



Education of Refugees

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A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion is outside the country of his [her] nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [herself] of the protection of that country..."

~The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are over 17 million refugees throughout the world (2004). These individuals, fleeing war and persecution, have been forced to leave their belongings and their livelihoods behind in order to escape hatred, discrimination, and violence. In 2004, the Department of State helped 52,776 refugees find new homes by allowing them to resettle in the United States of America. Due to the fact that over half of any given refugee population is typically under the age of eighteen, the faces of those coming to seek solace within our borders are often those of children (UNHCR, 2004).

While the refugee experience cannot be generalized and is different for every person, family, and child, there are similar challenges that characterize the lives of those who have come to the United States seeking peace and safety. For children, that experience has often meant violence, instability, and the loss of family, friends, and neighbors. One refugee youth from Liberia remembers his life at age 14: "I watched as they killed my father," he said. "I was then forced to help them [the rebels] clean up bodies off the side of the roads" (Interview, 2002). Some individuals are able to anticipate acts of violence and leave their home countries before they are targeted; others are only able to flee after they have witnessed or been the victim of atrocious acts. Studies have shown that over 50% of some refugee populations have encountered a combat situation, witnessed the murder of a family member, or suffered severe shortages of food, water and shelter (Mollica, *et al.*, 1993).

Whereas violence might characterize the refugee experience of some, the long wait in a refugee camp might be the biggest challenge for others. Once individuals are able to seek safety in another country, the process of finding a new home begins. Because refugees typically flee to nearby countries that are poor and resource-strained, they have limited opportunities to rebuild their lives. Families may stay in camps for anywhere from 2 to 15 years, and rely solely on rations given by aid agencies. Often times these rations are enough for one small meal or less per day. Adults are rarely able to supplement these meager handouts due to restrictions on movement and



employment. Approximately 1% of refugees are eventually referred for resettlement to developed countries like the United States, Canada, and Great Britain (IRC, 2003). Before refugees are relocated to cities like Des Moines, Montreal, and London they must often endure the hunger, hardship, and anxiety of life in a camp.

Refugee camps around the world vary in size, safety, and resource availability. One common characteristic, however, is the lack of educational opportunities for children. Some camps have no schools, others have makeshift tents that serve as schools, and some have buildings with desks and chalkboards. The average school enrollment rate for refugee camps in Sudan is 32%, while camps in Kenya have enrollment rates of 69% (UNHCR, 2002). Camps that do have the necessary facilities typically fail to achieve the structure and community support common in school systems throughout the United States. This is, in part, due to a lack of resources such as textbooks, paper, and pencils. It is also reflective of the fact that parents are forced to concern themselves with the day-to-day survival of their family versus educational needs. Consequently, attendance requirements and outcome measurements such as report cards or teacher/parent conferences are often non-existent.

Other educational obstacles in camps stem from large classrooms and uneducated teachers. In Bangladesh and Eritrea approximately 100% of teachers are unqualified, while camps in Saudi Arabia have teachers that are fully qualified. The number of teachers in the classroom also varies with camps in Tanzania averaging student/teacher ratios of 132 to 1 and camps in Algeria averaging 42 to 1 (UNHCR, 2002).

All of these challenges undoubtedly impact refugee children and their parents. One of the most difficult obstacles for a child who has resettled to the United States can simply stem from entering a society with unlimited resources. One refugee youth remembers the overwhelming feeling of sadness he had upon entering the school cafeteria everyday: "I know that my friends at home don't have any food to eat," he said, "and I'm here with more than I need...sometimes I even watch my classmates throw entire apples away" (Interview, 2002). This reality can lead to behavior that is withdrawn, isolated, or subdued.

Refugee children in the United States might also react differently to specific school assignments or news of a death in a classmate's family. The creation of a family tree can be a particularly difficult task due to the fact that families are often forced to breakup when they flee their homes. This has resulted in the fragmentation of many refugee families. Some children are in the United States with relatives or guardians and have family members who are still in danger overseas. Others have lost large portions of their family due to conditions in the camp or violence in their home country. Because of this constant exposure to death or the threat of death, refugee children might also react differently to the passing of a classmate or a classmate's family member. Studies have shown that some refugee populations suffer disproportionately from Post-Traumatic



Stress Disorder. While prevalence rates for the disease among the general population in the United States is 8%, some refugee communities have a prevalence of 43% or more (Thapa *et. al.*, 2003).

