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Examining Teachers' Efforts to Educate Refugee Students at One Elementary School in Texas

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Abstract: A significant number of school-age children comprise the wave of refugees seeking and settling in new homelands. Schools are an integral part of the resettlement process. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to highlight how teachers supported the learning of refugee students at Northstar Elementary School (NES), which was designated by the school district as one of the elementary schools that served this student population. This qualitative study collected data through interviews, classroom observations, and school-related documents. The data were analyzed and the findings were organized around four central practices associated with culturally responsive pedagogy: critical cultural consciousness of teachers, culturally pluralistic classroom climates, diverse communities of learners, and multicultural curriculum and instruction. Refugee students and their families have hopes and dreams for themselves and teachers can play an integral part to help realize those dreams.
Keywords: Refugee students, newcomer teachers, elementary school, culturally responsive pedagogy

The migration of people has historically been part of the human experience, however, the worst of it is when individuals are forcibly displaced due to war, constant sectoral violence, sociopolitical oppression, religious persecution, famine, and natural disasters. For instance, the current Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars as well as the political instability in Afghanistan are painful reminders of the destabilizing conditions people find themselves in, resulting in flight from their homelands. Furthermore, in recent years, the United States has experienced an unprecedented number of migrants crossing through the southern border, seeking better economic opportunities (Statista, 2024). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the end of 2023, "an estimated 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing the public order" (unhcr.org, online). Of this refugee population, an estimated 40 percent

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are school-age children, which often means an interruption in their education (unhcr.org). Historically, among the developed countries, the United States has been the number one host country for refugees. For instance, from FY2011 to 2023, the US admitted 624,589 refugees. However, in 2024 the estimated net migration in the US is 1.3 million (USAFacts, 2024).

As migration in the US trends upward, schools have become more diverse as well. For instance, by March 2024 the foreign-born population reached 51.6 million, which is 15.6% of the total U.S. population, representing a two-year (i.e., 2022 to 2024) increase in US history (Camarota & Zeigler, 2024). Goddard (2015) aptly noted, "As people relocate to new countries, these migrations have resulted in the forced integration of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups into schools, which historically have served the dominant, majority culture population of that region or state" (p. 4). Teachers being the most influential school-related factors on student school outcomes (Chetty et al., 2014), effective teachers are needed for the students most in need, such as refugee students. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to highlight how teachers supported the learning of refugee students at an elementary school designated by the district as one of the elementary schools that serve this population. To achieve this purpose, we conducted interviews, classroom observations, and school-related document analysis. In the following sections, we first conduct a review of related literature consistent with a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), we then present the study design and methods, followed by the findings and discussion section, and finally the conclusion.

Related Literature

Theoretical Constructs

Critical education studies have decried the pervasiveness of Eurocentric values in defining the educational structure and experience in the United States (Gay, 2013; Jackson et al., 2021; Paris, 2012; Young & Young, 2023). In response, scholars have proposed more culturally sensitive and inclusive pedagogies such as CRP, a pedagogical paradigm that is meant to teach "to and through" (Gay, 2013, p. 51) the personal and cultural strengths of students. It focuses on the intellectual abilities and previous successes of students from varied ethnicities and cultures (Gay, 2018), and centers on their ways of learning to positively impact behavior, increase motivation to learn, and improve academic success (Asante, 2014; Byrd, 2016; Idrus & Sohid, 2023; Lewis et al; 2018; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; Sheffield, 2014). Perhaps most importantly, when CRP occurs in classrooms it fosters antiracist education by removing stereotypes, creating positive learning environments, developing a sense of community, and making learning relevant to students (Albarello et al., 2020; Gay, 2002; Okilwa et al., 2021).

Gay (2018) defined CRP as, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them" (p. 36). The extant literature substantiates CRP as an effective teaching practice for working with students from diverse cultures (Byrd, 2016; Hammond, 2015; Idrus & Sohid, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Muhammad, 2020; Walker, 2023) and has established four central practices associated with a culturally responsive pedagogy: critical cultural consciousness of teachers, culturally pluralistic classroom climates, diverse communities of learners, and multicultural curriculum and instruction (Gay, 2002). The following section provides a brief review of the literature concerning each of the four core practices. In it, we aim to emphasize how teachers use the CRP framework to cultivate positive educational experiences, and support learning for refugee students.

