



Beyond Refuge

A Framework for the Emancipatory
Education of Forcibly-Displaced Youth

Jason R. Swisher

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Beyond Refuge

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Beyond Refuge: A Framework for the Emancipatory Education of Forcibly-Displaced Youth

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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To my grandmother, Patricia E. Swisher, who reminded me how proud she was of me throughout my doctoral program, and who was called to peace before I earned my degree. Grandma selflessly devoted her life to those in need of love and belonging.

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Chapter 1

Educating Those Forcibly Displaced: Purposes and Processes

As armed conflicts, genocide, politically charged economic situations, and natural disasters have continued around the world, more displaced persons than ever before are searching for better lives in new and unfamiliar countries. Roughly 42% of the 84 million forcibly-displaced persons worldwide are children (UNHCR, 2022). People have fled homelands, often due to oppressive circumstances, and arrived in countries that are typically foreign to them. The ways in which they make meaning of their world have roots in subjugated ground. As they learn how to navigate their lives in new countries, forcibly-displaced persons continue to be othered by those who have different conceptions of truths within the boundaries of their communities and codified in their laws (Lingis, 1994).

Fleeing persecution only to arrive in slightly less oppressive environments, forcibly-displaced children (herein used interchangeably with the term “refugees” for the sake of brevity) are susceptible to having limited or no opportunities to be liberated from repressive circumstances. Bounded potential can be due to educational systems that were not built with refugee students in mind and have been modified primarily to meet the goals of socializing refugees to conform to dominant social norms and qualifying students to speak native languages and pass exams.

Potts (2003) described an emancipatory model of education as one that “(1) explicitly addresses social oppression, situating community problems (and targets of primary prevention) within historical context, (2) acknowledges students as agents for social change, and (3) affirms . . . cultural resources for healing and social transformation” (p. 175). Such a model is rooted in the belief that educators and students, together, can “engage in a counterhegemonic praxis of creating new transformative and liberatory possibilities” (Bautista, 2018, p. xiv), which can address the forces that lead people to reluctantly leave their home countries in search of better lives. In this book, I describe the research I conducted to investigate definitions of an emancipatory education for refugees and to explore considerations for theoretical and practical components of an emancipatory educational framework for forcibly-displaced children. Context is important to any study, and especially relevant to my study, as I conducted it in the United States from 2019 to 2020 – a time in which policies regarding immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were intensely debated in the sociopolitical

media landscape. I begin by describing the current sociopolitical milieu in which forcibly-displaced youth exist.

Context of the Study

The historically high numbers of forcibly-displaced persons have tested many countries' policies regarding immigrants, refugees, and asylees. Leaders of some countries, such as Germany, have worked to welcome and assist as many asylum seekers and refugees as possible (De La Baume, 2017). Leaders of other countries, such as Bangladesh and Algeria, have forced people to return to their place of origin (Fullerton, 2015), occasionally at gunpoint (Domonoske, 2018). In recent history, the United States has been situated somewhere between the extremes:

The United States [has often been] sought as a destination for immigrants due to the perception that a good life can be had there, through education and hard work, not just for the immigrants themselves, but especially for their children.

(Waite & Swisher, 2019, p. 23)

Such meritocratic discourse – resonant of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1958), and often reinforced by educators – has been embedded along with beliefs of competition, individualism, and self-promotion in what many have termed the American Dream (McGinnis, 2009). However, the xenophobic and protectionist zeitgeist of the Trump administration and its influence on US government policies and practices that concern non-US citizens has caused some forcibly-displaced persons to lose hope of finding a better life in the United States (Amos, 2016).

