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"I Saw the Look on Her Face:" Engaging the "between" Spaces of Work with Refugee-Background Students and Families

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Abstract: This paper bridges critical refugee studies concepts with the literature on refugee education, advancing the possibilities of humanizing educational discourses and practices for refugee youth and families. We consider educational practices that move beyond labels and seek what is possible in the "in-between" spaces that sustain agency to define the parameters of belonging and participation. We examine how educators' and schools' work needs to takes place between recognizing the refugee status and its implications and not reducing the person to that identity category; between supporting the refugee student in their needs, and yet not trapping the youth in that category indefinitely by inadvertently disallowing self-definition; between ensuring the needed service and supports, and yet accepting what refugee youth and their families have to offer to the institution and the educational process; between rejecting derogatory labels for refugees as 'resource-takers' and yet resisting the commodification of these youth as "resources" themselves. Amid framing discourses of idealizing and demonizing discourses of worthiness and danger, educators are invited into the "in-between" spaces that offer rich moves into belonging.
Keywords: Refugee youth, refugee education, belonging, identity, humanization

In line with this special issue on *Educational Equity for Refugees: Sustainable Practices*, this article bridges critical refugee studies concepts with the literature on refugee education, advancing the possibilities of humanizing educational discourses and practices for refugee youth and families. In doing so, the aim is to enhance sustainable practices that also sustain newcomers' identities, agency and flourishing. The framing of the 'refugee' status and the processes of resettlement in the international refugee regime–the global infrastructure of international and domestic laws, institutions, and legal processes that contour refugee flows—are designed beyond the refugees' reach, without their input, yet impact their ability to participate in the receiving context and to move beyond being perpetually refugees into being members of new host communities with a sense of belonging, participation, and a dignity-conferring sense of agency and being fully valued. To offer an initial illustration, we recall one youth in our work who, in

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discussing her experiences long after resettlement to a U.S. Midwestern city, mentioned the politeness that she encountered in most interactions with Americans. She very much appreciated that. Nevertheless, she went on to reflect on the acute awareness of her identity as a refugee in such episodes as trying to pay through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) at the store and noticing the expression on the clerk's face: "She was nice, but I saw the look on her face." That was a moment of tension, an in-between space where the apparent tenor was positive and welcoming, but a slight change in perception was sufficient to make this student think that it was her embodiment as Asian, her accent, and clothing that somehow made the supplemental assistance less acceptable because it was offered to an outsider, a refugee.

Sustainable practices for educators in work with refugees need to begin with reflection and recognition of ongoing work, as much has been done towards the support of refugee and refugee-background students in the U.S and other countries over the last several decades. At the same time, we continue to learn, repeatedly, of the remaining work needed, of the reframing that continues to be necessary, as we remain engaged in the persevering complexity and nuance of working justly and equitably with and for refugee youth. We elaborate on how educators are invited to sustain these possibilities by walking the razor's edge between seemingly competing situations, needing to intentionally inhabit these in-between spaces where individuals are recognized in their humanity and unique needs, but where the structural examinations of power and the unequal positioning of newcomers is not overlooked and where relational empathy and compassion do not elide political responses to dehumanization. In doing so, we consider these uneasy tensions that exist between varied needs or among the possible approaches to meeting these needs, and continue to examine them as scholars and as teacher educators. We refer to these tensions as "between" spaces, because they often elude evident or straightforward choices in response and practice, just as refugee families and youth themselves have to often inhabit the "between," the precarious and the uncertain. In this article, we draw attention to some of these "between" spaces, inviting educators to reflect on and add to them, as we continue to learn alongside refugee youth and their families.

Critical Refugee Studies: Towards intentional refugee-centric and -generated agency

To highlight some of the "between" complexities and the tensions of humanization calls and supporting refugee students well amid these tensions, we draw at first on work done in Critical Refugee Studies. The overarching field of Refugee Studies is interdisciplinary, encompassing a range of areas that examine not only the experiences of refugees, but also their wider national and international contexts, ranging in scope from narrative-based inquiry to economic and policy analysis. As such, the field has always included critical analysts concerned with whose interests are served through policies or approaches taken in scholarly works, condemning the ways refugees are commodified in the displacement legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and how the international refugee regime protects the global north and not necessarily the interests of refugees. In this context, some scholars have claimed that "Refugee Studies has always been critical," while also acknowledging the calls over the last decade for more explicit critical engagement with this work (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022). Indeed, fields such as international law and relations, geography and political science have invested increased attention to the complicated facets of humanitarianism in terms of race, gender or colonial positioning, and the daunting tasks of transforming the international refugee regime while working within its established parameters, since studies tended to reinforce the refugee regime even as they critique it (Hong, 2020).

Critical refugee studies, an emergent field at the intersections of Southeast Asian American studies, feminist theory and postcolonial studies, foregrounds refugees' own knowledge-making

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and agency, while also making the personal-to-political linkage between experiences and structural hierarchies of post-colonialism, militarism and social locations as race and gender. In this manner, "refugee lifeworlds [are conceptualized] not as a problem to be solved by global elites but as a site of social, political and historical critiques" (Espiritu, 2021, p. 3), while "refugee epistemologies and experiences become visible guiding principles" (Hong, 2020, p. 35). In initiatives such as The Critical Refugee Studies Collective, scholars who subscribe to this approach have also spoken collectively about these intentions "to center refugee lives and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer" (CRSC, 2024). The aim is to "replace and reverse the dehumanization of refugees within imperialist gazes and frames, sensational stories, savior narratives, big data, colorful mapping, and spectator scholarship . . . [and] show how data . . . and other forms of discourse can avoid the objectification of refugees" (CRSC, 2024). This is an invitation to scholars engaged in work with refugees, to "actively re-imagine more accountable ways to understand and represent" and to elevate "the autonomy and self-authorized strategies engaged in by refugees" (Bjorklund & Hyndman, 2022, p. 350).

Too often, refugees are positioned as the problem to address in various contexts and in relationship to social institutions, but we must instead emphasize that refugees have certain problems framed by the structures they need to navigate for survival. They also have rich capacities to act at the "intersection between private grief and public violence" amid "the hidden and overt injuries but also joy that play out in the domain of the intimate" and amid "the always-already incomplete-ness of the resettlement project" (Espiritu, 2021, p. 12). There are uneasy juxtapositions that make the work with refugees so consistently complex, calling for examining and acting in the "between," often uncertain spaces of seemingly opposed approaches or positions.