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Critical cultural consciousness of teachers

Critical cultural consciousness of teachers exemplifies Freire's (1996) critical pedagogy where:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

Thus, critical cultural consciousness of teachers focuses on effective teaching underpinned by considerations for teachers' and students' previous experiences, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities (Cho, 2018). Teachers with a critical cultural consciousness see culture as an asset to academic and social achievement, and they recognize how cultural socialization affects their attitudes and behaviors toward various ethnic groups (Byrd, 2016: Freire, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). In this way, teachers realize how prejudices limit learning opportunities afforded to some students and work to remove barriers to learning from curriculum resources and instructional practices (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Idrus & Sohil, 2023). Teachers with a critical cultural consciousness know there is much to be learned from students, so they pursue an understanding of different cultures. In addition, they seek personal experiences with heterogeneous groups in communities and demonstrate cross-cultural awareness of the needs of students from varied backgrounds (Bassey, 1996; Okilwa et al., 2021).

In the classroom, teachers who demonstrate critical cultural consciousness understand that no single story holds true for all members of an ethnic group (Adichie, 2009) and that students' varied life experiences impact behavior. More directly, they recognize that behavior is a form of communication and respond in ways that support students and foster personal growth (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). Furthermore, teachers have an awareness of the impact traumatic experiences have on learning (Carlson et al., 2020) and know that refugee children from one country may have had access to more formal schooling than children from another. Resultantly, some refugee students have a stronger foundation in their first language than others, so teachers adjust instructional support accordingly (Idrus & Sohid, 2023; Okilwa et al., 2021; Schachner et al., 2021).

Culturally pluralistic classroom climates

Culturally pluralistic classroom climates focus on the physical environment of classrooms, the quality of personal interactions, and the emotional safety of students (Gay, 2002; Due & Riggs, 2016; Horswood et al., 2019; Rapa et al., 2020; Robinson, 2023). Indeed, the literature describes classroom climate as the psycho-social backdrop for learning (Juang et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2010; Toren & Seginer, 2015; CASEL, 2020) created by teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and interactions (Emerson et al., 2022; Johnson, 2009). More precisely, positive teacher-student relationships depend upon how teachers respond to students emotionally and academically, and impact students' overall achievement. These ideas support Igoa's (1995) suggestion that schools should be where refugee students feel safe after leaving their native country, know their culture is respected as they settle in a new land, and trust that adults at school will act upon their individual academic, emotional, and physical needs.

In culturally pluralistic classrooms, displaying artifacts such as ethnically centered artwork, pictures, or flags is an acknowledgment of the presence of students from diverse backgrounds and

nations (Hammond, 2015). At the same time, an overt ethos of caring (Due & Riggs, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009) is evident in teachers' verbal and nonverbal responses to students, including tone of voice, facial expressions, and general accessibility (Toren & Seginer, 2015). It models positive communication for peer-to-peer interactions and conveys to students that they are valued and accepted. Showing concern for students in this way creates a safe place to learn about others and for teachers to have high expectations for both behavior and academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hammond, 2015).

hooks (2000) suggests that care is a dimension of love, and that love is made of affection, recognition, respect, commitment, communication, and trust. When these virtues are apparent in culturally pluralistic classrooms they build community. Thus, we assert that culturally pluralistic classrooms convey an ethos of love, where students are safe to be themselves, know their needs will be attended to, and learning is an exciting challenge. For this to exist, expectations must be connected to the school's vision and communicated routinely to all stakeholders (Murphy & Torre, 2015).

Diverse communities of learners

Diverse communities of learners centers around the idea that performance in school is improved when students from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds affirm each other and help each other learn (Lewis et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022). The literature underscores the positive impact that associations with individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have on the educational and social development of students of all ages (Ayscue et al., 2017; Cardona & Rodriguez, 2023; Wells et al., 2016) and challenges the assumption that native students' academic success is compromised as the number of immigrant students increases (Konan et al., 2010). It also highlights how cooperative learning builds community and speaks to the values of human connection and collaborative problem-solving which are often important in the cultures represented by refugee students (Gay, 2018). Based upon cognitive and social theories, Gurin and colleagues (2002) established a framework that underpins the connection between educational outcomes and postsecondary students' interactions with cross-ethnic peers. Their research provides evidence that informal interactions among diverse student populations foster cognitive growth that, in turn, facilitates improved academic performance. Benner & Crosnoe (2011) applied the framework in their investigation of kindergarten students. They discovered that interactions with heterogeneous ethnic populations were pivotal in educational trajectory. Notably, interactions with individuals from different backgrounds positively impact students' social-emotional and cognitive development via exposure to new ideas and thought processes (Kawabata & Crick, 2015). Such interactions also lead to positive academic habits, abate feelings of school aversion, and increase students' grade point averages and teachers' expectations of students (Debnam et al., 2014; De Laet et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2018). In short, this central practice of a culturally responsive pedagogy aims to cultivate feelings of community where students and educators are both teachers and learners, and each individual learns about others' heritages (Gay, 2002).