In 1981, then US President Ronald Reagan stated:

Our nation is a nation of immigrants. More than any other country, our strength comes from our own immigrant heritage and our capacity to welcome those from other lands. No free and prosperous nation can by itself accommodate all those who seek a better life or flee persecution. We must share this responsibility with other countries. (para. 1)

At the time of this study, the viewpoint of the US president was much different. During his campaign, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump “call[ed] for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Johnson, 2015, para. 7). A year-and-a-half into his presidency, the US Supreme Court upheld Trump’s proposed travel ban, posing heavy restrictions on entry to the United States from seven countries (i.e., North Korea, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Venezuela), five of which are of a Muslim majority (Inskeep & Horsley, 2018). In 2020, the Trump administration added six more countries to the travel ban: Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Eritrea, Tanzania, Sudan, and Nigeria (Rose, 2020). Trump also referred to immigrants as animals (Hirschfield Davis, 2018), and to illegal immigration as an infestation (Graham, 2018).

Per the Refugee Act of 1980, the President, in consultation with Congress, establishes an annual fiscal year ceiling for refugee admissions. That number was raised from 85,000 for 2016 to 110,000 for 2017 by President Obama. Despite an unprecedented number of displaced persons in the world (UNHCR, 2018a), the ceiling was lowered by President Trump every year of his presidency: 45,000 for 2018, 30,000 for 2019, 18,000 for 2020, and 15,000 for 2021 – “the lowest in the history of the U.S. refugee admissions program” (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Furthermore, nearly 100% of the ceiling had been reached every year before Trump took office (Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System, 2020). However, the United States collectively accepted just 56.2% of the number of refugees afforded by ceilings in the four fiscal years Trump was in office.

The numbers of refugees accepted by the United States in fiscal years 2016 through 2020 were 84,994, 53,716, 22,517, 30,000, and 11,814 respectively – drastic declines in numbers that had heretofore been slowly rising since the start of the Syrian war in 2011 (Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System, 2020). In 2020, Trump issued an executive order granting individual states and municipalities the right to refuse refugees, thus allowing communities to self-segregate and further limiting the number of refugees permitted into the United States (Trump, 2019). Governor Greg Abbott of Texas – the setting of my study – was the first person to effectuate that right when he announced his state would not accept any refugees in 2020. Declaring “Texas has carried more than its share in assisting the refugee resettlement process” (Romo, 2020, para. 3), he insinuated that helping displaced persons was a burden of charity as opposed to an example of compassion.

Though many economic, sociocultural, sociopolitical, and geopolitical factors contribute to the existence of refugees, many factors can lead to better lives for refugees. Education is a vehicle to discover and elucidate those remedial factors, because teaching and learning can broaden people’s thinking and social consciousness. Although education occurs in many settings, the bulk of support for refugee children comes via school-based practices, because schools are where children in the United States spend most of their formative time away from home. My study focused on how we can improve the education of forcibly-displaced youth in schools because building the agentic capacity for school staff, students, and teachers (Fullan, 2015) is important to the success and well-being of refugee students. Educators can, and do, help refugees feel welcomed by supporting their cultural and social adjustment and by helping them address psychological and emotional trauma (McBrien, 2005). However, more research is needed to explore how educators and students can cooperatively participate in an education that includes elucidating and deconstructing the social inequities and oppressive systems that often create refugees so that the number of refugees in the world can be mitigated or eliminated.

Background of Refugee Education

While the rates of refugees' enrollment in schools are not as high as rates of their nonrefugee counterparts (UNHCR, 2018b), a positive schooling experience is important for refugee children's academic achievement and mental health (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Alan, 2012) and can lead to a reduction in armed conflict (Thyne, 2006). Consequently, educators should be creating and sustaining positive schooling experiences for refugee youth. However, I argue that we, as educators, are doing no such thing. Extant leadership, policies, and practices imply educators have not moved far beyond the perpetuation of routines that value refugee students for their contributions to schools' academic indicators of success rather than valuing them for who they are and who they can be. Too much attention is directed toward the socialization of refugees so schools can meet the socially accepted requirements of academic achievement. Working toward the goals of socializing and qualifying refugee students is adequate for moving children through educational systems and maintaining the status quo, but not sufficient for changing it.