Schools—with their organizational structures, personnel, curricular goals, pedagogical approaches and interpersonal dynamics—continue to shape young people' opportunities and development in unparalleled ways. Indeed, for immigrant and refugee youth, the most sustained interaction outside of the family in the new society is with the school. Educators need to be particularly attuned to these tensions, especially since much of the everyday work is carried out by truly invested, well-intended individuals who give of themselves to make a difference in the lives of newcomers in their classrooms, districts and communities. So much more, then, our aim as teacher educators and scholars is to examine these tensions, so we can equip teachers towards equity. As critical refugee scholars urge, educators need to sit with these complexities as we "move decisively away from conceptualizing the refugee [students and families] as desperate, abject, and impoverished, and toward addressing and foregrounding their concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings" (Espiritu, 2021, p. 5).

In this context, we invite educators to examine how our work needs to takes place, for example, between recognizing the refugee status and its implications, yet not reducing the youth to that identity category; between supporting the refugee student in their needs, and yet not trapping the youth in that category indefinitely by inadvertently disallowing self-definition; between ensuring the needed service and supports, and yet accepting what refugee youth and their families have to offer to the institution and the educational process; between rejecting derogatory labels for refugees as 'resource-takers' and yet resisting the commodification of these youth as "resources" themselves. Amid framing discourses of idealizing and demonizing discourses of worthiness and danger, educators are invited into the "between" spaces that offer rich moves into sustainable practices and belonging.

Refugee de/humanization: Beyond conspicuous practices in and out of educational settings

The analytical approaches and practices rooted in critical refugee studies are all the more needed, as we live in political contexts dominated by the use of fear towards exclusionary aims, leading to the dehumanization of newcomers, especially of refugees. Schools are not immune to these practices, even when they are not particularly conspicuous. Since "the global discourse has belabored the costs of integration, but rarely discussed the potential gains," refugees are least likely to be perceived as economic and cultural contributors when compared with other immigrants, even if they bring skills, knowledge, innovation, and networks to their host nations (Bahar & Doolay, 2019, p. 2). With the vast increase in the number of forcibly displaced people—117 million, of whom 47 million are under the age of 18 and 37.6 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2023)—the exclusionary processes have been examined in much migration-focused scholarship across disciplines. Dehumanization has been shown to take varied forms that go beyond direct physical violence, abuse and exclusion. They can also range from news coverage and representation which engenders a "visual dehumanization" (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021), or narrative accounts that equate refugees to natural disasters, such as "overflowing" floods or "swarming" insects and uncontrollable entities such as "hoards" or "masses." (Eberl et al., 2018) that overtake and overwhelm a nation, to policies that criminalize those seeking refuge and reduce access to safety (Healey, 2004; McDonnell & Merton, 2019).

In addition, scrutinizing techniques predominate and can be inhumane, both before and after resettlement. Refugees face long waiting times, uncertain outcomes, family separation and increased youth vulnerability to abuse, trafficking and lack of education and mobility opportunities. Together, these experiences have long-lasting effects on families and children's sense of belonging and safety even upon resettlement in a new context of reception. Despite the resilience shown by refugees who often find ways to continue the education of the children and youth in their care, many still experience extended interruptions in formal education or access to advancing in the sequential nature of schooling and degree-completion. As a result, only one percent of refugee youth ever complete a college degree (UNHCR, 2023), making it difficult to access opportunity structures, especially in the knowledge economies of Western resettlement nations. In response, there has been a renewed interest in college- and university-based pathways to refugee resettlement, in order to create migration opportunities for refugees and enable educational advancement (Crow & Botstein, 2022). Further investment is necessary for mobilizing U.S. campuses through more formalized support via policies and program infrastructures that can facilitate streamlined communication with resettlement agencies and meet state requirements.

In response to othering mechanisms that strip refugees of fundamental rights and means to belonging, migration scholars have argued for the importance of (re)humanization through the re-framing of narratives by political and institutional leaders (Esses et al., 2021) and also by shifting away from dehumanizing representation approaches (Alcaraz-Mármol & Soto-Almela, 2022) and strengthening institutional supports at national and local levels. Such humanization efforts are often rooted in a desire to cultivate empathy towards the plight of refugees, by highlighting common human qualities and experiences (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019) or to "construct people as belonging to a common moral community, of acting in ways that are understandable, and as deserving of support" (Kirkwood, 2017, p. 116). Teacher education programs, too, aim to enhance candidates' multicultural understanding and many programs now include courses where the experiences of immigrant and refugee students are studied both through social science research and narrative.

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These approaches are often well-intended, bridging, in a sense, an 'experience gap'—the lives of those in many western resettlement locations are far removed from the daily survival struggles of people who are forced to relocate their entire lives, often at extreme costs to themselves and their families. The creation of empathy in that gap, then, forms "the refugee" as the most deserving category of migrant (Jensen, 2021), a "privileged immigration status" (Betts & Collier, 2017) with whom anyone can identify by tapping into the basic human needs for shelter, nutrition, family safety or relationships. These categories generate and are reinforced amid *hierarchies of deservingness*, which are then employed as criteria for acceptance or exclusion in the new society (Bleiker et al., 2013). The deservingness is thus, paradoxically, not necessarily because of what the refugee has to *offer*, but because of what they *lost*, and what a shared humanity would require as the appropriate action under such circumstances.

To be 'recognized' as a deserving refugee, then, is a centrally defining moment in the journey toward more safety and stability, but this 'recognition' of status and deservingness occurs in what critical refugee scholars call the "global refugee regime" that still protects the interests of wealthier resettlement nations. Resettlement statistics show unequivocally that the vast majority of forcibly displaced people never arrive in global north nations, with 75% being hosted in low- and middle-income countries, and 69% of refugees and other people in need of international protection live in countries neighboring their countries of origin (UNHCR, 2023). The well-intended attempt to fill the knowledge and experience gaps of global north individuals and institutions by generating empathy through media representations is reflected in the particular choice of women and children as "faces" of refugee resettlement in messages about taking humanitarian action to support them. Even if they are generally underrepresented in the media coverage (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2023), refugee women and children in dangerous situations, such as when riding on overcrowded boats on the Mediterranean during the Syrian conflict in 2014, engender more empathetic responses from the European public, when they were perceived as vulnerable and in need of help and rescue. As Hron (2014) points out, "[c]hild victims thus elicit much more sympathy than adult victims and make the wrongs perpetrated against them seem even more grievous. The observer's response to child victims—ranging from pity to righteous indignation—therefore seems morally and politically uncomplicated" (p. 27).

