

Challenges Affecting Refugee Education: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract

It is the duty of the host countries to ensure that refugees are given access to education by taking appropriate measures to integrate them into their education system. This paper aims to review existing research on the experiences of refugees, with a focus on factors that affect their education in host countries. The paper sheds light on the key issues that arise in the education of refugees. It highlights the challenges posed by language barriers, internal and external factors affecting the students, the role of educators in providing support, and the effectiveness of the school education system in meeting the unique needs of refugee students. By exploring these common themes, the paper aims to provide insights that can help improve the educational experiences of refugees and promote their integration into host societies.

Keywords: Refugee education, refugee students, educators, language barriers, internal factors, external factors

INTRODUCTION

It is important to acknowledge that every child has the fundamental right to receive an education, regardless of their migratory status. However, the type, quality, and duration of education that refugees access largely depends on the location where they seek asylum, rather than their educational needs. According to recent data from UNHCR, over half (51%) of all refugee children are not receiving any education. Moreover, the enrolment rates for pre-primary, primary, secondary, and higher education among refugees are significantly lower than the global average. However, enrolment rates alone do not comprise sufficient indication to determine the challenges faced by refugee students in continuing education. UNHCR has identified numerous obstacles that refugee and migrant children face in accessing education, including inadequate school capacity, language barriers, psychosocial concerns, and a lack of necessary support.

These obstacles do not cease to exist when a refugee student is enrolled or even excels in school. Multiple studies from various refugee populations across the globe indicate different challenges that refugee children may experience in relation to their education. Though certain issues might be limited to a singular population, there are a few common themes of challenges found across studies exploring the refugee experience. This paper examines these studies highlighting the common challenges that refugee students face in their host societies.

OBJECTIVES

The present study will examine available related literature on the various issues encountered by refugees

with a special focus on factors affecting their education. It will identify dominant themes in past and current research as well as trends in research conducted on the experiences that refugees face upon entering a new country.

Language Barrier

For refugees entering a new country, access to education is often faced with the challenge of learning a new language. Language barriers pose a significant obstacle especially for refugee children, as many have little to no knowledge of the dominant language in their host country. Qualitative studies on refugee experiences in entering a new country provide observations of language barriers in accessing education. Research conducted by Mozy nah in 2017 aimed to explore the schooling experiences of Syrian refugees in the Ottawa public school system. The study revealed that Syrian refugees come to Canada with a strong determination to succeed and have positive initial experiences in schools. However, the research pointed out that Syrian refugees often lack confidence in education, which could be attributed to factors such as low language proficiency. A research paper by Davila (2010) examined how a group of Vietnamese Montagnard refugee high school students were viewed by their teachers and peers as ‘good kids but poor students’ due to their experiences as a marginalized ethnic minority in Vietnam and limited English language proficiency among others.

In a study conducted on refugee children in countries of first asylum concerning their educational experiences, Dryden-Peterson (2015) highlighted four educational challenges which included language barriers to educational access. Another study by Gilhooly and Lee (2016) on the Karen refugees in the United States through qualitative data collection identified the English language barrier among five issues that Karen kids face both in and out of school. Serker and Sirkeci (2015) conducted interviews with educators for their study on refugees in Eastern Turkey centered on the challenges that refugee children encounter while in school. Teachers identified the lack of proficiency in the Turkish language among refugee children as one of the major problem areas.

Parents of refugee children are also found to have their share of language struggles which may influence their children’s education in the host countries. Aldiabat et al. (2021), performed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological study to explore the lived experience of Syrian Newcomers in Moncton, NB, Canada. The analysis-synthesis revealed refugee parents’ view of the education system in Canada as suitable for their children but not for themselves mainly due to the language barrier. Another study by Robinson (2018) delves into the experiences of Syrian refugees residing in Berlin, Germany through an interpretative phenomenological method to analyze semi-structured interviews with 14 refugees. The participants of the study shared their struggles after they arrived in Germany including the language barrier issues.

Internal factors

Feelings of isolation and the negative impact of their experiences in school caused by assumptions that refugees would easily adapt to the new society constitute some of the findings of a study by Mosselson (2006) on the Bosnian refugee community in the United States.