Most research in refugee education is concerned with socializing refugees into their hosts' societies and qualifying them to graduate from secondary school; such literature is necessary and helpful for that purpose. However, the current body of literature has insufficiently addressed how education can serve an emancipatory purpose for refugees – specifically those who attend mainstream schools. Some educators have acknowledged this purpose, and promising emancipatory educational practices for refugee youth have been implemented in some international schools (Bajaj, Argenal, & Canlas, 2017; Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Bartlett, Mendenhall, & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; Martin & Suárez-Orozco, 2018; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018). Nevertheless, as Dryden-Peterson and Reddick (2017) found, emancipatory education for refugees in international schools – schools that serve students who have recently arrived in the United States – yielded disillusioned high school graduates who, upon reflection, felt unprepared for the structural inequalities they encountered in postgraduation life.

Dryden-Peterson and Reddick stated that “refugees, by definition, have fled from conflict and persecution; however, for many refugees, the systems and structures of racism and inequality that confront them in the United States are different from what they experienced prior to arrival” (p. 271). Given that refugees and immigrants are consistently interacting with native-born students in mainstream schools, emancipatory educational practices for refugee students in mainstream schools may help to “align students' in-school experiences with the realities that they may face post-school” (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017, p. 270). However, a framework for emancipatory education for refugees in mainstream schools does not exist. Thus, three central questions guided my research:

- (1) What paradigmatic concepts or philosophical directions can inform a theoretical framework for emancipatory education of forcibly-displaced youth in mainstream schools?

- (2) What changes in policy, leadership, and/or practice are needed to realize a theoretical framework for emancipatory education in mainstream schools?
- (3) How can we make the changes needed in policy, leadership, and/or practice to realize a theoretical framework for emancipatory education in mainstream schools?

Many terms have been used to describe people who were forced to emigrate from their home countries. These terms include refugees, migrants, immigrants, displaced persons, asylum seekers, and stateless persons. While there are distinctions between the terms – and those distinctions often determine the services and protections those so labeled are eligible to receive – all children have a right to an education (UNHCR, 2010). Therefore, I chose to review literature concerning children who were forcibly displaced from their home countries, regardless of how they have been labeled. For the sake of brevity, I will use the term refugee to encompass all such students.

Although I organized much of the literature into domains of educational purposes: socialization, qualification, and subjectification (Biesta, 2013), the research lies in the overlap of those three domains in terms of its overall educational goals – that is, the practices and processes in one domain serve the purposes of other domains. Thus, we should consider holistic connections between the literature, and not interpret any purpose as independent of another. That said, researchers and educators tend to prioritize the practices of socializing refugee students to meet the goals of qualification (academic achievement). References to emancipation (subjectification) in the literature about refugee education are scant.

Socialization. The socialization purpose of education serves to help students develop their identities by recognizing and becoming a part of social, cultural, and political practices (Biesta, 2013). When it comes to the education of refugee children in Western countries, much of the scholarly literature addresses teaching the English language and includes practices aimed at socializing refugees into their hosts' societies. Under the umbrella of socialization, authors use terms such as assimilating (Birman & Tran, 2017), acculturating (Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017; Kennedy & MacNeela, 2014), cultural transitioning (Makarova & Birman, 2015), adapting (DeCapua, 2016), adjusting (Birman & Tran, 2017; Brenner & Kia-Keating, 2016), and integrating (Ager & Strang, 2008; Berry, 2005). All such terms come with varying descriptions and interpretations, yet all are typically embedded in discussions related to a primary goal of academic achievement (qualification). Also within the scope of socialization, researchers have used multiculturalism (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016) and interculturalism (Catarci, 2014) as concepts to describe how educators can and should socialize refugee children in schools.

