

Afterword: Themes and Insights from This Special Issue

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Abstract: In this response to the articles in the special issue, I highlight themes that are particularly salient, related to educational equity and sustainability for refugee students. I focus specifically on Asset-based Approaches, Culturally Responsive (and/or Sustaining) Teaching, Macro-level considerations. I conclude by picking up on the theme of Self-Reflexivity as a final theme, as well as a frame to help us understand the particular contributions of this collection of research to both scholar and practitioners' work in refugee education.

Keywords: Asset-based pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, self-reflexivity, critical literacy

This collection of articles offers a rich, multi-faceted portrait of the experiences of refugee students, their families, and the educational practitioners working with them in a variety of institutional and geographic contexts. By foregrounding the concepts of equity and sustainability, the editors signal their recognition that pursuing academic integration and success for refugee students must be a long-term, collaborative endeavor that involves much more than one-time interventions. We need to pursue micro- and macro-level changes that center the goals, experiences, and concerns of students and families and will have a long-term effect on their educational lives. In this Afterword, I reflect on themes that come through in this collection of articles, which help readers understand the nature of equity and inclusion for refugee students and the sustainable strategies and resources that can help us to achieve those goals.

Asset-Based Approaches

Asset Discourse

A thread running prominently through this collection is a focus on asset-based approaches in work with refugee students. As the editors posit in their Introduction, a focus on asset is powerful in that it allows students to “see their self-worth” and in encourages both students and staff to “focus[] on what [students] can do rather than what they lack” (p. 4). The editors go on to link asset-based approaches to the “ethics of care” (p. 4), suggesting that the two components are closely linked in the promotion of educational equity for formerly displaced students.

Throughout this group of articles, we see many examples of this linkage. The first of these is language, which we must attend to carefully in order to ensure that we do not promote deficit perspectives about refugee students (Okilwa et al., this issue; Shapiro, 2014). As several authors in this issue point out, some of the labels historically used in educational research with refugee students have deficit undertones, even if they are thought to highlight important aspects of student identity or experience. The label “refugee” is can itself be used in a dehumanizing way, often connoting a sense of victimization and/or threat, rather than persistence and contribution (Shapiro,

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2023). While we need the term, we must also think carefully about how it might be experienced by the students and families we are referencing and take into account other aspects of their identities and experiences that are equally important.

Another example of discourse with potential deficit undertones is the label “SLIFE” (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education), which homogenizes the past educational experience of refugee students and may cause teachers and administrators to overlook important individual and communal distinctions that can inform curriculum and instruction (Browder, 2018; DeCapua, 2023; Hos, 2016). This is not to say that students’ educational history is unimportant. Rather, it is to encourage researchers and practitioners to approach such labels with caution—to be aware of what they offer as well as what they might cause us to overlook. As Fruja and Roxas (this issue) explain in a discussion of the relationship between labels and institutional change:

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 . . . 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 [. . .] (p. 147).

Linking Asset to Equity in Instruction

Thus, we see that asset-based discourse is necessary but not sufficient for sustainable equity. Moreover, we learn that simply celebrating what refugee students and families bring with them into education systems is not enough: We must take seriously the question: *How can we create environments in which these assets are leveraged in impactful ways?*

One example of asset-based classroom instruction that stands out in this special issue is Vorobel and Finn’s study, which investigated strategies for promoting engagement of Ukrainian refugees in a community college writing course. Through interviews and other data from students, the authors found that interesting topics and materials had some effect on student engagement. However, the factors that had a greater impact were more social and motivational: Students were eager to experience sense of belonging in higher education and felt most engaged by instruction that built a strong sense of community in the classroom and was directly relevant to their academic and professional goals. Thus, we glean from this article specific instructional strategies that can ensure that all students are engaged in learning that is personally meaningful to them and taps into their goals and assets.

Familial Advocacy as Asset

Familial assets are also a focus in this collection. Al and Akay, for example, employ the framework of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to highlight the persistence displayed by Turkish mothers in advocating for educational support for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. They demonstrated what Yosso (2005) calls “resistance capital” in their refusal to accept the status quo. They responded to communication challenges by drawing on family and community networks, an illustration of “social and familial capital,” and used technology to identify academic support and extra-curricular opportunities, which showed their “aspirational capital” (Yosso, 2005). Al and Akay are careful to point out, however, that the school system needed to do its part in order

to ensure that parents' efforts were fruitful: A general "lack of communication and support from school," (p. 130) they point out, was the reason the mothers had to work so agentively in the first place. Addressing these and other issues, this study suggests, is a way to honor the investments parents make in their children's educational success.

