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## International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel)

## Cultural and academic adjustment of refugee youth: Introduction to the special issue



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Refugee  
Education  
Academic adjustment  
Cultural adjustment  
Acculturation

### ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the IJIR special issue on refugee youth in academic settings, the editors sought manuscripts that examined both challenges and effective practices in countries of temporary and permanent refugee resettlement. We welcomed diverse methodological approaches and empirical work at all levels and types of education (formal, non-formal, and informal).

Our final selections do not fully represent the field of refugee education, as eight of the nine are studies in third countries of permanent resettlement, a designation received by only about one percent of the total refugee population. Perspectives came from the social sciences: psychology, sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistic disciplines. Themes of the articles fall into two broad categories: 1) educational challenges due to trauma, acculturation stressors, and educational issues; and 2) educational practices intended to address some of these challenges.

Although the resettlement category is the smallest of the UNHCR's "durable solutions," the authors present important findings to support refugee students' success. These have to do with collaborative processes, issues of identity, the use of social media, and teacher training in multicultural and language support. In considering future work in this field, we conclude that dimensions of justice need to be more fully examined in other refugee solutions (such as repatriation and local integration in the first country of refuge). We recommend that more research be conducted on the current European "migrant crisis." We also call for scholars to be public intellectuals in venues that can reframe the characterization of refugees in opposition to "fake news" fanning public fears.

The articles in this special issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* address the cultural and academic adjustment of refugee youth in educational settings. Recent decades have seen massive and unprecedented movements of people within and across national borders. Some have been voluntary but others have not. Figures released by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that in 2015 more than 65 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced. If these people constituted a single nation, then that nation would be the twenty-first most populous in the world (UNHCR, 2016). The

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.07.001>

Available online 24 July 2017

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magnitude and emergency nature of these involuntary flows of peoples have generated new educational challenges in societies around the world (McBrien, 2016)—and with this, efforts to create more effective educational practices for refugee youth.

The United Nations has specified in conventions, and researchers have concurred, that education is essential for refugee children's social, psychosocial, and economic adjustment. However, in temporary spaces of refuge access to education is limited and generally of a low quality, with inadequate resources (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Research suggests that refugee students continue to experience challenges in countries of resettlement (McBrien, 2005), and students with limited or interrupted education (SLIFE) are particularly at risk (Dooley, 2009). Yet schools are a critical setting for youth where they are socialized into the new culture and society, and they provide an opportunity to intervene with necessary supports.

The current special issue is intended to further the conversation on issues and challenges facing refugee students in schools that are tasked with their education and overall adaptation to life in a new cultural world. We sought submissions of empirical research conducted in formal or informal educational settings in national contexts around the world. Our aim was to showcase the variety of topics, theoretical perspectives, study designs, and methods that researchers are bringing to this topic.

The nine articles published in this issue focus on the challenges confronting refugee youth in educational settings and describe practices by which some of these challenges are being addressed. Most of the submissions we received reported on studies of third countries of refugee resettlement in Europe, North America and Australasia, and only one was set in a country of first asylum (Karam et al.). Several studies focus on a particular ethnic or language group of Sudanese (Wilkinson et al.), Somali Bantu (Birman & Tran), and Somali-speaking (Bigelow et al.) refugees, while the rest include diverse refugee samples from a variety of countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Importantly, not all studies focused on refugee students exclusively. Most studies also include teachers and school personnel to provide perspective on refugee student experience, and two focused on teachers and peer mentors specifically (Karam et al.; Vickers et al.). Several samples across these studies included refugee and other immigrant youth (e.g. Patel et al.; Vickers et al.). Because refugee students attend school with native-born and immigrant students, it is difficult for researchers to select out only students with official refugee legal status. For this reason, Patel et al. and Blanchet-Cohen et al. specifically defined refugee status by past exposure to war trauma rather than using a legal designation. It is also worth noting that students may not want to be labelled a “refugee” – a derogatory word in the Australian context – and some even find the label “immigrant” confining (Blanchet-Cohen et al.). The difficulties separating refugee samples from other peers in school contexts is a methodological challenge for researchers, but also is a reminder of the importance of understanding perspectives of all members of the school community in order to achieve intercultural understanding (Vickers et al.) and support refugee students.

In terms of theory, the studies are framed from sociological perspectives of social capital (Blanchet-Cohen et al., Karam et al., Wilkinson et al.); psychological theoretical perspectives of social ecology (Birman & Tran; Patel et al.) and social identity theory (Oppedal et al.); and anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives that stress culture as a process (Bartlett et al.; Bigelow et al.). Methodologically seven of the studies were qualitative, and the others used quantitative and mixed methods approaches.

With respect to content, five of the studies in this special issue focus sharply on the educational challenges for refugee youth, including traumatic stress, acculturative, and educational challenges, and supports available to them in school settings. The remaining four articles describe practices by which some of the challenges that confront refugee youth are being addressed in educational settings. We describe them in the two following sections, ending with concluding thoughts and recommendations for future research.

### *Educational challenges for refugee youth*

Lesley Bartlett, Mary Mendenhall, and Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher report on a cultural anthropological study conducted in an international high school in New York, U.S.A. focusing on refugee youth from a variety of countries. They report that while the refugee youth did not discuss experiencing psychological distress in interviews, their teachers and counselors described them as struggling with post-traumatic stress. Such struggles are also highlighted in other studies in this special issue that report on socio-emotional challenges that refugee youth confront as a consequence of exposure to war trauma (Blanchet-Cohen et al., Karam et al., Oppedal et al., Patel et al.). Bartlett et al. also focus on acculturative challenges in the school setting. These relate to the capacity of the school to address safety, trust, daily stressors, optimism, and cultural appreciation. The researchers suggest that static notions of culture held by both students and teachers potentially constrain the creation of effective educational practices.

Sita Patel, Anna Staudenmeyer, Robert Wickham, William Firmender, Laurie Fields, and Alisa Miller also examine both pre-migration war exposure and post-migration acculturative stress in a quantitative study of diverse immigrant and refugee students attending an international high school and found that both predicted lower psychosocial adjustment and academic performance. However, the relationship between acculturative stress and adjustment outcomes was weaker with more war exposure. Drawing on the socio-ecological framework, the authors suggest that while devastating, the experience of war may also have led to growth and resiliency that was protective. This framing is echoed by Oppedal et al. who note resiliency of the unaccompanied minors they studied and Wilkinson et al. who express concerns that a focus on trauma can lead to a deficit view of refugee youth.

Educational challenges faced by refugee students are highlighted by Dina Birman and Nellie Tran whose ethnographic study focuses on Somali Bantu children and their teachers in a Chicago elementary school. They found that students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) encountered formal educational systems with new cultural and structural expectations; and they were likely to exhibit problematic behaviors, such as academic refusal or complaining, distress, hoarding, and potential disengagement in class. The students' reactions were also complicated by the assimilationist or multicultural viewpoints of their teachers, with the latter being more likely to make accommodations to support the children. SLIFE constitute a large proportion of

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