Although socialization is important, the amount of literature concerning socializing refugee students far exceeds the amount of literature addressing their qualifications (Biesta, 2013). Educators are good at teaching kids to be like them. As we review existing research, we should keep in mind the following: "The status of being a dominant discourse enables [an] ideology to be considered commonsense

practice (McGinnis, 2009, p. 63). *Should* educators aim *primarily* to socialize refugees into Western ways of living and learning, and are current methods of socialization appropriate? What do the aims and methods indicate in terms of hegemony, neocolonialism, exceptionalism, and other omnipresent Western ideologies that inform the perpetuation of educational and other systems that dominate, exclude, and oppress refugees (McWilliams & Bonet, 2015, 2016)? Such ideologies have often informed the actions of leaders in and of many nations that have created the circumstances for refugees to exist in the first place (Haines, 2010).

Support for Identity, Cultural, Psychological, Social, and Emotional Issues. Being a refugee is often traumatic (Heptinstall, Sethna, & Taylor, 2004; McBrien, 2005; Shaw, 2003) and “most teachers neither have sufficient knowledge nor competence to deal with the psychological problems their students struggle with” (Pastoor, 2015, p. 252). Problems stem from fleeing one’s home country due “to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3). Often, this forced migration is war-related (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016). “Unable or unwilling to return their countr[ies] of origin” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3), asylum seekers find an intermediate country where they are often (dis)placed in camps while they apply for refugee or asylum status and wait – sometimes for years – until they are resettled either in the country of their first arrival or another country. It is not surprising that as many as 54% of refugee children have posttraumatic stress disorder and up to 30% suffer from depression (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011). Sadly, “interventions that combine education programs with trauma healing techniques or that integrate healing activities in a school curriculum are rare” (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, Guven, & Skarpeteig, 2017, p. 641).

A stable schooling experience is an important protective factor in alleviating posttraumatic stress and depression in young refugees (Fazel et al., 2012; Nasıroğlu & Çeri, 2016). Additionally, Thyne (2006) showed that higher secondary school enrollment and literacy rates could reduce the likelihood of civil conflict in any country, rendering schooling for refugee “students with limited or interrupted formal education” (DeCapua, 2016; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010) extremely important.

Unfortunately, only 61% of refugee children attend primary school, 23% attend secondary school, and only 1% enroll in institutions of higher education, compared to a respective 91%, 84%, and 36% globally (UNHCR, 2018b). Educational leaders and the global public should be disturbed by the discrepancies between these numbers. Although education may not be necessary for self-determination and mental health, many who immigrate to the United States believe that it is (Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011; Daha, 2011; McGinnis, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). McWilliams and Bonet (2016) found that Burmese and Bhutanese refugee youth “saw themselves as agents of their communities, charged with the task of becoming educated in order to return to their people to relieve their suffering” (p. 160). Given that many have been forced from their homes under political duress, refugee youth should realize that they can be sociopolitical actors who work to eliminate the circumstances that produce refugees. Supporting this realization is the responsibility of educators and educational decision makers.

Considering that some refugees have never been in a classroom, they may not be aware of how Western schools function, or how people interact within them (Birman & Tran, 2017) or outside of them; neither might their parents. Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2016) noted that “the desire to be accepted, belong, and be heard [are] fundamental human need[s] and especially exacerbated in youth and those who have to transition from home countries to a new one” (pp. 170–171). In attempts to meet those needs, refugee students learn the social, cultural, political, and other norms and practices of their host countries while unlearning some of what they already know (Jackson, 2014). Educators’ failure to acknowledge refugee students’ social and cultural identities can lead to a devaluation of students’ social capital. Valenzuela (1999) described this as subtractive schooling.