We see potential for fully leveraging social and familial capital in other articles as well. In their study of students who both "thrived *and* struggled" (abstract) in higher education, Metro et al. (this issue) found that a variety of community organizations played a role in mentoring and supporting refugee students in their college transition process, including non-profit and even religious organizations. Within these communities, there is often a robust network of peer-to-peer mentoring, as well as support from elders and other role models. The authors suggest that schools could partner more fully with these networks to strengthen support for refugee students in the college preparation and transition process. Metro et al. remind us, however, that the role of family and community in students' educational lives can be complicated—especially when there is a mismatch in expectations about whether and where to pursue higher education. They wisely encourage researchers to:

acknowledge that the ethical and practical dilemmas that youth face are complex, requiring them to decide how to use their time, energy, and resources when facing competing demands from school, family, and community. (p. 174)

This reminder is one example of the "betweenness" that Fruja and Roxas highlight as a central feature of work with refugee students: We need to recognize student agency, while also acknowledging the challenges that can affect their ability to exercise that agency in certain situations.

Culturally Responsive (and Sustaining) Teaching: Tapping into Deep Culture

Perhaps the most prominent asset discussed throughout this special issue is cultural capital. A number of the studies included here employ the frameworks of *culturally responsive teaching*, or CRT (Gay, 2018) and/or *culturally sustaining pedagogies* and practices (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). As with their discussion of other assets, authors in this collection are careful to foreground the theme of equity in discussing when and how practitioners draw on students' cultural backgrounds and resources.

There are several examples woven throughout this collection of how educators can tap into *deep culture*, which Shaules (2007, cited in Cromarty-Lawtie, 2008) defines as "the unconscious frameworks of meaning, values, norms and hidden assumptions that we use to interpret our experience" (p. 2). These frameworks are often overlooked by outsiders to a community, but they exert a powerful effect over both individual and collective behavior, including at school (Gay, 2018). By inviting elements of students' deep cultural backgrounds into the classroom, teachers can promote meaningful cultural exchange among all students, going beyond traditional approaches to multicultural education that shine the spotlight only on surface-level topics such as "heroes and holidays" (Boyd, 1998).

One article that offers multiple examples of deep cultural learning as a manifestation of CRT is Okilwa et al.'s (this issue) case study of elementary teachers at a school in Texas that received a high number of newcomers. This article provides us with numerous examples of applications of CRT to primary grade students. Teachers in the study worked thoughtfully to create sustained opportunities for community-building and identity-based sharing among students. This helped to build strong relationships that could in turn enhance collaborative learning. In these ways,

teachers build the sort of caring climate that is a key feature of CRT and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). Teachers in the study also encouraged meaningful writing, including personal narratives and recipe books, as a central part of the curriculum, offering opportunities for students to exchange cultural knowledge that matters deeply to them and their families.

The teachers in Okilwa et al.'s case study also sought out spontaneous opportunities for cross-cultural connections during classroom interactions. A “powerful learning experience” (p. 63) described by one teacher participant was centered on a book about how chocolate is made. The book included a map of where chocolate is cultivated. Many of the students recognized countries they had lived in prior on the map, resulting in both cross-cultural and linguistic learning. As the participant put it:

[K]ids 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. (p. 63)

Thus, we see that a CRT framework applies both to instructional strategies (e.g., use of collaborative learning) as well as to curricular topics. These same interconnections are highlighted in Umeh's (this issue) discussion of how mathematics education can both tap into and build students' mathematical, technological, and literacy knowledge. Umeh provides examples of innovative connections that mathematics teachers can make to students' cultural backgrounds. For example, they can “utilize[e] geometric patterns found in traditional textiles or architectural designs from various cultures” in order to “illustrate abstract concepts like symmetry, transformation, and scaling in a tangible and relatable manner” (p. 189). Umeh points out that such an approach not only ensures that students “see the value and applicability of mathematics in their own lives” but also “promotes continuous cross-cultural collaboration between teachers and students” (p. 184). In other words, *everyone* benefits from culturally responsive teaching—not just refugee students from underrepresented backgrounds. Recognizing these shared benefits is one way to increase support and sustainability for equity-based teaching.