On the other hand, images of large groups of young, able-bodied, brown-skinned men arriving in Europe were used in conjunction with messages about economic or cultural threats to a European identity. Similarly, in the U.S. context, asylum seekers crossing the Mexican border and then arriving by the thousands in places like New York City in 2023, lead to increased coverage that ranged from empathy-building images of families asleep on sidewalks as shelters were at capacity (CBS News, 2023), or newcomers being moved from temporary tents into a local high-school for shelter during a storm. At the same time, the movement to online classes for the one day of missed school, also caused frustration and complaints among parents, some of whom seemed less willing to find empathetic responses. While claiming they understood the needs of migrants, they wanted the city to have found a "different solution" that did not affect their own children (CBS News, 2023).

A concern with these empathy-based approaches to 'rehumanizing' refugees, then, is that they depend on frameworks of empathy that, in turn, depend on a capacity for perspective consciousness—an understanding that personal views and capacity to connect with others' experiences are shaped by our embodied experiences in particular contexts. At best, relying on empathy and the underscoring of a shared humanity for refugee rightful support can have limited effectiveness. At worst, it can perpetuate systemic inequity and injustice as such approaches cannot bypass systems that seek to preserve existing advantage, access and privilege. Critical refugee

scholars, then, invite us to consider the challenges that the calls to humanization present. These challenges remain directly relevant not only to wider policy decisions, but to educational practice as well. They argue that the attempts in both human-interest journalism stories and some scholarly accounts, to center the shared human experience of refugees that readers can identify with, poses "a risk of obscuring alternative accounts of how the human, as a political category, has been constructed within structures of power and privilege" (Darling, 2021, p. 58). The well-intended attempt to move beyond numbers and statistics, to 'put a human face' on the realities of displacement and to center individual narratives raise the issue of who we are likely to identify with, like or prefer. Empathy and preference mechanisms are structured by long histories of socialization in unequal, racist and ethnocentric structures. Indeed, as Darling (2021) puts it, "whether 'we' like these people or not should not be a concern for a politics of refuge—social and spatial justice should not be a politics of preference" (p. 58).

Implications for educational policy and practice in "between" spaces

Carefully considering the pitfalls of calls to humanization is an important starting point in examining implications for teacher preparation, professional development and practice, as we aim towards centering refugee students' and families' agency and elevating their autonomy. To this end, our teacher education and in-service professional development must continue to emphasize reflection, self-examination and systemic critiques, so that teachers and administrators can be equipped with the tools to recognize these predilections and their origins. In doing so, they will be able to counter them and act for the creation of systematic, justice-oriented and resource-supported initiatives in classrooms and school districts.

Between empathy and principled action: Moving beyond empathy- and volunteer-dependent support

Findings in education research studies also help us understand the precarity of humanization processes and their dependence on empathy and identifying with one's students—there are well-established findings about preference, discrimination and their consequences. Studies on experienced discrimination in schools show that Black and Latino students report discrimination by teachers and security officers, while teachers tend to prefer Asian-American students informed by model minority belief frameworks (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Additionally, African American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended or expelled for the same or similar problematic behaviors enacted by White peers (Skiba et al., 2011). Such persistent findings really highlight pervasive racial and ethnic disparities and thus should give us pause when trying to rely on empathy or identifying with the individual refugee youth as a basis for support and policy interventions in schools.

While compassion and connection are important in the formation of relationships across difference, to serve all refugee youth well, we must move past our own capacity for empathy which is deeply entrenched into our racialized social structures. In our work, we have also found that assessment and hierarchical comparisons between national-origin groups tends to seep in, as educators reflect on their experiences in schools, perceiving some students' behaviors as representative of general cultural tendencies, where some youth are positioned as easily adaptive—"we have never had problems with them"—while others are combative or conflict-seeking—"they fight more and we are trying to understand why." To this end, critical refugee studies scholars raise questions about the very notion of humanness in our studies with refugees, prompting migration

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scholars "to seriously reckon with our own fragmented humanness, including the differential positions we inhabit within intersecting global orders of race, class, gender, ability, and geographical location" (Brankamp & Weima, 2021, p. 5).

Moreover, trying to generate empathy for refugee peers among students, by foregrounding decontextualized individual narratives of resilience, can quickly become problematic and essentializing. For example, in our work, we encountered accounts such the one where one refugee student's teacher had all of her students go out and collect twigs, as a means to show the rest of the class how in her journey she had had to hide in the woods for weeks, surviving with small makeshift fires. In reflecting upon this episode, the young woman commented on her embarrassment and made a crucial critique: "It looked like some sort of reality. But it was just so out of context. I mean, you can't really understand what that experience was like. Especially in that one particular activity." In other initiatives—usually community-based—youth were asked to skip a meal and donate that money towards supporting certain needs, or were given an extremely small budget and had to make a meal for a large group, in an attempt to help students in the context of reception understand the impact of hunger and drastically limited resources that refugees often face in refugee camps. There are good intentions that drive these activities in an attempt to create connections and empathy among peers, to offer a glimpse to students who are often far removed from these realities of displacement.

The tension, however, is that such activities, especially when decontextualized, tend to trivialize the refugees' experiences by reducing it to certain images and moments, to reify the refugee youth's identity among her peers, and generally not offer the other students opportunities to genuinely engage with the subject of refugee resettlement without the assumption that they could ever grasp those lived experiences. An essential aspect to promote in teacher education is an understanding that when we speak about the education and needs of refugee students, as we prepare to serve them well, we need to consider not only their own education, but also that of the children who are already in the receiving schools and classrooms. Teachers have the complex responsibility of creating spaces where new peers build relationships across differences of experience, language and culture, and where they engage students in critical conversations about conflict, power and inequality, as they lead to displacement and their consequences for so many affected people. To this end, teacher preparation programs need to include contextualized curriculum that includes a range of social science and humanities courses on these perspectives, both national and global. Well-prepared, socially-minded teachers, who have had the opportunity to engage in these conversations in programs that contextualize teacher training in a rich, general curriculum, will impact positively not only classrooms with newcomer youth, but can develop the agency to act as "transformative intellectuals" in the education system (Giroux, 2018), resist and act as "negotiators" of highly scripted, imposed curricula when working with students newcomer youth (Hos & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020).

