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Article

Social and Curricular Inclusion in Refugee Education: Critical Approaches to Education Advocacy

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Abstract

Recognizing refugee students, families, and communities as a source of knowledge and social change, this article offers two case studies of innovative, deliberative, and labor-intensive practices toward meaningful social inclusion of refugee parents and students in education. The first example focuses on the multiyear effort by the Parent-Student-Resident Organization (PSRO) in San Diego, California, an education advocacy group organized and led by local parents to institutionalize social inclusion programs for refugees and other systemically excluded students. The second example analyzes the Refugee Teaching Institute in Merced, California, organized with the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), to work with teachers to create a refugee-centered curriculum. In both case studies, organizers depart from deficit models of refugee education by foregrounding student and parent empowerment and bringing together diverse stakeholders to generate and implement a shared vision for teaching and learning. Through sharing insights glimpsed from participant observation and extended conversations with participants in each case study, this article shifts the reference point in refugee education from that of school authorities to that of refugees themselves. Through reflecting on the challenges of effecting systemic change, we argue for a model of educational transformation that is ongoing, intentionally collaborative, and cumulative.

Keywords

critical refugee studies; cultural humility; curricular inclusion; refugee education advocacy; refugee teaching; social inclusion; systems change

Issue

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1. Introduction

Since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980—the first comprehensive US immigration law to address the admission of refugees—more than three million refugees have been resettled in the United States (US Department of State, n.d.). As one of the top resettlement states in the nation, California welcomed about 10% of refugee arrivals between 2010 and 2021 (Monin et al., 2021); between 2009–2013, 20% of the 941,000 children with refugee parents living in the US resided in California (Hooper et al., 2016, p. 14). As schools are considered key

to the successful resettlement of refugee children and their families (McBrien, 2005), it is vital that local schools develop strategies to ensure their educational inclusion. However, research on the particular needs of refugee students in the United States remains scant (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2018, p. 333), in part due to gaps in data availability for refugee students in US schools (Wiseman & Bell, 2021). As a result, US education researchers and policymakers often lump together refugee, immigrant, and English language learners, contributing to the invisibility of refugee students in academic literature, policy, and the classroom (McBrien,

2005, p. 337; Oikonomidoy, 2010, p. 75). This lumping practice disregards the distinct challenges refugee students face, which include experiences of forced displacement, interrupted or limited education, protracted stays in refugee camps, lack of educational documentation, loss and separation, violence and persecution, and mental health care needs (Cun, 2019; Merry et al., 2017). Although the official discourse of most school policies is to welcome refugees, schools often lack trauma-informed approaches to education that do not pathologize and diminish refugee students and their parents (Roxas & Roy, 2012, p. 469). Existing research on refugee education indicates that US schools have mostly responded to the challenge of refugee education within the logic of the existing education system, relying on ad-hoc strategies (Fix et al., 2001) rather than on an intentional systems change to include refugee students. In this article, we thus offer two case studies of innovative, deliberative, and labor-intensive efforts toward the social inclusion of refugee students and their parents in the education system.

Addressing the underrepresentation of refugee voices in education scholarship, and challenging the persistent deficit positioning of refugee students as a problem to be solved, this study adopts a critical refugee studies approach that centers the agency and efficacy of refugee students, parents, and communities, reframing them as enactors of systems change in education (Espiritu et al., 2022). While previous studies have focused on whether and how school authorities support and integrate refugee students and their families into the existing education system, this article examines how two refugee-led programs in California reimagined and restructured two core areas in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) refugee education: *social* and *curricular* inclusion. Our first case study focuses on the efforts of the Parent-Student-Resident Organization (PSRO) in San Diego to develop an infrastructure across school sites that enables the social inclusion of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). The second case study analyzes the curriculum innovations and teaching strategies offered by the Refugee Teaching Institute (RTI) in Merced, organized by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC). All three authors have extensive experience working with the PSRO and the CRSC, and with refugee communities more generally. Dan Nyamangah, a senior community organizer with Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) San Diego, organizes the PSRO. Yến Lê Espiritu, a founding member of the CRSC, co-organized the RTI and also collaborates with the PSRO. Alexandra Greene, a PhD candidate at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, works alongside the PSRO to document their advocacy model and also collaborates with the CRSC. Through documenting promising practices and processes, as well as ongoing barriers to achieving long-term, lasting change, glimpsed from participant observation and extended conversations with participants in each case study, we adhere to a "collab-

orative inquiry" approach (Ainscow, 2005) that centers refugee students and parents as enactors of meaningful educational inclusion.

