

**Education as a Human Right: Educational Transitions
for Refugees in a Third Country Resettlement Context**

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Resettlement Context

Abstract

Among 65 million displaced people worldwide, 21.3 million hold refugee status, and over half of these refugees are minors (UNHCR “Global”, 2016). Worldwide, 3.5 million displaced young people were out of school in 2016 (“UNHCR reports”, 2016). With such high numbers affected, the young people who are resettled and reenter the school system, facing various challenges as students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), are entitled to support. The United Nations has asserted education as a human right (Claude, 2005). Moreover, United States federal law and North Carolina case law support a student’s equal access to educational opportunity, regardless of their linguistic abilities or national origin. However, the precariousness of refugee status and the accompanying psychological difficulties of resettlement raise questions regarding how best to facilitate a young person’s right to equal education upon entry into a new school system.

In the United States, a third country resettlement nation, refugee youth often face four-fold segregation in schools: linguistic, socioeconomic, racial, and religious isolation. There is no one refugee experience: ethnicity, refugee camp experience, appropriate grade placement on arrival, parents’ health, urban residence, and number of months resettled in one’s third country are all correlated with academic performance (Wilkinson, 2002). This paper explores best practices for mentorship-centered integration into new educational environments for refugee youth in their educational transitions following third country resettlement, through the case study of Citizenship Lab: Tools for Change.

Introduction: Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Education in North Carolina

Citizenship Lab is based in Durham, North Carolina. Each year, 2,700 refugees are resettled to North Carolina, with most coming from Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq. In the Triangle Area, which encompasses Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill in North Carolina, 1,230 refugees were resettled in FY 2016 (Zhou, 2016). The four primary resettlement agencies in this area are Church World Services, USCRI, Lutheran Family Ministries, and World Relief (Panzer & Hess, 2016). These resettlement agencies receive funding to support refugees for 90 days, and this support can be extended to up to 180 days with assistance from local partnerships. Support given by these agencies includes assistance in applying for social security cards, registering for temporary social service benefits such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Cash assistance, enrolling in local public schools and ESL programs, finding work in the U.S., and connecting with church and community groups (U.S. Department of State, 2018). However, little support is specifically aimed at benefitting young people in schools.

Young people face unique challenges in attempting to adjust to life in the U.S. When culturally disoriented upon arrival, young people entering the U.S. need support in navigating the simultaneous maintenance of their cultural heritage and integration into life as an American student and future citizen. Around one-third of refugee youth live in linguistically isolated settings (Trinh, 2017), which, when coupled with disrupted to non-existent experience in a school setting, reduces a resettled young person's ability to advocate for himself or herself in U.S. social structures such as public education. Citizenship Lab was created in an attempt to ameliorate the difficulties refugee young people face in their transitions to a new educational and community setting.

For young people seeking refuge in the United States, school systems pose a host of problems. Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Service (BRYCS) has explored the manner in

which bullying manifests in different ways across different cultures, exploring how these differences affect newcomers. All literature on this problem emphasizes that the research is limited, and results are inconsistent. Some researchers have attempted to particularly define “immigrant bullying.” This phrase is described in the *International Handbook of School Bullying: An International Perspective* as, “bullying that targets another’s immigrant status or family history of immigration in the form of taunts and slurs, derogatory references to the immigration process, physical aggression, social manipulation, or exclusion because of immigration status” (Jimerson et al., 2010). As many refugees are young people of color and non-Christian, they are often targets for bullying due to bias incidents. BRYCS also discusses the role a refugee young person’s past could play in current issues in schooling. As many of these young people spent time in refugee camps, BRYCS argues that their strong survival instincts could cause them to more easily perceive threats in their new environment.

According to 2017 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 13% of public school children were diagnosed with learning disabilities, therein receiving support under the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (NCES, 2017). However, resettled refugee children often miss early detection opportunities; consequently, they do not receive the appropriate special education support (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Graham, 2016). This poses a challenge for educators and health workers, as they do not recognize at later stages how best to provide additional support. Moreover, due to a lack of understanding surrounding cultural differences, refugee children are often misidentified for mainstreamed, gifted, or special education.

