Culture in acculturation: Refugee youth's schooling experiences in international schools in New York City

Lesley Bartlett[a,*], Mary Mendenhall[b], Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher[c]

[a] University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States
[b] Teachers College, Columbia University, United States
[c] University of Pennsylvania, United States

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ABSTRACT

As the number of refugee children and youth across the world continues to grow at an alarming rate, the needs of refugee populations require more and sustained attention. This qualitative study explores the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of refugee students in New York City (NYC), a city that has received refugees and asylum seekers from over 50 countries. Using qualitative research methods and drawing on the literature on refugee students' school experiences and acculturation theory, in this article we ask how refugee students describe the key features of international high schools that foster students' academic success, social and cultural integration, and academic well-being. Moreover, we examine how the notion of *culture* itself can interfere with these efforts.

Introduction

Persistent levels of conflict and persecution have resulted in the largest global refugee population since World War II. Consequently, an unprecedented number of asylum seekers and refugees across the globe are seeking safety and stability through third-country resettlement.[1] In 2016, the United States (U.S.) resettled approximately 85,000 refugees[2]; under President Trump, these numbers will likely decline, despite the global "refugee crisis." Approximately a third (33%) of those resettled in the U.S. are children and youth (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). The needs of these young people vary considerably and depend on factors such as their age, prior educational experiences, migration history, reasons for fleeing, and expectations for their new homes.

As the number of refugee children and youth continues to grow, the needs of refugee populations require more and sustained attention. This qualitative study explores the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of refugee students in New York City (NYC), a city that has received refugees and asylum seekers from over 50 countries, including Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Cuba (BRIA, 2015). In this article, drawing on the literature on refugee students' school experiences and acculturation theory, we ask: how do refugee youth describe the features of international NYC high schools that foster their academic success, social and cultural integration, and academic well-being? After documenting those factors, we argue that a static notion of *culture* can interfere with these efforts.

Literature review

Refugees' experiences differ from voluntary immigrants' experiences in important ways. Refugees are often forced to flee suddenly, having little time to prepare and facing uncertainty about where they might find safe haven. Some spend many years in refugee camps in a neighboring country before resettlement in a third country. Prior to resettlement, not only do children and youth often experience various kinds of trauma and stress from uncertainty, but in many cases their schooling has been interrupted (McBrien, 2005).

Refugee students face immeasurable academic challenges in their adjustment to their new environments (Davies, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Pinson & Arnot, 2007). They frequently suffer from marginalization and discrimination (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001a, 2001b), social alienation (Davies, 2008; Mosselson, 2007), lack of adult support (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010), and difficulties accessing education (Women's Refugee Commission, 2011). Refugee and asylee children and youth confront the bureaucracy and expectations of schooling and must often quickly learn to navigate a system whose policies and standards are unfamiliar and unknown. When they begin school in the U.S., they must rapidly learn not only English, but also new pedagogical routines and subject matter. Refugee youth face particular challenges as they must learn academic English while simultaneously learning challenging subject-area content and–in some cases–preparing to take difficult standardized tests in English. Educators and policymakers have historically developed blanket and unintentionally pernicious education policies that ignore the diversity of experiences of students–particularly refugees–and limit their access to education (Davies, 2008; McBrien, 2005; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Pinson & Arnot, 2007). Few resettled refugees experience school programs that provide resources to meet their unique academic and linguistic needs (Boyson & Short, 2012). However, under the right conditions, education may help rebuild academic, social, and emotional well-being (Sinclair, 2001). Furthermore, refugees typically maintain high aspirations and optimism regarding schooling, which is a valuable educational resource (Kao & Tienda 1995). Schools need to learn how to develop welcoming learning communities for newcomers.

It is important to keep in mind that the refugee population is incredibly heterogeneous. The refugee student population in the United States continues to diversify as more refugee students enter from a wide range of countries that are both culturally and linguistically distinct. Refugee experiences vary significantly by the specific context of reception, including: how peers perceive the refugee's nation of origin; levels of discrimination and racism; prevailing ethos toward immigrants; economic opportunities (and extent of racially/ethnically stratified niches); city and state social policies; and, of course, school culture. Refugees themselves may face more or fewer difficulties depending on income, status, family composition, social capital and social networks, religious orientation (Collet, 2010), language abilities, and legal status. Educators must "refrain from essentializing" refugees or ignoring differences *among* co-nationals; students' "personal histories and current needs must take precedence" (Sarr & Mosselson 2010, p. 553). The available literature signals "the importance of knowing individual refugee students and providing appropriate psychosocial support" (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010, p. 563).

To consider the process by which a newcomer adjusts to a new culture and environment, scholars working in the fields of cross-cultural psychology and intercultural relations have developed the concept of acculturation (e.g., Birman, 1994; Ward 2001). *Acculturation* has been defined by Berry (2005) as the "dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 698). Acculturation is influenced by various factors, including identity, socio-economic status, pre-migration education, the ability to access education upon arrival, work experiences, professional backgrounds, literacy skills, and personal losses (Hartog & Zorlu, 2009; Hickey, 2007). According to Berry (2001), refugees adapt to a new environment using several strategies. Assimilation assumes that refugees abandon their original norms and adapt to a dominant culture. In contrast, integration implies mutual accommodation between the refugee's home culture and the receiving or host society, and potentially the maintenance of biculturalism; this integration process emphasizes language acquisition and cultural awareness among refugees, as well as developing bonding and bridging social capital (Ager & Strang 2004; Berry, 2001, 2008; Birman & Addae, 2015). Notable barriers to acculturation include racial tensions, income inequality, and negative social, educational, migration, housing, and economic policies (Strang & Ager, 2010). The context of reception is clearly influential (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Because school is "the primary acculturating institution where refugees often make their first contact with the host society" (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010, p. 549), we must pay attention to this key institution. In ideal circumstances, the school promotes integration, or mutual accommodation.

Though the notion of acculturation has been very influential, it is not without its critics (e.g., Ward, 2008). As Kennedy and MacNeela (2014) argue, though Berry's model "stems from an eco-cultural perspective," the lack of qualitative and specifically ethnographic work and the preference for "nomothetic, aggregating methodologies ha[ve] not permitted sufficient investigation of context" (p. 128). Proponents of a "critical psychology of acculturation" (Chirkov, 2009a, 2009b) have called for more widespread use of qualitative methods to understand the process of acculturation from an interpretive paradigm. This article responds, in part, to this call.

In order to help students integrate into their new environments, schools and other institutions need to avoid binary approaches to culture. Drawing on the field of sociocultural anthropology, this article promotes a reconsideration of what we mean by *culture* in acculturation (see also Waldram, 2009). Anthropologists have long argued *against* a notion of culture as static, homogeneous, or unchanging—what some call "culture as container." Instead, anthropologists promote a notion of culture as process.[3] As anthropologist Anderson-Levitt (2012) clarified, "since the 1980s many anthropologists have shifted the focus to practice or

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[3] For a history of changing definitions, see Maxwell (2012) and Erickson (2011); for a review of how the culture concept is used across several disciplines, see Baldwin et al. (2005).