Current initiatives to support refugee youth often rely not only on empathy, but also volunteerism, even to the creation of entire community-based initiatives where volunteers—often retired individuals—offer refugee students who aged out the support they need to complete a high school degree online. We have seen such commendable efforts in our fieldwork and these have been life-changing for the youth who benefited from them, especially when schools can no longer allow these youth to pursue their high school diplomas because of the age limits imposed on high school attendance. It has been long-shown that refugees who arrive in their late teens face a more difficult systemic issue with graduation, as they are often underprepared for formal education in English, so their ability to accumulate enough credits for graduation before they "age out" is limited. Youth who arrive by age 13 have similar high school graduation rates to those who have

been in the U.S education system from the beginning, but for those who arrive after 13, graduation rates drop sharply (UNHCR, 2023). Refugee teens are often insufficiently supported by the variety of "newcomer programs" that many schools are able to implement. As a result, these students have even fewer options in trying to complete GED programs that are too demanding in terms of language and content and often lack the kind of structural support that formal schooling might have offered.

As an alternative to this bind, community-based initiatives have emerged, such as one we encountered in our work, in a Midwestern metropolitan area. This initiative emerged from the joint efforts of a local refugee resettlement agency, a church and local authorities who invested small grants in covering the costs of materials and online classes from an accredited cyber school, as well as community volunteers. The program was promising and helpful in its hybrid format—the credentials are provided by an accredited cyber school, but the students are not left alone to navigate the complexities of the content, but "take" these courses along with their colleagues in the context of face-to-face daily meetings in a "classroom" with teachers. Students had access to two accredited retired teachers who do this work voluntarily, as well as local community mentor-tutor volunteers who work with the youth one-on-one. This model offers a powerful opportunity to explore the intersection of community involvement or volunteering and formal education of newcomer youth.

According to the organizers, this initiative "fills a huge gap in the community" and the official documents clearly recognize the essential aspect of volunteer work, to the point that it is clearly expressed that the initiative would not exist without the thousands of hours that are poured in annually by the volunteers. Attending graduation ceremonies where the newly-credentialed youth share deeply emotional stories of perseverance and triumph is truly uplifting and joyful. Lives and educational trajectories are changed by the capacity to access more learning and credentials though being able to complete high school. Many testify to the invaluable and life-changing role such an initiative had for them and their continuation to local community colleges and beyond is also a testament to this importance. Nevertheless, refugee youth's access to the opportunity structure in the United States should not depend to this extent on volunteers and philanthropic funding. While the rigid structures of educational frameworks and systems in nation states often inhibit the realization of lifelong learning possibilities for refugee youth and adults to fulfill aspirations, some scholars argue that the recent global disruption to education and the inequalities that have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic provide an opportunity to rethink how education should look like, especially when young people's full participation in their communities is affected (Morrice, 2021).

Increased advocacy is needed along the lines of emerging work that raises the voices of newcomers, including refugees, as part of policy-crafting and decision making, especially when it comes to funding education and educational structure reform that would allow them to graduate from high school with meaningful credentials–creating more flexible testing requirements and schedules for English Language learners, funding translation of state testing materials in languages that students are already literate in, and especially increasing the "age-out" upper limit for older newcomer students. Teachers, administrators, and district-level leaders need to be policy and practice advocates too (Vehabovic & Dyce, 2024). In collaborative, school-community partnerships, multi-tiered systems of support (Hoover, 2009) are formed and are anti-isolationist by design. These partnerships are essential and need to be supported through appropriate allocations of time, resources and compensation for staff and community members involved, because essential rights to education cannot be relegated to volunteer community work only and the investments of these essential participants needs to be valued in tangible ways.

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Existing community and non-governmental initiatives, too, feel the weight of the multiple demands set upon them as they facilitate the transition of the families in the new context of reception. In our work, for example, a resettlement agency worker shared about the way local schools contact the agency when they feel that the refugee students whom they serve should have already had certain cultural knowledge or understanding about the U.S. context prior to entering the school. They ask the agency to conduct "cultural orientation" classes—which they already do and which are, according to the workers, packed with much necessary information about surviving in the U.S., including information about rent, driving, school requirements and job possibilities. A resettlement agency worker mentioned times when refugee families would allow older siblings to take younger children to the hotel pool where they were temporarily staying while waiting for their apartment allocation. Local staff had to contact the agency to explain the rules around water safety in the U.S. context, where the absence of adults was not allowed. Similarly, refugee parents did not understand that they were meant to wait at the bus stop for younger children returning from school, especially since bus stops were so close to the families' housing. In the absence of the parent, bus drivers did not allow the students to get off the bus and walk to the nearby apartments. Instead, they took children back to school, from where phone calls were made to parents to come pick up the children. These parents had not yet acquired a car—they have to wait 60 days to gain a license after application, even if they were able to drive in their home countries. When the families appeal to the resettlement agency for rides, they are highly encouraged to find other means because the agency is not able to provide these services.

These domino-effect puzzles occur often in the experiences of resettlement and refugee youth and families have to navigate a system that seems often paradoxical or counter to the forms of family, sibling responsibility and dynamics that were customary in their homes and cultures. This causes frustration and difficulty in adaptation for families and youth who have already undergone immense difficulties and pressure prior and during resettlement. School-community partnerships are important and the role of resettlement agencies essential, but when they are under-resourced and lead to different actors passing the baton of responsibility from one party to another, it is not a sustainable practice in the long run, and resources for additional initiatives are of central importance. Volunteer-based initiatives both belie and highlight the need for wider structural supports and policy shifts in the reception and integration of refugee youth.

Our findings echo those expressed by others who work in refugee-founded organizations to support newcomers in their transition through "cultural navigation that is around the small things that really make a big difference down the road" (Powers, 2022). Not only do such community organizations enhance the cultural capital of new community members, but also act as intermediaries between them and schools, trying to do literal and metaphorical translation work, helping teachers understand certain student behaviors that may be negatively misinterpreted and have consequences for the youth. This kind of complex work helps refugee students and families well after the 3-6 months of resettlement support ends and highlights the need for ongoing, formalized support that is funded. Refugee-founded and staffed organizations that are centrally funded on an ongoing basis can also engage in training initiatives in school districts and thus be compensated for their essential work.