Through Citizenship Lab, a program for refugee youth run by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, refugee high school students resettled to Durham work within a

pedagogical framework that involves partnering with undergraduate mentors for academic coaching while also participating in a community initiative designed to foster academic excellence, leadership development, and robust citizenship. Duke University undergraduates serve as mentors and cultural brokers with refugee high school students in the Durham Public Schools system, leveraging their privilege to support the needs of local refugee youth. The lab uses a mentorship model akin to that which Liang et al. (2013) support when explaining the value of “approaches [that] place greater emphasis on youth as assets to their communities and the promotion of positive development through the cultivation of these assets.” However, differing from the Liang et al. model, the Citizenship Lab mentorship component seeks to “extend the reach and deepen the impact of youth mentoring through the promotion of community, social, and individual change” for specifically refugee communities (Liang et al., 2015).

Student mentors and mentees meet weekly for two hours after school for academic support; recognizing that education is a holistic process, mentors also visit the refugee young people’s families at their homes during weekends and ensure that communication occurs with the students throughout the week. The Citizenship Lab program is run in conjunction with an after-school tutoring program for younger children (Mentorship, Academics, and Self-esteem: Tutoring and Engaging with Refugee Youth or MASTERY Tutoring) and a literacy program for women (SuWA: Supporting Women’s Action), allowing high school students, elementary school children, middle school students, and mothers to all participate in similar programming and adding a family dimension to the programs. Research for various subsections of student populations, including students belonging to minority groups, students with learning disabilities, and students with attention deficits, indicate that family involvement allows for a young person

to have greater success in school (Conus & Farni, 2017; Bubić & Tošić, 2016; Walker, 2016; Ihmeideh & Oliemat, 2015; Georgis et al., 2014; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Lareau, 1987).

The Citizenship Lab program is distinct to mentorship and tutoring programs in that it equips refugee students with the skills necessary to more successfully integrate into school and society as civically engaged community members while encouraging the students to maintain important aspects of their culture. Through mentorship relationships and programming, the high school students are exposed to the positive aspects of assimilation, such as community engagement, team-building, and commitment to academic success. Tools for Change is a program implemented nationally to support secondary school students of minority background in navigating their local public school system while engaging with large research questions connected to a community initiative.

This paper will seek to answer the following question: How can youth civic engagement programs promote a robust sense of citizenship and improve college readiness among refugee youth? We argue that schools are currently failing to serve refugee high school students in a manner that upholds Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Interventions such as those performed through Citizenship Lab's relationship-driven mentee-mentor engagement and community empowerment programs can remedy educational shortcomings in a manner that benefits the local school system.

Methods

This paper relies on a mix of literature review, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with refugee youth, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate mentors, weekly surveys for mentors related to challenges for mentees, and surveys for refugee young people related to their understanding of the local school system and their role in the local community.

Additionally, research is informed through conversations with Sashi Rayasam, DPS Director of K-12 ESL Services, and Chojoy Schroeder, early ESOL advocate and retired Rochester City School District teacher as well as Rochester School District Board Member since 2014.

Legal Implications for Educational Law Connected to Refugee Youth

Each student is legally entitled to certain educational rights under federal law. It is important to understand the educational rights of children in the United States to adequately understand the significant gap between the level of support that refugees transitioning to school receive and that to which they are entitled. In North Carolina specifically, *Leondro v. State*, a North Carolina Supreme Court decision that was reaffirmed in *Hoke County v State*, outlines the responsibility of states to provide every student with an adequate education, including those with limited English skills. Specifically, it states that:

the state must provide adequate resources so that each child has the opportunity to leave the public schools with sufficient academic skills that he or she can function in society, make informed choices with regard to issues that affect the local and national community, successfully engage in post-secondary education or vocational training, and compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment (1997).

Under such law, it is clear that all children in the state of North Carolina are entitled to equal educational access, as each individual's public education contributes to the local and national community. The North Carolina Constitution likewise outlines the need for equal educational programming for minority groups. In accordance with the provision of N.C. Const. Art. IX 2, a general and uniform system of free public schools must be provided throughout the state wherein equal opportunities must be provided must be provided for all students. The state violates this when educational opportunities favor one class of students over another or exclude a group of students. Moreover, according to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), each state educational agency that receives a grant must provide reports on programs and activities carried out and their

effectiveness in improving ELL education, indicating a federal push to support LEP students (S. 1177, 2015).