In the classroom, teachers create diverse communities of learners by assigning projects that promote self-growth and the exploration of others' identities via student discourse, as well as by facilitating cooperative learning experiences (Gay, 2018; Ghosh, 2021; Lewis et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022). Well-designed learning groups ensure diversity among members and provide natural opportunities for students to learn about each other. If cultural practices or ethnic histories prevent racial or gender-diverse grouping, teachers assign students to groups based on factors such as the amount of time in the United States. As teachers guide group assignments and projects, they also

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benefit from cooperative learning groups because they learn about students' cultural backgrounds, interests, strengths, and opportunities for improvement (Idrus & Sohid, 2023). Notably, when students and teachers come to know each other on a personal level, stereotypes and prejudices are prevented or dismantled (Idrus & Sohid, 2023; Miklikowska et al., 2021) and they recognize that education is more than learning English, math, science, and social studies. Even in non-diverse classrooms, encouraging an appreciation for diversity while acknowledging societal inequities connects learning to real-world challenges, thus helping students see that education also includes the responsibility to bring about social change for everyone's benefit (Byrd, 2016; Gay, 2018).

Multicultural curriculum and instruction

Multicultural curriculum and instruction are about empowering ethnically diverse students to achieve academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal success by acknowledging how culture influences the way students receive and internalize information (Byrd, 2016; McDuffie, 2023) and by appreciating the valuable contributions students' ancestors made to the fund of knowledge (Gay, 2018; Gilde & Volman, 2020). It utilizes textbooks, the Internet, mass media, and ethnic-centered literature, music, and research (Cheng et al., 2022; Gay, 2018) to explore and validate the histories and lived experiences associated with students' ethnic roots (Dworin, 2006; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Register et al., 2022). Furthermore, because learning is an emotional and communal process for many students, multicultural curriculum and instruction use both the active engagement and cooperative learning opportunities that exemplify the often-preferred learning styles among marginalized student populations. Multicultural curriculum and instruction foster an understanding of other cultural and ethnic groups (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) thereby improving classroom behavior, self-esteem, motivation to learn (Gay, 2018; Idrus & Sohid, 2023), and academic success outcomes for all students, not only for students in the non-dominant culture (Byrd, 2016; Schachner et al., 2021).

Multicultural curriculum and instruction is evident when teachers actively engage students in learning that is grounded in previous experiences. For example, math and science-based materials require students to solve ethnically relevant problems (Corp, 2017; Harding-DeKam, 2014; Lipka et al., 2005) whereas reading and writing materials are intentionally selected to help students find solutions to personal and social problems or to gain insight into others' experiences (Alismail, 2016; Aronson & Laughter, 2016). To actively engage students, teachers use movement, voice, music, dramatic enactments, and rhythmic patterns during instruction. In turn, students may engage in similar activities to demonstrate their learning. Teachers also allow opportunities for shared decision-making and group interactions to meet students' needs for communication, relationship building, and "human connectedness and collaborative problem-solving" (Gay, 2018, p. 217) which are paramount to the learning styles of many ethnically diverse student groups in the United States.

If multicultural curriculum and instruction is to exist in the classroom, educational leaders and teachers must work with community partners and scholars from heterogeneous ethnicities to ensure instructional materials depict events accurately and completely (Gay, 2018), and teachers must teach students to critically analyze instructional materials in the same way (Young & Young, 2023). In addition, teachers must recognize that some common practices deemed to be best practices in education focus on individual effort and achievement, attending only to the learning needs and preferences of some students (Young & Young, 2023). Thus, teachers must be willing to implement cooperative and actively engaging instructional practices. Finally, teachers should be aware of assumptions they have regarding refugee students and shift their focus from what students

don't have and can't do toward a growth mindset that sees refugee students' previous successes and cultural ways of knowing as resources to bridge future learning (Mampaey & Huisman, 2022; Mendels, 2012; Ratini, 2019; Yeager et al., 2022).