Sutton et al. (2021) found that acknowledging and appreciating the diversity of refugee-background learners can significantly contribute to their sense of inclusion and belonging. In their study, the participants reported feeling more included when their school recognized their diverse backgrounds and their ability to navigate multiple cultures.

External factors

External factors may pose challenges that may influence a refugee child's education in a new society. When people are driven by conflict to be displaced into a new space, they are forced to settle into an unfamiliar environment that may have a completely different culture and practices from their own. Moreover, when people become refugees, they may not be able to carry with them their titles, achievements, belongings, and socio-economic statuses. They may have to settle in refugee camps and depend on funding from the country of their settlements and adapt to new ways of earning a livelihood. A study on the livelihood of the Sri Lankan refugees living in the camps of Tamil Nadu conducted by Xavier (no date) found that higher economic status was linked to a better quality of life and livelihood of the refugees. At the same time, education was not associated with livelihood. On the other hand, findings from case studies by Mullen (2014) on six refugee students studying in an Upper elementary school indicated that external factors such as hunger, lack of healthcare, homelessness, family trauma, or other significant concerns can affect students' ability to engage fully with the school.

Negative experiences such as discrimination, racism, and bullying are often covered in studies of refugee experiences as these may hinder a refugee child's education. Studies by Gilhooly and Lee (2016) on Karen refugees in the United States, and Hek (2005) on young refugees in the United Kingdom, both had findings of issues that refugee children face in and out of schools. These issues involve the relationship with their peers and how these relationships may influence the refugee children's settlement in a new society. Bullying is a common theme in these papers.

Refugee parents also constitute an important factor in their children's education upon entering a new country. Isik-Ercan (2012) conducted a qualitative investigation into the experiences of Burmese refugee families with elementary schools in the United States. The study found that while parents encouraged their children's learning, their limited schooling experiences prevented them from advocating for their children's education and providing resources for academic opportunities.

Educators

Educators play a crucial role in the schooling experience of refugees and may be a cause of challenges that refugee students may face in their education. Discriminatory and negligent practices by teachers on refugee students may negatively affect their attempts to adjust to the new environment. A study conducted in 2005 by Hek, that explored the impact of teachers on the settlement and success of young refugees found that refugee students valued teachers who empathized with their circumstances and provided assistance, while teachers who failed to listen to or treated them unfairly posed difficulties for these students.

Educators may also be affected by the experience of having to cater to new students who come from different backgrounds as compared to their native-born students. In her case studies, Mullen (2014) examined refugee students in upper elementary schools in the United States. Her findings indicated that school staff may experience emotional difficulties as a result of interacting with families who have undergone significant suffering. Cultural differences drove teachers to build on existing practices and adapt new strategies to create supportive school relationships for refugee students.

School Education System

Host countries carry the responsibility to take necessary actions to integrate refugees into their education system. In a qualitative study on Burmese refugee families in the United States, Isik-Ercan (2012)

discovered that the schools' policies lacked creativity and resources to engage refugee parents. Additionally, the findings suggested that the unique needs of Burmese children were overlooked in school settings.

According to a study conducted by Seker and Sirkeci in 2015, refugees in Eastern Turkey face various challenges when it comes to education. Educators who were interviewed noted that refugee children cannot fully benefit from their right to education due to difficulties in adapting to the school and wider environment. They often face rejection from their peers and suffer from culture clashes, leading to feelings of isolation and a decline in academic performance.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, there has been a growing interest in understanding the experiences of refugees. However, it was only in the late 1990s that research on this topic started to gain momentum. In this paper, we have collected valuable insights from various research papers published between 2005 and 2021. Most of the studies used qualitative methodologies and data collection methods such as interviews, case studies, and observations to gather in-depth insights into the lives of refugees. These methodologies allowed researchers to understand the complex and nuanced experiences of refugees, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. According to the studies reviewed in this paper, refugees are faced with numerous issues when trying to pursue education in a new country. These issues may include language barriers, cultural differences, lack of social support networks, and internal and external constraints. The process of adapting to a new educational system and academic environment can also be daunting and overwhelming for many refugees. As a result, it is crucial for policymakers and educators to address these issues and provide appropriate resources and support to help refugees overcome these barriers and achieve their educational goals.

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