Between refugee stories and self-definition across generations: Moving beyond label-dependent support

In order to benefit from community- and philanthropic-based supports, refugees often have to help raise the funding in their local communities and schools through events where they are

invited to share their stories, narratives that inspire with their resilience and perseverance. As we hear their stories, we can often be moved to action, but we must also consider the complexities of and tensions that arise from story-elicitation and its role in refugees' survival and well-being in their new context. When we ask refugee youth for their stories focused on this particular part of their lives, we are not asking only for their triumph, but also ask that they rehearse their status as refugees, and potentially reduce them to that identity for indefinite periods that has ramifications for the second generation as well. In this moment, we may inadvertently perpetuate narratives 'about' our refugee students and their families, rather than 'by' them and on their own terms and, as a result, we may interfere with their spaces for self-definition and agency. Critical refugee scholars offer nuanced attention and relevant considerations to these facets of engagement with refugee narratives in our work as educators as well—we examine these aspects below.

As educators who want to center the experiences, knowledge and agency of refugee youth, we need to reflect on the "between" space that generates a paradox of visibility and belonging in settlement communities and schools: the refugee youth and families are invited to share their story in order to elicit response from communities and governmental agencies, and thus must always present themselves as other in order to gain access to the means of belonging. The transition away from this permanent "otherness" that is ultimately required for support is a fraught process which makes the youth, as our initial title vignette suggests, hypervigilant to the reactions and interpretations of others, wondering when they would cease to carry the label that is necessary for their survival in the new context. This concern, as captured in the title, highlights the status rigidity that refugees carry with them and resonates with work done over 25 years ago in refugee studies. We read the example of a Bosnian man who found refuge in the United States after the 1990s Balkan Wars. He referred to his self-talk when receiving benefits: "When I have to go to the Social Benefits Agency, I feel—'Oh, look at yourself how low you are now, you used to be a normal person . . . What that guy will think of me when they hear that I am a refugee' . . . I never had any kind of complexes in my life, but this has become a social complex (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000, p. 367). Similarly, examining prior narratives of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., Vinh Nguyen (2019) describes Le, who faces the structural hierarchies of class and race in the United States and, many years after resettlement, "makes the powerful confession that, despite having attained a seemingly comfortable life in the world's richest and, presumably, most powerful democracy, she is unanchored, is on the rickety boat, is still a refugee. In this moment, the refugee past punctures the resident present" (p. 109).

Such findings about a relentless sense of social demise attributed to the refugee status span decades of research and raise questions about when and how one might move beyond the status of refugee into feeling a sense of belonging, participation, and a dignity-conferring sense of being fully valued. Part of the concern is the very notion of working with labels and how they can be "co-opted to disempower and to exclude" (Dryden-Peterson, 2022). Beyond the label, of course, is the pressing reality of capitalism with a knowledge economy and mobility structures that are difficult to access for refugees, "prolong[ing] their search for asylum and settlement . . . [through] a life of low-wage labor . . . and [where] deliverance into freedom is always just on the horizon" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 110). The examples we offered earlier of the frustration that often emerges in families who face bureaucratic obstacles is only compounded by the barriers faced in accessing more rewarding jobs, even for family members who are highly educated and had rewarding careers in their countries of origin. Refugee parents then, will place an even higher hope into the promise of an education system that would support their children to access the social mobility that they were denied themselves. Yet when children, too, remain bound into a status that prevents full belonging, and

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when resource allocation depends so closely on the reiteration of an ambiguous status or categorization, the promising hope can fade.

For example, newcomer students who have gone through the resettlement process are often categorized in schools as part of an umbrella term, SLIFE—"students with limited or interrupted formal education"— a group whose experiences are quite diverse, as they may include a range from children of migrant workers to refugees. The aim of the categorization and other such labels in educational contexts is to be able to provide services for students that are focused on their specific educational needs and contexts of their reception in the U.S. Much good work has been done in schools towards this aim over the last decade to encourage good pedagogical practices, such as asset-based teaching and learning approaches, supporting teachers, and creating and engaging in age-appropriate, theme-based and interdisciplinary curriculum and assessment (Short & Boyson, 2012).

More recently, however, scholars have engaged in closer critiques of such labels and their implications–they aim to advance the conversation and call attention to the discrepancy between simply categorizing youth and actually instituting formal systems and policies that help transform these designations into tangible support through interventions and do not rely only on the care of teachers (Hoss, 2016). They also resist the monolithic designation that belies important difference of experience and overall, "SLIFE and its association with illiteracy and being uneducated [that] may enable the stigmatization of these students and simplification of their abilities and possibilities to succeed in school" (Browder et al., 2022, p. 12). The initial assessment to receive the designation is meant to collect as much data as possible to meet the specific and varied needs of these youth, especially since the SLIFE categorization functions multidimensionally, on a continuum of experience (DeCapua, 2020) and there are important differences between language learning and literacy programs offerings (Montero et al., 2014)—some students with the SLIFE designation may need initiation in print literacies, others are highly literate in home and other languages and have only had limited interruptions to their formal education.

To this end, some states now have taken important steps for official guidelines about the needed assessment and subsequent support types for newcomer students with SLIFE designation, rather than considering them monolithically as English Language Learners. For instance, one such example comes from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) which promotes asset-based frameworks—they emphasize that "students identified as SLIFE are experts on topics related to their lived experiences and backgrounds, bring a wealth of knowledge and varying levels of literacy in one or more languages, bring valuable ways of accessing knowledge and developing skills that are often undervalued in formal education settings" (MA DESE, 2024, p. 6). Overall, the recommendations request attention to individual, social and cultural assets that these students possess and employ as foundation for their new learning. They also encourage districts and schools to seek and consider input from key stakeholders, such as English Learner Parent Advisory Councils, because stakeholders can offer crucial insights to enhance support strategies.

Yet, a gap emerges between the asset-affirming framing and the screening forms recommended for a SLIFE designation, where the focus remains mainly on the basics of language(s) spoken and periods of interrupted formal education. Only the suggested follow-up interview includes questions that focus more closely on knowing the student's life, ways of knowing and aspirations. In terms of equitable, culturally-sustaining practices, districts should indeed engage in these types of conversations with newcomers, but these interviews are clearly positioned as optional, to be administered if possible. In fact, throughout the preface to the document, the language emphasizes that the documents exist as a guideline that is meant to support

districts rather than place any extra pressure or need of additional resources on them. While this is understandable, this approach then lacks the capacity to enforce these guidelines as well as the systemic support towards actionable policies. In the absence of specialized support and funds for districts' ground-level work, the research findings and well-drafted guidelines, even when issued by state departments of education, can remain simply good intentions or mechanisms of categorization and exclusion. As an alternative, some scholars have suggested more legally-binding approaches, such as "[t]he implementation of a plan similar to the 504 plan for students identified as SLIFE [which] could require accommodations and services for the specific needs of each student instead of a one-size-fits-all intervention" (Browder, Herrera & Franco, 2022, p. 16). We argue, however, that the details of such an approach would have to be carefully considered because newcomer youth's process of adapting to the new school environments should not be framed through a disability lens.

