Relocation and Resilience: Educational Challenges and Experiences of Refugee Students in Florida Schools

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Abstract

Since 2024, over 500 refugees have arrived in Old Town. Strengthening Experiences for Refugee Young People, Families, and Their Teachers in Old Town seeks to understand the lived and educational experiences of refugee people and their teachers and peers in Old Town.

Financial burdens, lack of community support, hindrances in language, culture, academic progress, and feelings of isolation are a small portion of the vast number of challenges that refugees face on a daily basis, especially in the United States where no further refugee families will be welcomed.

The study conducts over 80 structured, on-site interviews with refugee children and adults from Afghanistan, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to gain insight on the different perspectives among refugees adjusting to a new life in the U.S. Through certified thematic coding, the study analyzes interview data to generate broad themes emerging about the refugees regarding their attitudes and interconnected experiences at school, home, and work. Highlighted issues include bullying, social exclusion, language barriers, and struggles with identity.

The study's long-term implications will share vital data about the population, origins, and school experiences of Old Town refugees through an intervention model that will hopefully drive future educational policymaking, inform local stakeholders, and address the social and relational needs of refugee young people and their peers. Through meeting refugee children and young adults in their homes and understanding their experiences, this study hopes to pinpoint places of improvement to strengthen both current and future refugee experiences.

Introduction

Old Town is serving as a vital sanctuary for hundreds of resettled families from Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Despite being in America for over a year, many refugee children are currently experiencing issues of bullying, a sense of othering, and language gaps that impair their ability to forge strong connections with peers in American school systems.

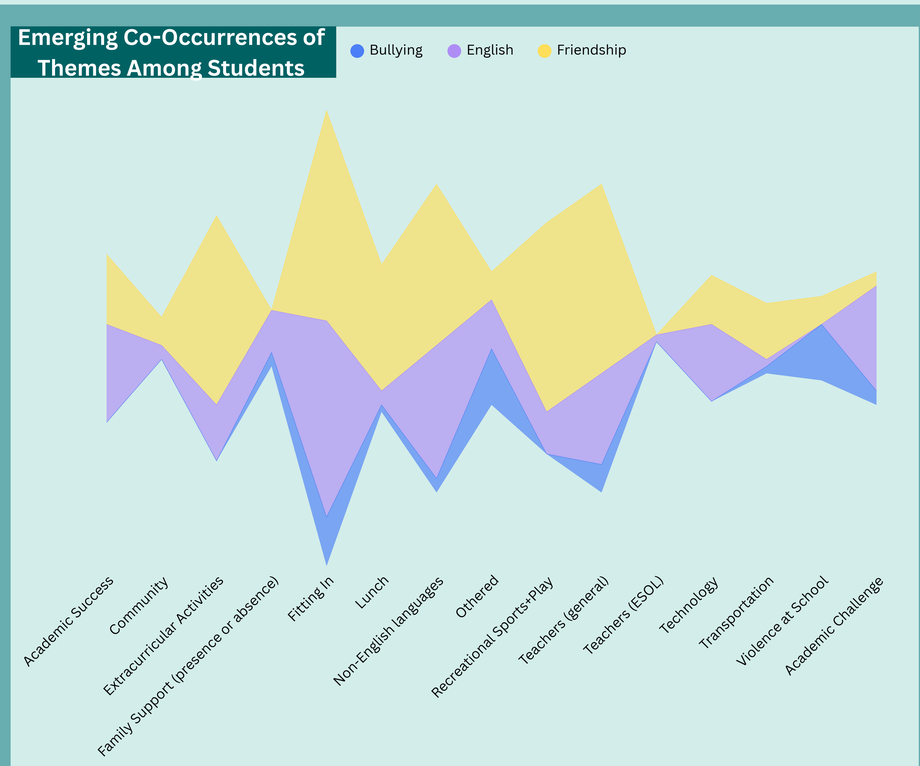
Previous research on refugee communities across the United States and in the Middle East shows increased knowledge about refugee families who share challenges such as navigating a new country and language in school, juggling extracurriculars and responsibilities at home, and mitigating academic and social pressures from their teachers and peers. However, despite the existence of NGOs and beneficial school and teacher programs, refugee students and their families still do not feel supported in the classroom or bolstered by their communities, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Settlement is not conducive to integration.