These four central practices of a culturally responsive pedagogy help all students and teachers learn about themselves as well as the cultures, values, and beliefs of others. It is clear that interactions with individuals who are different from us empower people of all ages to contend with preconceived beliefs and biases and contribute to improved social and academic outcomes. Below, we present a study of teachers at Northstar ES and examine the teachers' impact through this framework.

Study Design and Methods

This qualitative inquiry was part of a larger study focused on exploring how administrators, counselors, and teachers supported refugee students at Northstar Elementary School (NES). In addition, the larger study sought to understand what types of, and in what ways, resources were utilized to support refugee students. The specific part of the study reported here focused on how teachers supported the learning of refugee students at NES, which was designated by the district as one of the elementary schools that serve refugee students. Note that pseudonyms were used when referring to the school site, district, and study participants to maintain confidentiality. Information regarding the site, participants, data collection, and data analysis is detailed in the following section.

Site

The study site was purposefully selected. Northstar is an elementary school in the Central Independent School District (Central ISD), which is located in a large Texas city. In addition to 13 other campuses, in 2006 NES was designated by Central ISD as an English as a Second Language (ESL) cluster campus. ESL cluster campuses were designated as an approach to consolidate ESL resources to serve an increased population of English learners. NES began the enrollment of refugee students in 2007. At the time of the study i.e., 2014/15 school year, Northstar was the only elementary school designated to serve refugee students in the Central ISD and, by 2015, refugee students constituted about 20% of the NES student population. In addition, within the overall NES student population over 30 different languages were spoken by students. Basic demographic information of NES for the 2014–2015 school year is depicted in Table 1.

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Table 1

Northstar Elementary School Demographic Information for 2014/2015

Grades taught	EC-5
% economically disadvantaged	68
% ELL	30
% mobility	27
# of students, total	736
# of refugee students	144
# of languages	30
# of teachers, total	52
# of newcomer teachers	5
# of language support teachers	2
Administrative team members	5

Note: EC = Early Childhood; EL = English Learners; Newcomer teachers = teachers of refugee students in the Newcomer Program

Participants

School personnel who had direct involvement with refugee students were purposefully selected to participate in the study. In addition, with the help of the teachers, a flier was sent home with refugee students to share details of the study and seek parent participation. Study participants included Principal Connolly, three other administrative team members (Vice Principal, Mr. Rangel and two counselors, Ms. Martinez and Ms. Smith), five Newcomer teachers (teachers of refugee students in the Newcomer Program), five general ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, and ten refugee parents who had resided in the country for less than two years. For this specific article, the focus will be on how Newcomer teachers supported refugee students.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study went through two separate Institutional Review Boards (IRB), the first author's previous institution and the school district (Central ISD). We conducted participant interviews in the school setting that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. In total, we completed eight interviews and focus groups: individual interviews with the principal and VP (Mr. Rangel) and focus group with the two counselors (Ms. Martinez and Ms. Smith, two language support teachers (LSTs), two sessions with the five Newcomer teachers, five general ESL teachers, and two sessions with ten refugee parents (divided into two groups of five). The services of three translators facilitated the conversation between the researchers and parents who spoke Arabic, French, and Burmese. All interviews were audio-taped and professionally transcribed. The transcribed interview data was analyzed by the researchers guided by a priori themes consistent with the principles of a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP): critical cultural consciousness of teachers, culturally pluralistic classroom climates, diverse communities of learners, and multicultural curriculum and instruction. We collaboratively identified transcript excerpts for each theme (i.e., the four CRP principles).

Limitations

One potential limitation is the lapse of time between now and the time when this study was conducted i.e., 2014/15 school year. The landscape of education has significantly changed in the

past 10 years, particularly in light of the recent impact of COVID-19. However, good teaching remains good teaching before or after the pandemic, especially if undergirded by the core principles of culturally responsive pedagogies. Therefore, because this article focused on how Newcomer teachers supported refugee students, it is safe to say the good teaching practices the Newcomer teachers exemplified have not expired. Another possible limitation could be associated with refugee parents who had limited exposure to the US education system, some had limited or no formal education, and some originated from cultures that default to the school on most decisions regarding the education of children. This is a profile of parents who may not be willing or ready to critique the system in their new homeland. Additionally, due to not being proficient in English, the parent focus groups required three translators, which altered the interview process, and the translation required for multiple languages may have lost some of the meaning when translated back to English.