Subtractive schooling can be manifested in many ways, including, but not limited to dress code policies that prohibit students’ expressions of cultural identity or promote the dress of the dominant culture; behavioral policies that seem appropriate for the dominant culture but may include punitive consequences for those who are accustomed to different social norms; and the general speech, conduct, and tacit behaviors of school staff and students that may be conducive to the development of environments that exclude students who are new to the country. Promoting a “complex, positive, and flexible sense of identity depends not only on the individual youth’s desire for ethnic identification, but also on the positive possibilities of recognition allowed by the larger context of reception” (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016, p. 161). Thus, educators in positions of power over students must take the first caring step by closely analyzing institutional policies and practices for rules and actions that marginalize refugee students (Makarova & Birman, 2015), while recognizing and welcoming refugees’ differences as assets to be cultivated.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Bitew & Ferguson, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995) is an oft-cited approach that can work to combat subtractive schooling. Culturally relevant pedagogy can be described as “an attempt to create a schooling experience that enables students to pursue academic excellence without abandoning their cultural integrity” (Howard, 2001, p. 136). However, there is no refugee culture. Therefore, culturally relevant pedagogy may support refugees in terms of constructing positive, caring relationships (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009) and applying cultural referents to learning, but it does not address sociopolitical issues of becoming a refugee.

A culturally relevant pedagogy still resides in systems designed to absorb and socialize refugee students into them, and socialization is a branch of colonization because it involves one group being forced to conform to another group’s norms. Perhaps refugees can help to change the systems responsible for producing refugees, instead of becoming a part of those systems. Perhaps refugees can discover and form their unique identities and express them in ways that help to conceptualize an emancipatory education in which a culturally relevant pedagogy is not a tool to be implemented, but an inherent element in the totality of education.

Support for English Language Acquisition. In the United States, capitalism, commodification, standardized testing, and other merit-based ideologies have pressed educators to appreciate students only for their academic abilities and

production values (Goodlad, 1984). Too, communication is often a barrier for refugee students to justify their academic aptitude when they are expected to learn, participate in discussions, and present oral and written information in a new language (De Jong & Harper, 2005). Because English fluency is a strong predictor of academic engagement and performance (Han, 2012; Kim & Suárez-Orozco, 2014), and refugees' scores on high-stakes tests are subsumed under the label of English language learners (ELLs), refugees are compelled to assimilate and speak English as quickly as possible. However, "in many cases, refugee children have experienced limited or interrupted schooling, leading to low literacy skills in their native language" (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016, p. 160). It is no surprise that the bulk of the literature regarding the education of refugees deals with teaching and learning English as a new language. The scope of research that informs theories and practices for English language teaching is also broad because it can be applied to groups other than refugees. What is surprising, however, is that few studies discuss what and how we can learn *from and with* refugees as opposed to what and how we can teach *to* them.

There are many widely held beliefs and practices for how to teach English as a new language. Given that details of English language teaching were outside the scope of my study, I will not delve into such beliefs and practices, but I will mention some as they arise under the umbrella of other topics that are relevant to my line of inquiry. I recognize that it is important for refugee students to be able to communicate, but I am also aware that they "are mostly positioned as language learners despite the fact that the complexities of their situations as newcomers go far beyond language acquisition" (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016, p. 163). My contributions here mostly lie beyond the complexities of language barriers.

Qualification. Dryden-Peterson (2016a) analyzed the presettlement educational experiences of refugees in four countries of first asylum and described them as discriminatory, with teacher-centered pedagogies and extensive language barriers. US schooling experiences cannot be described in a much better light, given that "test preparation and rubrics have replaced relationships, respect, and true reform" (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 27). Much of the research on refugee education indicates that when socialization is adequately underway, educators can begin qualifying students to do something of economic or social value for themselves and their communities. I find myself agreeing with Faltis and Valdés (2010), who stated that:

At times, [the literature regarding qualification of refugees] is overly concerned with helping teachers learn relatively simple strategies for making academic content understandable to English language learners. This literature also tends to essentialize immigrant students, refugee students, and English language learners, treating them as if they all need the same social, language, and educational resources, rather than recognizing the complex variation within these groups. (p. 289)

Assimilationist perspectives can be felicitous for teachers because they feed into many teachers' preconceived notions of how students learn. The more