Our study aims to improve refugee children's outcomes and comfortability and inform local stakeholders and educational policymakers by providing direct insights into the lived experiences of refugee students in Tallahassee school districts.

Challenges Refugee Students Face in School

- Struggles with English and feelings of inadequacy
- Lack of teacher/peer support
- Lack of community events or support outside of school
- Financial or time constraints preventing ability to participate in recreational programs, such as sports.
- Burdens of household responsbilities, such as taking care of siblings, dishes, homework, etc.
- Attempts to "fit in" and assimilate to American culture-changing how they speak or dress
- Bullying and name-calling leading to isolation or retreat

Emerging Co-Occurrences of Themes Among Students



Important Quotes

- **"In America, one benefit Hawa has noticed is that she is able to go to school now." (H23C1) (female student from Afghanistan)**
- **"Zola does not understand English well, which limits his ability to understand the content of school. Given this, he wishes he could receive more support to learn English." (H3C1)**
- **Bullying:**
- **"In Grade 3, Inaki didn't have the English skills and couldn't defend himself and was bullied and accused falsely of things" (H11C2)**
- **"Sometimes they just don't care" (H11C1) (in reference to teachers)**

The above quotes are taken directly from the listening notes for the student interviews. When attempting to quantify qualitative data, it can often feel like one is reducing the nuances of the issue into bite-sized words and phrases that don't properly convey the whole story. The quotes above demonstrate directly the specific issues faced by specific refugee students, giving them a voice that can be lost within the act of attempting to quantify. In the above quotes, we see the struggles refugee students face in dealing with bullying, teachers, and struggling to learn English, while also showcasing the benefits of coming to U.S. We hope that in these quotes, a piece of the students' humanity can be seen, not just as data points, but as people.

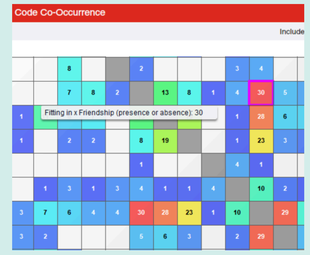
Methodology

Initial Analysis:

Context: Conducted 20+ literature reviews and individual annotated bibliographies. Findings indicated that there is a scholarly awareness of refugee experiences in American schools but a lack of successful school and community support systems in place.

We reviewed several interviews with refugee children from ages 7 to 17, creating listening notes and co-thinker notes for each interview.

- **Listening notes**: an initial summary of the key points of each interview with some analysis. We recorded background noises, time of responses, and tone of voice



Co-thinker notes: Deeper analysis into the points gleaned from each interview. Drawing observations from responses, these insights guided our development of emerging codes.

Thematic Coding

Throughout this process, we focused on finding recurring themes that particularly impacted the refugee children's experiences in school, such as **bullying**, **violence**, and **academic challenges** and **struggles**. We then began the process of coding each interview through the qualitative research software **Dedoose**, assigning specific themes to excerpts from the interviews, which will be used to analyse and form a comprehensive overview of the key findings from the conducted interviews.

Co-Occurrence Matrix of Thematic Codes (Dedoose Coding Results)

High numbers → these themes frequently appear together

Low numbers → they rarely overlap.

Future Direction

This research is still in its early stages. Though the bulk of data collection has been completed, we are still analyzing data collected from the children's interviews and just beginning coding for the adult interviews. Next steps include beginning to synthesize the data into memos that discuss the biggest takeaways and recurring themes from each code, and beginning the process of turning the information found into publishable written work. In the future, this study aims to ultimately influence policy and school administrations to take steps to improve the overall experience of refugee students in public schools in the American south, first and foremost by pinpointing the greatest issues faced by these students.

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