safe, comfortable and student-centered learning environment. One implication raised by this study is that educators who do not have extensive knowledge about the effects of trauma on adult learners can still support students by employing and expanding their repertoire of pedagogical practices known to be effective with adult learners in general. The authors link this observation to the concept of Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2006), which has become widely used in K-12 settings, but has rarely been taken up in adult education.

Chapter 12, by Annette Korntheuer, Maren Gag, Phillip Anderson and Joachim Schroeder, examines the availability and quality of vocational education for refugees and asylum seekers in two urban centers in Germany – Munich and Hamburg – through a meta-analysis of previous reports as well as new analysis of their own data. The authors show how legal and institutional structures in both communities serve to exclude refugee-background students, and can be considered forms of discrimination – either directly or indirectly. Despite these concerns, students interviewed in both communities maintained high educational aspirations, which the authors see as a valuable ‘coping strategy’ for refugee-background students who must navigate these complex systemic challenges.

Amy Pucino, in Chapter 13, considers discrimination from another vantage point, studying how Muslim, Iraqi-born adolescents in a mid-Atlantic community in the United States respond to racist and/or xenophobic interactions with classmates and teachers. Students reported a variety of strategies, including avoidance, the use of humor, confrontation and attempts to educate others. Each student’s choice of strategy was influenced by his or her personality as well as by the context in which the interaction occurred. Pucino employs ecological theory (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1995) in her analysis in order to link student experiences to broader, macro-level ideologies perpetuated in particular by media discourse.

In Chapter 14, Eliana Hirano addresses a question often overlooked in educational research: What do refugee-background students gain from higher education? Hirano focuses holistically on students’ personal growth – particularly on their membership in non-academic ‘communities of practice’ – at a small, liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. Hirano highlights how experiences such as extracurricular involvement, campus leadership activities and employment contributed to students’ identities beyond the classroom. The author finds, in fact, that some students saw these ‘non-academic’ accomplishments as even more valuable than grades or other markers of academic achievement, in terms of their sense of belonging and legitimacy in higher education. This study suggests that researchers in post-secondary settings may need to broaden their conceptions of educational success – particularly for refugee-background students.

Finally, Chapter 15, by Beatrix Bukus, complicates some of the assumptions underlying this collection – particularly the dichotomy of ‘voluntary’ versus ‘forced’ migration. Drawing on interviews with 10 students ages 11–18 in Leipzig, Germany, about their educational expectations and experiences as they migrated through other European Union countries, Bukus highlights the ways that students’ individual goals and expectations can play a much greater role than their legal citizenship status (e.g. economic migrant or refugee/asylum seeker) in shaping their attitudes toward education. Ultimately, Bukus’s work suggests that educators should exercise caution in making assumptions about students’ educational goals based solely on the voluntary–forced migration dichotomy, and that holding deeper conversations with students about their lived experience of multifaceted, multidirectional migration can offer valuable insights to both teachers and researchers.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, this collection elucidates a range of issues critical to the education of refugee-background youth and adults. The chapters discuss a number of significant barriers to educational access and achievement for refugee-background students. However, they also reveal a robust array of assets and strategies that students and teachers employ in reducing those barriers. We hope that this book offers readers not only a nuanced understanding of educational challenges, but also insights on how to address such challenges. Studies included in this volume were conducted in a variety of geographic contexts in North America, Europe and Australia, as well as from a range of institutional settings. While none of these chapters can capture the nuances of its geographical and institutional settings, we hope the collection helps readers see how the dynamics of a particular context can both constrain and enable certain educational experiences for refugee-background students. Finally, we hope that the range of disciplinary perspectives, conceptual frameworks and research methodologies presented in this collection will offer a multidimensional snapshot of current trends in educational research with refugee-background students, and provide inspiration for research and practice among our readers.

Note

- (1) The seven categories are: Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs, Survivors of Torture and/or Violence, Medical Needs, Women and Girls at Risk, Family Reunification, Children and Adolescents at Risk and Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions. More at <http://www.unhcr.org/3d464e842.html>.

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