The Department of Justice (DOJ) provides the most specific guidance for ensuring the rights of English Language Learners (ELLs). Entitled “Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – National Origin Discrimination Against Persons With Limited English Proficiency,” the guidance mandates that: “recipients of federal funds, such as schools, take responsible steps to ensure meaningful access by limited-English proficient persons” (2000). This guidance outlines several factors to be considered in this regard, including the number or proportion of limited-English proficiency (LEP) students in the eligible service population, the frequency with which LEPs come in contact with the program, the importance of the service provided by the program, and the resources available to the recipient.

As previously discussed, parents play a crucial role in helping their child reach his or her potential in school. This involvement becomes more difficult to attain if a student’s parents cannot speak English, which is frequently the case for the parents of resettled refugee youth. Federal law is clear, however, about parents’ right to be meaningfully involved in their child’s education. The English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is intended, among other things, to help ensure that children who have limited English proficiency, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. Specifically, NCLB stipulates that schools are required to present the following information to parents “to the extent practicable, in a language that the parents can understand”:

a written parental involvement policy; notices and information regarding the parental involvement policy; information about programs under the parental involvement provisions of Title I; description and explanation of the curriculum in use at the school, the forms of academic assessment used to measure student progress, the proficiency levels students are expected to meet, and school's promotion policy; State, District and School Report Cards; information on child's level of achievement in each of the State academic assessments; notification that parent may request information regarding the professional qualifications of child's teacher and/or paraprofessional; if applicable, notice that child has been assigned to, or taught for four or more consecutive weeks by, a teacher who is not highly qualified as defined by Title I; and information related to school and parent programs, meetings, and other activities (H.R. 1, 2002).

It is essential that parents are involved in a young person's education, receiving thorough notification of their student's academic progress. The Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division offer specific requirements regarding language access to parents on a multilateral federal level, requiring a standardized system for translation of documents, a directory of qualified interpreters, and translations for all student documents. Only with adequate support for students *and* parents will students have equal access to education regardless of their linguistic background, as is owed to them based on landmark cases *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Lau v. Nichols* (*Dear Colleague Letter*, 2011).

Citizenship Lab: A Case Study

Citizenship Lab is uniquely positioned to shed light on the challenges refugees are facing in school as well as the potential of different strategies to ameliorate those challenges. The lab's primary focus examines support for students within the Durham Public Schools system in North Carolina; however, the obstacles facing refugee youth are extrapolatable to other ELL students more broadly in that they are truly systemic challenges – and the efforts to overcome them may be similarly applicable to other ELL young people. Citizenship Lab focuses on three core tenets in its support framework:

1. Academic and School Success

2. Leadership: Self esteem/Self efficacy
3. Robust Citizenship and Community Inclusion

To do so, mentors seek to promote the following goals for their high school mentees: promote agency, construct belonging and foster social inclusion, and allow for leadership transitions.

Citizenship Lab takes a relationship-driven approach to academic support, utilizing an academic coaching model as opposed to a more basic tutoring technique. The academic support program builds upon Rogers and Renard (1999) who posit six standards for relationship-driven teaching and Witmer (2010) who further analyzes the role of relationships by recommending relationship training for pre-service teachers, offering them insight into building relationships with parents to support the school-home relationship. Founded on the premise that academic tutoring does not alone holistically mitigate challenges facing refugee high school students, Citizenship Lab uses a relationship-driven mentorship model. On Tuesday evenings, refugee families resettled to Durham at various points over recent years are transported to Duke University to spend two hours on campus working with undergraduate students in a mentorship capacity. Families are transported via bus if they live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of families, to continue promoting a community atmosphere and sense of togetherness, or via taxi or Uber if families live in more isolated areas of Durham, having moved after initial resettlement.

For two hours, each Duke student (i.e. mentor) works with a high school student (i.e. mentee) to assist the student with any challenges he or she may be facing in school, address any gaps in education he or she notices the mentee is experiencing, and facilitate skill-development and community engagement as is relevant. Weekly challenges are analyzed in the following categories: Language and Communication Skills; Math and Science Skills; Social Science Skills (presentations, projects, etc); School Logistics (Powerschool, signing up for classes, etc);

College Preparation; and Family, Citizenship, and Culture. Thus, the mentoring role consists of significant family involvement and community engagement, promoting intercultural understanding while maintaining a focus on academic support. Mentors frequently visit the homes of the mentees, meet weekly with the other mentors to discuss mentee engagement and overall strategy, and participate in independent legal and civic engagement projects relating to the lab .