There are also various challenges for parents and guardians. While life in the United States is safe for refugee families, it is often extremely difficult. Adults struggle to make ends meet with low-paying jobs and substandard housing. Those who are able to find full-time employment struggle to send money to family members overseas who have much less or no income at all. Many do not understand the complexity of the public school system and do not have the language skills, the time, nor the resources to learn. Therefore, interaction with teachers and participation in after-school events is virtually non-existent. Many parents teach the importance of education to their children and stress that it is the only way to be successful in the United States. They do not, however, understand report cards nor the components that are needed in order for their children to be successful. This can stem from the fact that parents are uneducated and fail to understand the importance of homework, study time, and tests.

Likewise, many cultures where refugees originate have educational systems where teachers and educators are seen as leaders that are not to be questioned or challenged. Classrooms are structured so that the method of learning is memorization and interrogation, versus analytical or free thinking. Children only speak when spoken to and those with difficulties are often successful in hiding within overcrowded classrooms, especially in camp settings. Consequently, children are used to being lost in the crowd, and parents are used to letting teachers handle all situations. Children from these cultures might also be accustomed to conservative environments, with little exposure to variables like parties, alcohol, and dating. Behavioral issues from refugee youth might stem from cultural differences and the unfamiliarity of life in the United States.

In light of these challenges, it is important for educators to remember that refugees are strong people who have overcome tremendous challenges in order to survive. Refugee communities in the United States are often close knit groups of people who strive to hold on to their cultural past, but accept the new lives they have been given. Thus, it is important for educators to understand methods of communication and interaction with refugee families that are culturally sensitive and accountable to the refugee experience. While all cultural communities are different and have varying expectations of the education system in the United States, most have a common goal: to help their children succeed.

With the help of community partners, school districts should, thus, be aware of the influences within a particular refugee community. Some groups have councils comprised of trusted community leaders that help address challenges and problems. They meet regularly throughout the United States to discuss issues and develop initiatives that help pave the way for personal development and growth. Educators



could contact these groups and meet with community leaders in order to address the needs of youth within that particular demographic. This would be an opportunity to stress the importance of parent interaction and help the community at large understand the components of success in the school system.

School districts could also help families feel more welcome in the school system by personalizing attention and showing interest in their community. If a funding source were to become available, educators could schedule meetings with refugee communities in order to help show parents and students that the school cares about them and their success. Bi-monthly meetings with each refugee group, for example, would help give parents a better understanding of the education system and encourage them to become more involved in their child's education. This would help educators develop a forum for better understanding the needs of the Liberians, the Afghans, the Sudanese, the Somali, etc. It would also provide a comfortable platform for parents, who would be able to lean on those with similar language and cultural backgrounds, for support.

With the help of an interpreter, this type of meeting would not only help school districts reach many families at a time, it would show them that the school district honors any kind of contribution to the education of their children. It would also help families become more accustomed to interacting and communicating with teachers. Educators should also note that small tokens of cultural understanding, such as learning how to say hello in the particular language of the group being addressed, can go a long way in helping to foster trust and respect. In order for this type of venture to be successful, educators must take transportation needs and hectic work schedules into account.

Educators can also help families become more involved by asking them to participate. Notes sent home often go unnoticed due to language barriers. If funding were to become available, the use of interpreters could help significantly reduce this problem. These individuals could be responsible for communicating with parents on a regular basis. While translating documents into the language of communication might be an effective method, phone calls home would be even more effective. If an Arabic-speaking interpreter called Arabic-speaking parents and asked them to attend parent-teacher conferences, the rate of attendance might significantly increase. Educators must constantly ask themselves how they can foster more successful communication. In order to do this, however, state and federal government should make funding sources available.

Education is the primary source of hope for refugee children. It will allow them to communicate with the cashier at a grocery store and will help them get jobs that will give them a better life. A United Nations report on children living in war described their lives as a "desolate moral vacuum devoid of the most basic human values in which nothing is spared, held sacred or protected" (UNHCR, 2004). Those who have been resettled to the United States have the chance to overcome that vacuum by taking full



advantage of what should be every child's entitlement. Iowans and educators have the unique opportunity to help make that difference in the lives of refugee youth.

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