Findings and Discussion

The extant literature clearly articulates, of all school-related factors, teachers are the most influential in determining learning outcomes of students (Chetty et al., 2014). Consequently, teachers' positive influence is crucially needed by student groups that are easily marginalized, such as refugee students. In this section, we unpack the findings from the study we conducted at NES as aligned to the four practices of culturally responsive pedagogy: critical cultural consciousness of teachers, culturally pluralistic classroom climates, diverse communities of learners, and multicultural curriculum and instruction (Gay, 2002). We utilize excerpts from the interviews to demonstrate how teachers supported refugee students at NES.

Critical cultural consciousness

Teachers being aware of their own cultural socialization and values and the ability to acknowledge the existence of diverse cultural frames is important in successfully working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The NES principal relied on this understanding in the hiring process for Newcomer teachers (i.e., core teachers of refugee students): "...I will tell you the five teachers I have, I purposely selected them…I looked specifically for people who had something in their background related to ESL (Principal Connolly). The Newcomer teachers' experiences were indeed consistent with what the principal was looking for in the teachers. One of the teachers said: "My experience with refugees came when I worked in China. I worked with adult refugees who crossed the river from North Korea. They weren't officially refugees but were fleeing the country" (Newcomer teacher). In addition to her experience in China she reported working with adult immigrants and refugees in London, England as well as spent a couple of years in East Africa working with refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia. Another teacher talked about being a military child, which took her to many places: "My father was military so I had the opportunity to not always go to glamorous countries. We were stationed in some third world countries. There are times I felt like a Newcomer – I wanted to go home. But, I didn't realize it was a plan for me" (Newcomer teacher). Another teacher's prior background was working with emergent bilinguals: "I always taught ESL – but for the first six years I would say I taught the "typical" ESL which is Spanish/English. students." Additionally, her professional trajectory led her to work on a Read Malawi grant that gave her the opportunity to work with educators in Malawi and South Africa: "I [worked] on a grant called Read Malawi in which I was able to work with educators in Malawi and South Africa and travel and work on curriculum development and teacher

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training there. I visited a lot of schools across Africa in small remote villages and things like that" (Newcomer teacher). Similarly, another teacher's prior teaching experience was in a bilingual program: "I came from teaching at a bilingual campus but I did have children with interrupted schooling." She also noted that "My husband is a refugee and listening to his family and their experiences – he first came over in the 90's and was placed in special education. I really wanted to work in a classroom with refugees" (Newcomer teacher). It is quite apparent, the common prior experiences of working with individuals, children and adults, from multicultural backgrounds prepared these Newcomer teachers to work with refugee students and their families. Part of their preparedness was an acknowledgement of both the challenges (e.g., economic, emotional, educational gaps, etc.) and unique abilities (resilience, multilingual abilities, dreams and hopes for their futures, etc.) the students brought to the classroom. This understanding helped the teachers avoid the deficit thinking trap and become strong advocates for refugee students and their families. As one teacher noted "we had that meeting with the head of the bilingual department…We were just asking for help. What can the district do for us? We need research-based intervention." Furthermore, in an effort to advocate for the dignity of refugee students, one teacher expressed her frustration and pushed back on biased generalizations: "But I've heard this from talk and some previous frustrations from previous interviews about our students. That was very offensive to me. They referred to a lot of our kids "from the wild" or "feral". When I made that comment in frustration, [I voiced] it to some of my colleagues here." This is yet an example of these Newcomer teachers who brought to their work a critical perspective that was largely informed by their own prior multicultural experiences.

Culturally pluralistic classroom climate

Effective teachers understand the importance of creating a classroom environment that is safe and fosters learning. Teachers of diverse learners are thoughtful about diverse representation and display of artifacts such as pictures, maps, flags, books, and other cultural items (e.g., pottery, artwork, etc.) within the classroom. All the Newcomer teachers at NES worked hard to ensure the classroom was a safe space for all students, which was expressed in a variety of ways: they displayed multicultural artifacts, attended to the material and socioemotional needs of students, and provided advice and support beyond the classroom. The Newcomer teachers talked about investing their own money to purchase more representative books:

> We, and that again goes to funding, use our own money. We have – I have – invested in lots of books that either take place in their culture and country. There are actually a lot of books out there that are about stories of kids coming. We cover all of those. I think it's just natural. We make it very open and talk about things. We compare and contrast each other's countries all the time. Very open in the classroom. We don't even try to make it like it's just America.