In both case studies, refugee organizers intentionally bring together school administrators, teachers, and counselors, with refugee students, parents, and community groups to generate systemic change on how refugee students should and could be included and taught in US schools. Although integration and inclusion are often used interchangeably, we define integration as a process of gaining access to an existing system, and inclusion as a comprehensive approach to participation in which spaces are created that value and center refugee perspectives and wisdoms (Ghorashi, 2021, p. 88). As such, our inclusive education approach reflects "a move from a deficit model of adjustment towards systemic change," insisting that it is the system that is required to change to accommodate students (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001, p. 306). In offering new ways of theorizing refugee education, as well as reflective accounts of challenges to deepening inclusion, we aim to unsettle the system of education by elevating and engaging refugees' subjectivities, knowledge, expertise, and creativity.

We define a systems change approach to education as one that aims to address the root causes and underlying structures and relationships that reproduce educational inequalities. At the same time, we reflect critically on the challenges inherent in effecting systemic change, and caution against piecemeal reform approaches that fail to challenge existing power dynamics, structures, and mindsets that conceptualize refugee students and their families only as problems to be solved and as peripheral to changemaking. The evidence of our case studies indicates that meaningful, respectful, and ongoing partnerships with refugee communities and advocates are key for a systems change in refugee education. We also found that a systems change requires time, humility, reflective practice, and ongoing relationship-building, as well as adjustments along the way. As such, we offer and advocate for an approach to change that attends to the practices and processes of changemaking—and not only to outcomes.

2. Who Is a Refugee? A Critical Refugee Studies Redefinition

The Refugee Act (1980) defines "refugee" as a person who is "unable or unwilling" to return to their homelands because of a "well-founded fear of persecution"— a standard stipulated by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This definition has remained the basis of refugee "protection" in the United States and elsewhere, despite its inability to account for the multiplicity and complexity of refugee-producing conditions and refugee claims, which include climate crisis, occupation, and internal displacement (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 1). Moreover, the interpretation and application of the US Refugee Act is a powerful and deeply political

process determined by the state (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; McBrien, 2005), which renders the category of refugee neither stable nor neutral. Adopting a critical refugee studies approach, we move beyond the legal definition of refugee that is premised on "fear and persecution," redefining "the refugee" instead as "all human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin…regardless of their legal status" (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 72). This expanded definition includes those who self-identify as refugees, even though they may be subsumed under other state-generated labels like "asylum seeker" and/or "undocumented." In offering a redefinition of "the refugee," critical refugee studies recognizes and insists that "refugee" is a status that the statutory powers of international and state laws do not have sole and privileged authority to determine. As such, a key premise of critical refugee studies is that the worlds of refugees are much more than precarity and (il)legality, and foregrounds instead refugee epistemologies, creativity, and strategies (Espiritu et al., 2022).

Departing from existing paradigms that conceptualize refugees only in relation to the nation-state, we intentionally foreground "refugee"-ness (Malkki, 1992) and use the word "refugee" not only as a descriptive term referring to people with (current/former, formal/informal) refugee status under the Refugee Act (1980), but also as a "crucial analytical term and category for situating and naming a critique, as such terms as Black, Indigenous, Transgender, and many other (self)-identifying labels do," that integrates theoretical and political concerns with refugees' lived worlds (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 12). In doing so, we reject the reification of the term "refugee" as only a legal classification in accordance with US immigration law. Given the "ontologizing force" (Górska, 2016, p. 59) of language, we do not use "refugee" to refer to a state-derived legal and immigration status, but to affirm and honor the ways in which the participants at the heart of this study derive their advocacy from their lived experiences as forcibly displaced people. The term refugee then is not a descriptor but a critical analytic to accentuate refugee advocacy and call into question and illuminate the relationships between theory, practice, politics, and the lifeworlds of refugees themselves.

3. Critical Refugee Studies Concepts: Cultural Humility and Refugee Teaching

The bulk of scholarly literature on refugee schooling focuses on the significant barriers faced by refugees, and on the oft-inadequate institutional responses to the challenge of integrating refugee students into "mainstream" education (McBrien, 2005). Along the same line, the limited research on refugee parents' interactions with US schools has largely adopted a deficit framework that focuses on the steep challenges refugee parents purportedly confront in supporting their children's academic success (Camino & Krulfeld, 1994, p. xii). Deficit models of refugee education characterize refugee par-

ents as passive, indifferent, or lacking, and underestimate their capacity to effect systemic change (Cureton, 2020; Isik-Ercan, 2018, pp. 1–2; Koyama & Bakuza, 2017), thereby denying refugee parents' knowledge, efficacy, and agency (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017). Moreover, since perceptions of refugee parents as uneducated and uninformed on parenting and child development remain pervasive in many schools, many displaced parents experience being demeaned or disregarded by school teachers and leaders (Isik-Ercan, 2018). This deficit model of thinking thus positions refugees as "vulnerable problems" to be solved only through school intervention (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 112). Departing from the social science scholarship that erases refugees' experiences, heterogeneity, and agency, we situate our article in critical refugee studies, whose objective is to produce knowledge that is not only about but also *by* and *for* refugees (Espiritu et al., 2022). While the literature on refugee education largely adopts a "trauma discourse that perpetuates and pathologizes refugees in unproductive ways" (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 119), a critical refugee studies approach emphasizes the concepts of cultural humility and refugee teaching by foregrounding relationships and the lifeworlds, epistemologies, and actions of refugees.