The “mentor-mentee” language is emphasized and intentional; the Citizenship Lab aspires to foster a relationship among each mentor and mentee pair that consists of mutual trust and continual conversation. Dr. William Tobin, founder of the Citizenship Lab and a Visiting Associate Professor in Sociology at Duke University, compares the relationship to that among siblings. Through such a relationship, Citizenship Lab participants, though recognizing the bias of participant observation, investigate how their mentees can reimagine a life of dignity and purpose after enduring the often traumatic implications of third country resettlement. By developing programmatic interventions in support of refugee well being, lab members provide evidence-based policy recommendations at a local level while partnering with displaced communities.

Fostering Social Inclusion through Community Engagement

Citizenship Lab encourages refugee high school students to engage with their community beyond the classroom. Noticing that local business owners and government officials were concerned about dangerous bus stop conditions in Durham, mentors in the Citizenship Lab facilitated their mentees’ participation in a bus stop improvement project. During the 2016-2017 academic year, undergraduate students and their mentees partnered with the Durham Department

of Transportation to emphasize democratic opportunities of citizenship to the high school students.

Through working on a “Bus Cube Project” the high school students became part of a community initiative, building wooden cubes that would be placed at bus stops near their homes for seating. Each week, the young people broke into teams: one group focused on designing a product that could better the bus stop conditions and draw attention to their current poor state, while the other team developed interview skills in order to conduct semi-structured interviews with bus riders, both before and after the product was implemented. Drawing upon previous projects in Greensboro, North Carolina and Rochester, New York, the young people worked with their mentors to develop a plan for large brightly colored cubes that could be placed at several highly trafficked bus stops in order to draw attention to the issue and provide a place to sit for people waiting at the stop. The Department of Transportation spoke with them about the importance of surveys, offering insight into the power of public voice in democracy. Thus, the high school students had the opportunity to learn about research interviews before then visiting bus stops in Durham and asking locals about their opinions regarding GoDurham transit opportunities. Refugees are often excluded from leadership structures and volunteer opportunities, but Citizenship Lab seeks to provide a sense of community belonging for refugee youth through volunteering (Carlton, 2005; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Furthermore, as Spaaij (2014) argues, community engagement for refugees is beneficial in even informal settings, as boundaries between inclusion and exclusion are transcended through participation in a team-based activity.

The community initiative component builds upon findings by Kirpitchenko and Mansouri (2014) regarding social engagement and migrant youth. They recognize the importance of

positioning young migrant people as active agents of social inclusion, rather than as passive recipients of a variety of government programs and initiatives. Their research provided evidence for approaching and conceptualising the social inclusion agenda as a positive shift from a previously prominent conflict perspective, also described as a “tolerance model” which highlighted poverty, unemployment and marginalised moral attitudes of migrant youth (Mansouri & Lobo, 2011, p. 6 qtd. in Kirpitchenko & Mansouri).

While within the “tolerance model” migrant youth tended to be negatively portrayed as “passive subjects” in need of being “managed and disciplined” (Mansouri & Lobo, 2011, p. 6 qtd. in Kirpitchenko & Mansouri), the social inclusion model highlights a holistic approach to integration. The Kirpitchenko and Mansour paper contributes to portraying social inclusion as a “transformative idea” that has a potential for challenging and redefining the society we live in (Levitas, 2003 qtd. in Kirpitchenko & Mansouri). What needs to be redefined is society’s approach to diversity. The social inclusion model calls for a “valuing of diversity, not just the recognition of diversity and difference. It recognizes that diversity and difference do possess their own worth—and are not challenges to be overcome” (Hanvey, 2003 qtd. in Kirpitchenko & Mansouri). Migrant youth are not “issues” that school systems must overcome. Rather, their diverse backgrounds could provide a richer academic experience for their peers. Citizenship Lab helps to demonstrate this dialogical integration, pushing refugee youth to take an active role within their community.

Promoting Agency and Postsecondary Inspiration

Underpinning the relationship-driven academic coaching model utilized by Citizenship Lab is an effort to promote self-efficacy of refugee youth. By instilling young people with confidence through strengthened language command and understanding of academic spaces, they

are given the self-assurance to navigate additional unfamiliar spaces. Moreover, this self-efficacy translates to their family members as well, as the students often use their strengthened confidence to assist their family members. According to Weng and Lee (2015), refugees have been identified as wanting to engage with their surrounding community and desiring to give back to the community despite the barriers that they face, which prompts deficits in their meeting a need for self-sufficiency. In an effort to mitigate such barriers, the Citizenship Lab facilitates connections between refugee students, parents and Durham Public School teachers, administrators, and educational outreach programs.