A common refrain in the work on equitable, accessible education for refugee youth and students identified as SLIFE is the utter importance of institutional commitments and administration support for teachers' work. Still, while school-wide collaborations are important locally, they are also in need of systemic reform to ensure consistent and equitable support across schools and districts. Think tanks and refugee-founded agencies advocate for policy reform that would commit federal funds towards these needs (e.g., Century Foundation, The Fugees Family Foundation). For example, ensuring federally-funded newcomer liaison positions at the district level would help transform some of the many good recommendations that exist in tangible, implemented supports and would facilitate the inclusion of newcomers' voices into the support plans. We argue that these committed funds need to go beyond some of the current federal options which are competitive grant-based funds pitting school districts against one another in time-consuming application processes that do not guarantee the necessary funding. The space between the well-intended, asset-based recommendations for supporting newcomer youth and what state and federal agencies are willing to support structurally needs to also be engaged through actionable items and designated financial support.

These complex dynamics of categorization and systemic support also highlight the need to consider intergenerational, sustainable practices with refugee youth and families, carefully investing and examining the long-term aspects of their well-being and education, as *their* children grow up and also enter schools. If the children born to refugees are to be served well, how might we keep in mind that their parents entered the United States as refugees, perhaps identified as SLIFE? How might we maintain the delicate 'between' balance, considering carefully who still benefits from the status and who is no longer able to employ the benefits of that label to access resources and support? Recent calls from refugee studies scholars turn our attention to the multigenerational aspect of refugee resettlement and interactions to the host society, paying closer and specific attention to the children born to refugees in host societies, because most often the children of refugees have been included in wider second-generation scholarship. A call for attention to the "possible specificities of refugee backgrounds shaping their lives," with attention to "integration context and their family relationships where storytelling, memory and community will shape identity, belonging as well as transnational engagement and diasporic linkages" (Bloch, 2020, p. 451) is urgently needed.

How might our schools consider the particular positioning of children born after resettlement and the possible impact on them as students? The comparatively limited research so far suggests that the children of refugees can face greater challenges than other second-generation children due to their parents' pre- and post-migration experiences, including status uncertainty in the relocation process, compulsory dispersal—asylum seekers or refugees may be sent to

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geographical locations around the country for the duration of their asylum case without a choice, in areas without pre-existing co-ethnic or even multi-ethnic communities, as a way to ensure integration. The ensuing reality is more isolation and a possible lack of access to appropriate services and employment opportunities. In our work with refugee communities, we found that often, refugee families will choose to relocate, when able, to areas with a higher ethnic presence, but when that is not possible, little is known about the impact of dispersal on the second-generation, especially in the context of uneven transnational and diasporic engagement due to uneven economic capacity.

Schools and education scholars can seek to understand much more about the "intergenerational impacts of refugee migration and how the past is transmitted within families and communities through stories, memories and silences" (Bloch, 2020, p. 253). How refugee families choose to transfer the knowledge to their children and cultivate specific identities should signal and model approaches for educators as well, as we seek to engage with the lives and stories of refugee students in ethical and culturally-sustaining ways. For example, teacher education programs would benefit from community-based learning opportunities–short-term or course-based, ongoing work–where pre-service teachers work with families and community leaders in education initiatives determined by the community' funds of knowledge and needs. Further, increased attention needs to be given to the work of refugee-background educators engaged with youth in communities and classrooms. Recent anthologies of these dedicated, skillful teachers' work (e.g., Bellino et al., 2023) highlight how they focus on certain intentional practices–building relationships, creating relevant curriculum, recognizing identities and forming school-wide collaboration. Many of these examples can be studied in pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development, in similar ways that other forms of pedagogical expertise is transferred through observation, reflection and then putting into practice, with feedback and engaging in formative conversations around these examples and models. This intentionality in learning directly from the experience and expertise of refugee-background community members would have "educators … create intentional spaces" for self-definitions to occur, highlighting the need for reflection spaces within educational settings, since refugee youth had few people who asked about their lives, concerns and future aspirations—too often, they "are subjected to narratives about them but not by them" (Jarmillo et al., 2019, p. 2).

This is a tremendous bind, a 'between' space that is uneasy, given that so much scholarly work, pedagogical initiatives and policy depend on eliciting refugees' narratives. It is an elicitation that comes from genuine intentions to provide support, to generate funding and policies that would aid the transition, adaptation and belonging of refugee youth and students. While the life story of each refugee youth is invaluable and we seek to amplify their voices through the work we do in scholarship and in the classrooms, critical refugee scholars caution us about the ways in which we do so. They call attention to the fact that refugees' narratives are constrained both culturally and politically. Culturally, their stories do not exist in a void, but intersect with popular narratives infused with preconceived ideas, stereotypes or single-sided positions. Politically, too, refugees are coerced to share their narratives for legal reasons—they must meet specific and carefully-vetted criteria and details to qualify for aid. In this context, as Hong (2022) points out, refugees "often possess little more than their stories with which to fight for survival. Their stories are their currency in specific juridical processes . . . and in a global affective economy in which they must perform vulnerability and gratitude to obtain aid and protection (p. 34-35). In this sense, Hong argues, "all refugee politics are story-driven, and all refugee storytelling is political," because the conditions on story transmission and reception set the contours of refugee-related discourse and its

possibilities: what stories are possible, under what circumstances, and towards what aims and results.

Critical refugee scholars invite us to "develop more ethical ways to listen to and read work by refugee storytellers/authors that don't just accept the stereotypes but honor the knowledge that refugees bring to the table . . . to think about, write about, imagine refugee migration from the perspectives of those who have the most at stake – refugees" (Hong, 2020, p. 34). Similarly, advocacy organizations such as the Refugee Congress, a national nonpartisan organization built and led by refugees with members across the U.S. states works to influence decision-makers on critical issues that affect their communities–one way they do this is through their Refugee Storytelling Collective and as researchers and educators who work with newcomers and their stories, we can continue to engage with such initiatives and learn from them. This approach is not only about scholarly work and teaching with refugee youth, but also important in our teaching about refugees in our teacher education programs. Vang (2020), for instance, offers examples of courses in Critical Refugee Studies that work beyond legal and sociological approaches to focus on storytelling as critical methodology for elevating refugee knowledge.

