

Chapter 12

Bridging Cultures: The Schooling Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children Living in the United States – A Literature Review

Einas Albadawi Tarboush
University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

ABSTRACT

This literature review focuses on exploring the existing body of research that examined the schooling experiences of Syrian refugee children living in the United States. It also attempts to identify the gap previous studies did not bridge to enrich the body of knowledge. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian children and families have had to negotiate the perils of displacement. As could be expected, the education of these Syrian refugee children has been held at a crossroads as families attempt to find both security and a renewed sense of prosperity abroad. The researcher's hope is that a more in-depth analysis of the lived dynamics of Syrian refugee children in American schools will reveal something more significant in regards to how schools and their educators can expect to find success with their foreign-national student populations, as well as providing refugee families with useful tools in navigating the complexities of American public schools.

INTRODUCTION

By 2016, it was reported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees that more than sixty-five million individuals experienced physical displacement from their home countries because of various forms of unrest and the threat of immediate danger, (UNHCR, 2018). Dozens of recent studies have been conducted to show differing levels of influence the forced migration process has on the minds, bodies, and spirits of people all over the world, and the present review seeks to continue the push in this direction by exploring the existing body of research conducted on the schooling experiences of Syrian refugee students living in the United States.

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To start with, embedded in the discussion of the unique experience of the resettlement process of refugee families is new research on the mental health outcomes experienced by children and adults who underwent forced migration. Studies sadly show distinct levels of trauma expressed variously as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and low self-worth across many interviewees (Bogic et al., 2015; Slobodin & de Jong, 2015). Educators face major challenges as many of them remain underprepared to serve as thought-leaders and mediators for their diversely populated classrooms, some of these hosting refugee-background learners who can be experiencing any of the trauma symptoms inherent to displacement. In many U.S. public schools, a single classroom contains half-a-dozen distinct nationalities or more represented amongst the students; thus teachers are lending their own voices to students who may not know how to express their own just yet. To complicate these matters further, research demonstrates that learners of refugee background are less likely to express their need for connection or assistance in an educational environment, which is in part due to the perceived stigma of their very arrival in the host country (Shannon, Im, Becher, Simmelink, Wieling, & O'fallo, 2012).

This study takes as its focus the lived schooling experiences of Syrian refugee children living in the United States. With the ongoing military and political unrest that has seized Syria since the outbreak of violence in 2011, thousands of children and their families have faced displacement and instability as they sought safe landing abroad. Accordingly, the education of these children has been intermittently placed on hold, or it has been immersed in the school systems of a host country. While refugees often garnered reception in neighboring Middle Eastern nations, many refugees have landed far from home, with the United States receiving over twenty-thousand Syrian nationals in the past seven years. As refugee families adjust to their new surroundings and sociopolitical contexts, educators and administrators in the U.S. are generally failing to adjust at-pace with their incoming foreign-national populations, and despite reports of strong home-language literacy and home-based learning practices, Syrian refugee learners in American schools are struggling to reflect that intellect in their respective U.S. academic scores and assessments.

This qualitative analysis utilizes interview and survey-based data gathered from Syrian refugee families in the U.S. whose children are currently enrolled in K-12 American public schools. The intent of this analysis is to shed light on a culturally specific immigrant-learning experience as it is being lived and experienced today, with real teachers, real pedagogy, and real families negotiating everything in between. The United States shows a long history of immigrant population booms from Syria, and an equally long history of warm, inclusive community exchanges between its own multicultural community matrices; however, twenty-first century pedagogy in American public school classrooms scarcely reflects this legacy of inclusion and adaptation when it comes to Syrian refugee student populations, hence the urgency of a study such as this in illuminating the needs of refugee learners, along with possible teaching strategies for culturally specific learning communities.

BACKGROUND

In the ongoing wake of its civil war and the continued outbreaks of violence and conflict, Syria has suffered greatly. A direct result of the Arab Spring demonstrations, the Syrian Civil War was triggered into action in March of 2011. A conspiratorial narrative is often spun around the uprisings in the Arab Spring, as several leaders of the involved countries felt the groundswell of dissent was indicative of Western interference and a subtle plot by Western powers to divide and hegemonize the Arab region (Johnes, 2013). By fueling civil wars between Sunnis and Shias, devastating the Arab armed forces,

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