As students in the program have acquired more comprehensive English Language skills and gained a better understanding of the school system in the United States, they not only serve as teachers and cultural brokers for younger students and their parents but exercise personal agency through stronger social and cultural capital skills to advocate for themselves. This student capacity is evident through the presentations about American culture students give to the others in the Citizenship Lab, the fact that many of the students work at part-time jobs they found on their own, and the transition some of the students have made from high school to college. Many of the students in the Citizenship Lab hope to attend college after graduation, showing resilience despite the statistics they face. In the 2012-2013 academic year, the most recent for which LEP graduation rate data is available, only 61% of LEP students graduated from high school, compared to the national average of 81% (Sugarman, 2015).

A veteran in the program, Jeanbosco Byiringiro from the Dominican Republic of the Congo, excelled in high school classes and now takes college classes at Durham Tech. He continues to participate in Citizenship Lab, serving as an inspiration for younger students. Maryam, a 17-year old Iraqi refugee, is equally excited for the transition in college. Of her

experience in the Citizenship Lab and the prospect of going to college, she stated, “I get so excited to come here. We get more ideas about America, we see the college. First, I was so nervous and scared with no English, but now, I know all about the college, so now I’m not worried about leaving high school. I like to come here to see my friends and my teachers and have fun with them.” By experiencing academic support on a college campus, the refugee young people, some of whom have illiterate and innumerate parents, become exposed to a postsecondary environment unlike that which they would otherwise experience.

Promoting Leadership Transitions

Citizenship Lab recognizes that students who have been involved in the program are capable of serving as role models for newcomers, as they have been through similar situations and have successfully transitioned to their new community. These students are transitioned to leadership roles, acting as mentors themselves. They use their lived experiences to help newly resettled youth navigate their local schools and community. Mustafa, a twenty-year old Iraqi in the program who arrived in the United States eight years ago, transitioned from MASTERY to Citizenship Lab, before ultimately becoming a Durham Tech student and mentor for other Arabic-speaking students.

Reflecting on some of the challenges refugee students face upon arrival, Mustafa explains: “Maybe in their school they don’t have any people from their home; they’re afraid to speak because people may make fun of them, but here they can speak and be confident and learn.” New students respect Mustafa, as they recognize that he was once in their situation and utilized program resources to navigate local school systems, to apply to attend a local technical school after graduating high school, and even to apply for citizenship. Moreover, Mustafa’s

ability to speak Arabic helps bridge the language gap between mentors and mentees, offering translation services when DPS is unable to do so for non-Spanish speaking ELL students.

Mustafa's leadership transition points to the value of diverse representation in education. Ella Shohat's "ethnicities in relation" approach (1994) as is analyzed in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education* (2005), "posits ethnicities, especially as represented in film and other mass media, as dynamic and unstable, gaining meaning only in terms of the representation of other ethnicities within a given textual context" (Valdivia, pp. 311-312). However, when individuals of a certain in-group have the opportunity to contextualize their own representation, as is the case of Mustafa mentoring young people who went through experiences similar to his, they can give meaning to the representation they create. Mercer (1990) presents, through the lens of black representation, that any form of representation is socially constructed, and when a member of the minority group in question gains access to a position of power allowing for further representative construction, they hold the responsibility to counter racist stereotypes (West, 2005). While this certainly holds the burdensome elements Mercer presents, that does not necessarily minimize the advantageous effects such positive representative imagery has for the group gaining beneficial representation.

Challenges and Closing Implications

The limited research on programs supporting refugee youth reveals that the most effective programs have the following three attributes: (1) relationship-driven academic support, (2) reinforcement of cultural pride while integrating into a new community, and (3) holistic treatment of a refugee young person's needs. However, major challenges remain to best supporting the needs of refugee youth. When both refugee mentees and undergraduate mentors are in states of transient participation, with undergraduates leaving Durham for the summer and

after graduation and refugee youth often missing Citizenship Lab sessions when a conflict arises, relationship development can be hindered. Moreover, with students arriving to the U.S. at various times throughout the year and with varied English abilities, pre-testing students in a systematic manner is challenging. Moving forward, research must be conducted more systematically, measuring student academic successes and the manner in which positive behavioral progress implicates families, collectively allowing for students and their families to feel a more robust sense of citizenship.

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