As teachers compared and contrasted different cultural issues, some of which might have elicited raw emotions among students, they did it with an ethic of care (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008; Owens & Ennis, 2005). Being attentive to the socioemotional state of these students was important given most of them probably experienced emotional trauma in their countries of origin. Hence, for them to experience teachers who cared put them on a trajectory to see the possibility of realizing their hopes and dreams. One refugee parent affirmed the teachers' commitment to their children:

> They basically take care of the kids as if they were their own. They provide them with the best that they have known by far and they are very happy

> about that and they basically track and follow up regarding their needs, the school needs and they try to work with the families on what they can improve on.

Furthermore, the Newcomer teachers demonstrated much needed care towards refugee students in their daily interactions with them and their families when they provided food and clothing:

> We've got a classroom full of clothes – I have more clothes than I will need for the year and that is a blessing because I buy clothes sometimes for the kids…I would go to garage sales and ask my neighbor friends if I could buy things for 10 cents apiece. I would stock up clothes and I was never able to get enough. (Newcomer teacher)

Expressing concern by meeting the basic needs of students such as providing clothing endeared the teachers to the students. Students enjoyed going to school and engaged in the process of learning. One refugee parent confirmed the special bond the students had with their teachers and school:

> …kids just talk, and they just want to be in school. They tell us that they wish that on Sunday they would be able to go to school because they are really close to their teachers. Because when they are with their teachers, they feel better about themselves, so they are really excited to be in school at all times. (refugee parent)

The impact of teachers was on display here. For students to express a sense of love for their teachers and school, feeling they belonged there, was an important starting point in educating them.

At the school level, the Parade of Nations was, and remains, an annual event that honors the diversity at NES. One Newcomer teacher described it this way:

> The parade of nations was wonderful where each flag – we had 31 different countries represented. So, we had their flags and then the teachers helped them pick facts about their countries. So one student was at the microphone reading the facts about their country to kind of teach everybody about it while their national anthem is being played in the background like the Olympics. And then, a group of students is walking with their flag – parading. We went through all 31 countries and at the end was the United States flag.

This kind of display of diversity for the larger community to see and participate in is much needed. However, honoring diversity cannot be left to an annual event and that is why what happens in the classrooms on a daily basis is critical. If classrooms are safe spaces for refugee students or diversity, consequently, the overall school environment has the potential to follow suit.

Diverse communities of learners

Based on NES's designation as a Newcomer School, it was a diverse community of learners with 30 different languages spoken from across the globe. This diversity had to be carefully managed to avoid potential tensions that emerge from some parents' negative perceptions of diversity that can easily outweigh the benefits. The principal appreciated the benefits of diverse students at Northstar: "Obviously, the diversity they [refugees] bring to the school has a benefit for all of the American students in learning about the other cultures." The existing body of research clearly articulates the academic and socioemotional benefits for *all* students who interact with classmates from different backgrounds, cultures, and orientations (Kawabata & Crick, 2015; Wells

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et al., 2016). At the school level, the principal was responsible for creating a culture and climate where diversity is celebrated. Events like the Parade of Nations at Northstar are an important feature to that effort. Additionally, refugee students were integrated in the regular classes for other content subjects as part of a gradual transition into the general classrooms:

> Actually, in social studies we pull in some of the Newcomer students now – like in 1st grade I believe all of us are ESL certified now – so the Newcomer teachers actually send out as many as 10 students during social studies and science time. (general education teacher)

At the classroom level, teachers wielded a significant influence in fostering a learning environment whereby every student felt safe to engage in the learning process. The Newcomer teachers provided a safe space for refugee students as they endeavored to learn English and express their thoughts and ideas in a language other than English: "But as a Newcomer teacher you don't work with regular curriculum. You're working with the linguistic aspect of it because everyone is speaking so many different languages and you're having to understand all that." (Newcomer teacher). This safe space took away the pressure and anxiety of not being able to communicate in English and which can easily steal the joy of learning.