Roxas and Gabriel (2022) and Roxas and Velez (2019) also provide examples of how the use of photovoice, photography, and visual narratives can open up spaces in which youth from refugee and immigrant backgrounds and their caregivers can tell their own stories via photographs and their accompanying written narratives about the contexts of their leaving home countries, their experiences in countries of reception, and the specific things they need to be successful in their countries of reception. In this work, youth and their family members shared powerful photos of their strengths of their home countries, cultures, and families, all the while facing difficulty and challenges in their new host country. Youth and their family members can work on visual displays, presentations, and other public documents that they can then share with their fellow students, their teachers, their administrators and members of their local communities and, in so doing, work towards self-definition and self-description in creative and authentic ways. These approaches then can act as a counter force to the narratives that reproduce the othering of the refuges, an 'otherness' that is often laced, in the case of refugee youth, with portrayals of helplessness and victimhood, which emerge from an emphasis on narratives of loss only, rather than adding narratives of resilience and self-definition. Instead, refugee students need opportunities where they can define which aspects of their journeys and identities they want to emphasize and to what extent.

Working with dominant labels and categories can "limit our understanding of migration and make us potentially complicit in a political process which has, over recent years, stigmatized, vilified and undermined the rights of refugees and migrants" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 50). To this end, the analytical insights of intersectionality enable examinations of how refugee youth experience and interpret social locations and status identities such as race, class, national origin, religion and legal status, particularly as they pertain to education. The approach foregrounds "a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time . . . [and] indicates that fruitful knowledge production must treat social positions as relational" (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, p. 187). In our work with refugee youth, we found repeatedly that various structural positions and status identities were alternatively foregrounded or obscured in each student's case. Aiming to discern these intersections and becoming attuned to the subtleties of young newcomers' own definitions of self and their needs could strengthen our work as educators. In our work, we think of a young woman who arrived with refugee status at 17, having experienced major interruptions in her education and being aware that refugee teens have a limited time to finish their high school graduation requirements. She was upset at younger students in one of her ESL classes for what she perceived to be the lack of engagement and lack of "respect for the

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teacher." She was concerned with being categorized with them and began self-distancing and self-defining, projecting facets of her identity that would offer the most positive recognition as a student and person in that education setting. A similar concern with expectations of conformity to the perceived norms of one's group was expressed by other refugee youth, especially those who had university-educated parents. They felt the pressures of being clustered together with youth from their ethnic group, simply because they shared the same identity as refugees and national origin—yet some of these peers tended to marry young and not pursue higher education. Allowing for a fluidity of identity in working with newcomer youth is thus central in empowering them to take charge of their new personas in the new society—in other words, recognizing the refugee status and its complex challenges, and yet not reducing the whole person to this political category or to the deeply entranced perceptions about what that identity might be entail.

For instance, focusing primarily on a refugee identity rooted in trauma and loss, and examining it mainly from psychological perspectives runs the danger of overemphasizing the personal, embodied issues at the expense of structural opportunity and support gaps found in the context of reception. If most emphasis is placed on the concerns that affected the youth pre-migration, much less attention is given to what must be done after resettlement and what resources are necessary support growth and self-definition in the new context (Rutter, 2006; Matthews, 2008). Here, such framing can mistakenly lead to actions that are counterproductive to the actual needs of our students. In fact, critical approaches are useful to educators in alerting to the danger of "reproducing victimising notions of refugees and therewith contributing to concepts of vulnerabilities which the international refugee regime uses" (Krause, 2017, p. 19). On the contrary, we are called to "move decisively away from conceptualizing the refugee as desperate, abject, and impoverished, and toward addressing and foregrounding their concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings" (Episritu, 2021, p. 5). To this end, Nguyen (2019) coins the terms 'refugeetude'—a concept "invoking past projects of political recuperation such as negritude, coolitude, or migritude, take social experiences of oppression and recasting them as states of being or agency" (p. 110).

In schools, careful and intentional reframing of refugees' stigmatized identities as resourceful actors enhances long-term academic engagement, when moves are made to tap into the skills of refugee youth in ways that draw from critical refugee studies' psychology, with "the strength of refugees as not despite or in addition to but because of their experiences—reversing stigmatizing narratives that frame these experiences as causes of weakness" (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 1897). The authors argue that societal stigma may prevent refugees from taking full advantage of many of the resources and opportunities that have become increasingly available in contexts of reception, and thus end up having a comparatively limited impact. They developed a brief, on-line intervention that can be used with refugee students to reframe their identity as an inherent source of strength and resourcefulness. They found that the intervention enhanced refugees' belief in their academic potential and willingness to take on academic challenges. Such findings can help direct additional thinking among educators on how we may craft stigma-countering narratives in our work, drawing on how "by its very nature, refugees' identity constitutes a source of strength and skills" (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 1897).

Between taking and giving back: Supporting agency and contribution through community engagement

Such shifts towards self-definition and agency in our pedagogies and classrooms can also help us move from positioning refugee youth and families in our communities and schools as

simply 'takers' rather than resourceful and fruitful contributors to educational environments. Refugees are more likely than voluntary migrants to be seen as deserving of empathy and support because the circumstances of their arrival are beyond their control and more dire—the status of the refugee, for many, taps into a sense of moral altruism that is not necessarily extended to voluntary migrants, and especially not those perceived as unable or unwilling to "contribute" to the receiving communities. Conversely, refugees are perceived as being less able to contribute or as having fewer valuable contributions to offer, given their marginalized and often stigmatized status.

In contrast, we can anchor educational practice in the critical refugee studies' psychology reiterating "the strength of refugees as not despite or in addition to, but because of their experiences" and we can learn from refugees themselves, both before and after resettlement. For instance, Dryden-Peterson (2022) shows the work of refugee teachers in various pre-resettlement locations—fifteen years of ethnographic observation and more than 600 interviews in twenty-three countries—and highlights their questions, approaches and educational aims. By looking at their own interpretations we can have more hopeful, agency-supporting futures for refugee teachers and youth: "refugee children and their teachers show us that it is hard, but not impossible, to thrive in uncertainty and build new futures by remaking what and how we learn. … [They] consider replicating the status quo as no option at all, and become forerunners in navigating uncertainty and reconceptualizing new futures" (Dryden-Peterson, 2022, p. 3). As the author points out, refugees can and do "contribute new conceptual tools for this re-visioning of education, related to experiences of systemic marginalization in schools, demands for justice in the content and structures of learning, and the creation of belonging in classrooms, schools, and communities (p. 4-5). Perhaps here, in the resettlement contexts of the west, the 'deserving victim' persona of the newcomer refugee is perpetuated to the point that refugees cannot move easily past it in our popular imaginaries—to move into the status of contributors, of offering resources—without being reduced themselves to the being resources for various awareness or fundraising campaigns.