Critical Storytelling and Digital Literacies as CRT

Storytelling—particularly critical storytelling that challenges dominant narratives (e.g., Pentón Herrera, & Trinh, 2021; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001)—can be another valuable application of CRT. As Fruja and Roxas (this issue) explain, “refugee students need opportunities where they can define which aspects of their journeys and identities they want to emphasize and to what extent” (p. 150). In their research, for example, Fruja and Roxas have found that many students are eager to tell and write stories of “agency and contribution” (p. 151) today and in the future. Agentive storytelling, they point out:

can act as a counter force to the narratives that reproduce the othering of the refugees, 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 (p. 150).

Notably, the authors encourage participants in their projects to incorporate visual components into their stories, using methodologies such as Photovoice. These links between

technology and CRT are also prominent in Molin-Karakoç's (this issue) review of literature on the affordances of digital literacies in the lives of refugee youth. The author found that in addition to having academic and social benefits, digital technologies provide opportunities for students to explore and express identities, exert their agency, and have meaningful cultural exchanges. She concludes that digital literacies can serve as *funds of knowledge* (Gonzales et al., 2005) both inside and outside the classroom, bringing us full circle back to asset-based pedagogies.

One final article with CRT connections, albeit using the frame of *humanizing practices*, is by Scolaro and Tomasi (this issue), who found that although many refugee students attending school in Italy had not had the opportunity to reflect extensively on their experiences with language instruction prior to and after relocation, they were highly aware of what the classroom climate in their current school *felt like*. They expressed deep appreciation for features such as “kindness,” “understanding,” “patience,” and “respect” from their Italian teachers. Although external factors such as job schedules and family responsibilities still prevented some students from continuing their language study, it is clear that positive experiences in class, as well as caring relationships with teachers, were “effective in alleviating the anxieties and fears about language learning” (abstract).

Thus, we glean from these articles that culturally responsive and/or sustaining pedagogy includes not just explicit connections to students' cultural backgrounds and values, but also a culture of caring in the classroom. This finding reminds us (readers) not to take an overly narrow view of what we mean by “culture” in education and broadens our collective sense of the pedagogical possibilities that are available to us as practitioners. It also suggests that future research could consider the interplay between “culture” as a curricular focus and “culture” as a way to understand how classroom climates can be inclusive.

Macro-level Considerations

Although many of the accounts in this special issue focus on what happens in the classroom, Fansa and Sayıcı (this issue) offer a much broader perspective on structural factors that enable and limit educational opportunities, through their comparative study of educational approaches across top receiving countries for Syrian refugees. We learn from their research that although there have been some advances in basic access to education in many receiving countries, most do not have the structures and resources to sustain and broaden that access, nor to implement a “holistic” experience that “encompasses not only the curriculum but also psychosocial support services, language training, and community integration” (p. 84). Despite these disappointing findings, the authors use their research as an opportunity to show how a framework for holistic education can be used for more systemic analysis. They also highlight some “exemplary practices” (p. 73) that countries and systems could borrow from one another in order to move toward that vision of holistic education. Moreover, they remind us that such an approach has benefits not just for refugees themselves, but for the larger society—again, a nod to assets-based approaches, but at a more macro level.

Self-reflexivity among practitioners and researchers

One final theme I wish to highlight from this special issue is the importance of deep and critical reflection among researchers and practitioners. Many of the points raised thus far in this Afterword leave us with questions to continue pondering, including:

- How do we balance the need for categorization with the dangers of homogenization?

- How can we build on—not just highlight—the assets students bring with them to schools and society?
- How does culturally responsive instruction shape classroom climate *and* curriculum and instruction?
- How can students’ digital literacy practices be further leveraged as an educational resource?

Brunner et al. (this issue) point out that self-reflexivity can be a force for decolonization, as it prompts us to think about the power dynamics that surround the education of displaced students. The authors encourage institutions of higher education to recognize the multiple—and at times conflicting—motivations for recruiting refugee students in higher education and to consider how the reception and treatment of those students might be misaligned with those motivations. They also invite readers to consider their own motivations for engaging in their work with these students. Among the fruitful “hyper-self-reflexive” questions they encourage us ask ourselves is the following: *What are my investments, insecurities, hopes, fears, and intentions?*

Indeed, this question can inform our reading of this entire special issue, as we know that our personal motivations both drive our work and can sometimes create blind spots that we must learn to recognize, so as to ensure that our efforts to promote equity are both successful and sustainable. But the many theoretical frameworks and pedagogical examples represented here comprise a valuable set of resources that can help us along in those intentions. And that makes this special issue a particularly important contribution to the growing body of research on the education of students with refugee backgrounds.

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Notes on Contributors

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