Northstar teachers utilized collaborative learning to help the students construct and destruct their learning. In these groups, students had the opportunity to work on projects that promote self-growth and exploration of their identities:

> Lots of opportunities for them to talk like pair-share and it's throughout our day like in writing workshops and in math. In reading we are moving to a model where we have 4 groups but you don't necessarily see them all every day. I really like this for the ESL population. Two of my groups of students that really need a lot more conversation opportunities to talk - I just have four in those groups. It's made a huge difference rather than having six. (general education teacher)

Another teacher reinforced the importance of cooperative learning for building community and further spoke to the value of human connection and collaborative problem solving

> I think also grouping our students in our classrooms – we have that luxury of having multiple languages – so a lot of the time when our students do come in we can pair them. But even if we don't have someone with the same language, they're going through the same experience in learning English. (Newcomer teacher)

The small collaborative groups unlocked the confidence in learning among the students when they realized they were in safe spaces with other learners with similar language insecurities:

> The one thing that helps out when we pull the groups – we have Newcomers and we have regular ESL – so we work with both. The Newcomers and the regular ESL who are more advanced in the classroom. But even after a couple of years you're still kind of shy in the regular classroom so you're seeing the kids who haven't spoken in the classrooms. They like to speak here because they feel that freedom in a small group so that's something we target here. (language support teacher)

When students converged in a classroom that was safe, they were willing to apply themselves even with mistakes and all. They exhibited a love for learning that is admirable:

> Their love of learning, their cultures, their acceptance – they seem to have acceptance of other people…[they] want to hold each other accountable…They don't really have discipline issues and it's like the kids

> can run the class. They figure out procedures and they're not going to let anyone slide. So they can be very responsible. They just have a different love for learning. They're not lazy. They're motivated. I think they're just so happy to be here.

Multicultural curriculum and instruction

Scholars have argued the importance for students of non-mainstream backgrounds to see themselves in the curriculum (Meidl & Meidl, 2011). The Newcomer teachers understood the relevance of finding books and other resources that connected with students' backgrounds and experiences:

> A lot of the books are nonfiction type readers and it has to do with international things – breakfast around the world, cultures around the world and if something is coming up for one culture, we'll read a book about it just like we do the ones here. So, we focus on cultural things for the US as well as cultural things from their countries. (language support teacher)

As earlier noted, the teachers were willing to spend their own money to purchase books that provided refugee students a personal connection with text or content or learning. This personal investment was in response to what the teachers felt was limited support from the district:

> Each of us spends at least $1000 a year. I think all of us probably agree – our principal, our school and our volunteers support us and will do whatever they can for us. But, we feel very disheartened by the district. (Newcomer teacher)

Another response to limited district support was around the need to seek their own professional growth: "We discuss with each other what we feel are our best practices and we're doing what we can. We looked up our own research articles but everything we know about Newcomers is self-taught amongst each other – our own research, our own ideas, our own reaching out to people we know." These efforts indicated a unique commitment to give refugee students access to the curriculum and learning opportunities to realize their own hopes and dreams. The Newcomer teachers employed a variety of pedagogical approaches to facilitate learning. For instance, they actively engaged students in learning that is grounded in previous experiences:

> The simplest thing that happened this week – we were reading a book about how to make chocolate. We're sitting in a group looking at pictures and talking about it. Then they have a map and it says these are the places chocolate comes from. You see Brazil, Thailand, and you see Malaysia and another place in Africa. The kids look at me and say, "Oh my goodness". They say the name of one of the students and say he knows where chocolate comes from. But I tell them maybe he's never visited a chocolate plantation but that's where most of the world's chocolate comes from. So kids that come from another part of the world now have a connection with those kiddos. When we connect the chocolate – in Spanish chocolate is "chocolate" and it is the same in Arabic. So we make those connections. For example, the Arabic kids made a connection with the kids from Thailand and Malaysia when they saw the chocolate pods so they have them outside their houses. (Newcomer teacher)

The powerful learning experience described in this scenario was made possible by teachers who understood that refugee students (diverse learners) bring all kinds of knowledge capital that is

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relevant to their own learning process. Similarly, this approach of tapping into students' previous experiences worked with regard to writing activities as well:

> In writing we have them draw from their experiences. They write personal narratives and right now Ms. L and I are writing recipe books where they're writing a recipe from their country and we're getting the families to help. So you can find out what their interests are and you try to bring that into whatever you are teaching.