To the contrary, refugee youth often demonstrate a tremendous capacity to support their communities in transition, from translation, to connecting family members with various services, caregiving and peer support in school for newer students or co-ethnics. This is often an invisible labor that absorbs physical and emotional energy from youth and yet is not formally accounted for (Orellana, 2009; Ratini, 2019). The way they act as tremendous resources of social capital in their communities or the emotional and academic costs of doing so may remain comparatively obscure in academic settings. These youth may continue to be perceived through deficit frameworks (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009) or as consumers of resources, rather than offering important funds of knowledge to the community. We thus need to ensure the needed services and supports these students need, while accepting what refugee youth and their families have to offer to the institution and the educational process. It is, as always, a complex space 'between' rejecting derogatory labels for refugees as 'resource-takers'—so that we can indeed support them in what they need—and resisting the commodification of these youth as simply "resources" themselves who serve to 'diversify' educational spaces or to draw attention to particular issues.

Not only do refugee families have the capacity to contribute in their communities, but repeated findings show that they want to do so, with altruism and helping behaviors as a prominent and recurring theme of participants' narrated lives (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014) Their reasons include wishing to maintain ethnic identity and connection, seeing the ethnic community as an extension of family, having a sense of duty and obligation, and also as a measure of achieved success and having accessed the opportunity structure sufficiently to be able to support others to do so (Weng & Lee, 2016). An overriding theme is the participants' enormous personal and collective psychological resources and coping strategies that often go unrecognized or

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underutilized by communities and, we could add, by schools. Research has shown repeatedly that refugee families place a high value on education, but they may hold different ideas about whose responsibility it is to monitor that process and how to do that best. For example, in some cases, they appear less engaged than some middle and upper-middle class American parents, since they deem teachers to be the experts on child development and education, not the parents, which is often different from highly-educated American families' perceptions (Cureton, 2020).

When schools pressure parents towards "parental involvement" that is patterned according to generally-accepted norms, while also not facilitating dialogue and structure for a wider understanding of involvement, we are not truly benefiting from the resources these families could represent for schools. Parents with children attending less supportive schools tend to doubt the school leadership's ability to support their children, so they become disengaged from school-based activities and even encourage their children to be less involved due to mistrust and fear (Cureton, 2020). This leads to a mutually-reinforcing cycle that is ultimately harmful for refugee-background youth. Some alternative, fruitful examples show the formation of diverse, multicultural PTAs led by refugee parents where the leaders received training through the National PTA. They were made to feel welcome there, as well as in their district, where their perspectives were valuable to teachers and administrators.

Another powerful example is when a school district principal in the Mountain West region of the United States was charged by her superintendent to build from the ground-up a school that was culturally responsive to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds and their families (Roxas, 2011). One of her first activities as founding principal of the school was to go out and talk to parents and caregivers of possible students. The principal then talked to students themselves to hear what they needed from the school and how their home cultures and strengths could be included and represented within the school building itself, within the curriculum, and of hiring practices of the staff and teachers themselves. The integration of parent feedback and consultation was clear as the school began to hire teachers, staff, and paraprofessionals for the school and as teachers built out the curriculum. Parents were encouraged to apply to become paraprofessionals if they were seeking employment. The principal would then encourage parents who were paraprofessionals to go on and do coursework for their teacher certification. In this way, parents were consulted before the school was built, became part of the school both as parent participants and also as potential paraprofessionals, and eventually became part of the school leadership through serving on the advisory board for the school.

Engaging the "Between:" An invitation to reflection, dialogue and action

These tensions raise questions of what it might mean not only for refugee youth and families to live in those 'between' spaces, but for educators' work with these youth and families in these spaces—as educators, to become increasingly aware of the tensions between good intentions and their consequences in action, between the immediate appearance of our dispositions and their interpretation by the youth and families whom we serve. We are inviting dialogue, reflection and action around such questions, an invitation to engage these 'between' spaces with intentionality.

What would it mean, then, for teachers, principals, students, and members of their families to think beyond empathy-driven work and commitments in place in many schools and move towards principled and purpose-driven action in schools? Instead of mainly providing support for students from refugee backgrounds during after-school tutoring sessions dependent on volunteers from the local community or from students who are training to be teachers, what would it look like for teachers, principals, and curriculum developers to commit to critically examining the materials

provided to students in class, the activities and discussions and assessments that are being used and move towards systemic changes to the structure and operations of the everyday school experience for these newcomer youth?

What would it mean if teachers and other staff in schools and students and members of their families began to think critically about the definitions used to categorize students when they arrive in schools and consider further problematic ways in which those very definitions both can possibly provide support through those classifications but can also take away support and agency through membership in a designated group? Providing a student with a SLIFE or "limited or interrupted formal education" designation can provide a categorical way of providing that student more resources or access to a certain set of classes within a program. However, how carefully do we consider the ways in which that designation can also delimit or put boundaries upon ways in which other teachers who may have not even met yet or worked with the students now see the student as someone that is "limited" in some way? How rigid are our categories and system held in place, that once a student has a SLIFE designation, it might be difficult to test out of or move into a non-SLIFE designation in schools?

Lastly, how we can as teachers, other school leaders, and students themselves advocate for assignments and curriculum that support the agency and contributions youth from refugee backgrounds and their families can bring to a larger school community? Contrary to delimiting what students can bring through certain designations or descriptors for certain programs, educators and school leaders can begin to think of ways in which to create opportunities for students to develop their own sense of agency in terms of their own learning and to both honor their refugee backgrounds and histories, but yet also transcend that designation and provide contributions and strengths from all the facets of a student's life: cultural assets, family-based, or individual.

As noted throughout this article, opportunities for re-thinking ways in which we work with youth from refugee backgrounds, members of their families and communities, and from members of their communities are boundless. How then do we begin to challenge our taken-for-granted ideas and conceptions of what refugee youth bring to our school communities and what we believe they already know? How can we move beyond those facile assumptions about their contributions and possibilities to move to a more agentic and dynamic way of thinking that benefits students themselves, members of their communities, and, ultimately, the communities in which we all live and share together?

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