A highly relevant topic such as food, undoubtedly, resonates with students from all backgrounds. At Northstar, concerted efforts to support refugee students and their families were collaborative. Counselors contributed as well:

> In their classrooms for guidance lessons, I do focus a lot on self-acceptance. I focus a lot on being unique and accepting diversity. I want them to know being different is wonderful. I find books that [have] a boring page – all the pumpkins look alike. Then at the end there is always this fun colorful diversity page, and all the pumpkins are colorful. I'll have them talk about which is your favorite page – they show me with smiley faces or sad faces. They always go back to the colorful diverse page. (counselor)

Conclusion

Refugee students and their families have hopes and dreams for themselves that need nurturing in order to be realized one day - as one Newcomer teacher said, "I would also say my students are highly motivated to be successful professionals." As Rita Pierson so eloquently articulated in her famous April 2013 TED Talk, "Every kid needs a champion." It is much truer for refugee students. They need a champion to navigate the new realities and challenges of their new homeland, and teachers are well positioned to be that champion for these students. Intentional hiring practices made it possible at Northstar. However, in the post pandemic era, finding good hires might prove to be more challenging than ever. School districts find themselves with shrinking pools of qualified teachers, particularly in hard to teach areas such as mathematics, special education, and Bilingual Programs.

Implications for Practice and Preparation. Given the ensuing acute teacher shortages, it is critical for the education system to explore potential solutions with a sense of urgency and intentionality. To that end, some school districts are appropriately pursuing initiatives such as Grow Your Own (GYO), which, in part, encourages high school students to consider the teaching profession. In addition, some school districts provide college tuition scholarships for students committing and pursuing teaching. This has a potential to likewise provide opportunities to high school refugee students. Furthermore, some districts incentivize teacher aids or other campus staff to get teaching credentials or complete teaching degrees. Similarly, these are potential opportunities for educated refugee parents who already work in schools as support staff. For instance, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has a funding program to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to establish GYO pathways (TEA, 2024). TEA notes that it supports LEAs to:

> intentionally build **strong, stable, and diverse** (bold from source) teacher pipelines from within their own communities through two distinct pathways. GYO aims to address teacher shortages in hard-to-staff areas, close demographic gaps between students and teachers, and build interest in the teaching profession among high school students. (TEA, 2024, webpage)

The idea of building a pipeline from within the community, calls for being cognizant of the context-specific needs (Hallinger, 2018), and if specific to refugee students, being intentional about meeting these students' needs. Recruiting and supporting refugee students and parents to join the teaching force could be one approach to build a pool of culturally responsive teachers. Furthermore, as districts collaborate with teacher preparation programs to grow the pool of teachers with competencies to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, teacher preparation programs must incorporate multicultural instruction into the required coursework (Elton-Chalcraft, 2020; Imouri, 2021; Weber, et al., 2021; Young & Young; 2021). Additionally, campus administrators should reinforce critical cultural consciousness via intentional professional development opportunities (Okilwa et al., 2021). As we learned from our study and the pandemic, it is not humanly possible for educators to fully meet the expansive needs of students. Therefore, a collaborative approach through what is considered as wraparound services has the potential to get close to meeting the needs of the whole child. The goal of wraparound services is to help children and families achieve positive outcomes and improve well-being developed through a team approach to include case management, counseling, crisis care and outreach, education and special education services, family support, independent living supports, and self-help or support groups (National Wraparound Initiative, 2024).

Implications for Research. We are cognizant of how the pandemic has significantly impacted education in ways that research is just beginning to uncover. Current research is needed to understand the state of educational experiences for refugee students during and after the pandemic. Furthermore, there is rising concern for the well-being of students, teachers, and school leaders in the post-pandemic era, which requires careful investigation.

In summary, in the midst of a concerning shortage of teachers, our findings underscore the need for intentional collaboration between school districts and teacher preparation programs to grow a pipeline of educators to work with an increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. For current teachers, to more effectively support the needs of students, results of our study call for research-based professional learning focused on culturally responsive pedagogies. Lessons learned from our study and the pandemic call for a collaborative approach through wraparound services in order to get close to holistically meet the needs of students.

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Notes on Contributors

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M. Michelle Kelley, PhD is the Coordinator for High School Counseling Services in Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas. Her dedication to education began as a high school teacher in 1997. She has served her district as a professional school counselor since 2006. Kelley's commitment to creating positive educational experiences for all students and their families is supported through her daily work and her research interests, including stakeholder trust on campuses, school leadership, bullying, and equity in education for students in marginalized populations.

Kerry Haupert is the Project Coordinator for the Welcome Center at North East ISD in San Antonio, Texas. She has been a dedicated educator for over 23 years and advocates for those who are most marginalized. Kerry has worked with refugee/asylee students and families for over 15 years, creating space and opportunities for them to thrive in and out of the school setting. Kerry is pursuing her doctorate at Texas Tech University in Curriculum and Instruction, Language Diversity, and Literacy Studies. Her areas of research interest are identity, language and literacy, and equitable access for displaced children and families.

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