3.1. Cultural Humility

First proposed in the medical field by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) as an alternative to traditional models of cultural competency, which treated culture as static, or suggested discrete endpoints to practitioners' "mastery" in understanding so-called "others," cultural humility is less about defining "culture" and more about crafting an ethical positioning of openness to the lived experiences of others (Haynes-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020 p. 25). Cultural humility thus entails a culture of humility characterized by lifelong learning, reflexivity, and power-sensitive solidarities that are meaningful and mutually empowering. Central to cultural humility's framework is its focus on diverse perspectives, relationality, and the ways in which structural forces not only shape community members' experiences but practitioners' approaches and capacities for action (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p. 169). Individual, collective, and institutional accountability is thus recognized as interconnected (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). Yet, despite cultural humility's wide adoption in medicine, nursing, public health, community psychology, and social work, there are few examples of what cultural humility looks like in the context of education (Lund & Lee, 2015, p. 10). Moreover, the few studies that do exist tend to focus on fostering cultural humility in teachers (e.g., Brown et al., 2016), rather than on community-led education advocacy in school settings. Given these gaps in the research, this article introduces an innovative refugee-led example of cultural humility in practice, where collective action promotes collaborative decision-making for education advocacy and policy-level systems change.

3.2. Refugee Teaching

The promise of education as the key to integrating refugees is often accompanied by a narrative of victim-hood, in which "teachers are there to rescue refugee children who are in need of care and tutelage" (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 103). Recognizing refugee students and their families as a source of knowledge rather than a problem to be solved, critical refugee studies insists on transforming the learning space by acknowledging, engaging, and elevating refugees' own experiences, knowledge, and creativity. Critical refugee studies thus flip the script on refugee education by emphasizing *refugee teaching* rather than *teaching refugees*, with refugee teaching defined to include teaching *by* refugees in collaboration with their families and communities (Espiritu et al., 2022, pp. 103–104). Centering refugee knowledges, subjectivities, and lifeworlds, refugee teaching invites educators to address these questions: How to implement strategies for teaching that honor the unique experiences of refugee students? How to design curricula that center refugee perspectives, agency, and epistemologies? How to make refugee teaching social and affiliative, producing and reproducing community? Refugee teaching thus shifts the reference point in refugee education studies from that of school authorities to that of refugees themselves, insisting that school authorities engage refugee students and their parents and communities as agents of systems change.

4. Parent-Student-Resident Organization: Setting a Foundation for Community Schools

4.1. Social Inclusion of Refugee Students

This section focuses on the efforts of the PSRO in San Diego to develop a comprehensive structure for the social inclusion of SIFE. While the social integration of immigrants (including refugees) into the US education system has long been a topic of discussion, little research exists that allows immigrant and refugee students to give voice to their experiences of schooling in the United States (Drake, 2016, p. 20). Scholars have thus identified a disconnection between policy approaches to refugee integration and refugees' actual experiences of inclusion (e.g., Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017). According to Lundberg (2020), in their efforts to provide "equality of opportunity," schools tend to implement a universal, power-blind approach to educating newly arrived students, which prioritizes academic achievement and language proficiency over socio-emotional wellness, friendships, and holistic supports—all while stressing personal responsibility and eliding structural factors that hinder student inclusion. In one of the few research studies exploring SIFE in US schools, Potochnick (2018) emphasizes that students with interrupted schooling are academically capable, but distinct from their immigrant peers, and thus require different educational supports (Potochnick,

2018, p. 884). Yet, US schools do not often recognize the prevalence of SIFE or have structures in place to better serve them (Colón, 2019). Recognizing the distinct needs of SIFE and the fact that social integration is not an individual responsibility but a social and collaborative process that requires "the affordances of social and structural provisions at the meso-level of organization in schooling" (Lundberg, 2020, p. 11), the PSRO developed a model of education advocacy to holistically support SIFE in San Diego.

4.2. PSRO Background

As home to one of the US's largest refugee communities and one of the nation's largest public-school districts, San Diego provides a rich site in which to interrogate the as-yet understudied collective potential of refugee parents as educational advocates. Formed in 2012, the PSRO is a refugee- and immigrant-led community coalition comprising more than twelve language groups advocating for healthy students, supportive schools, and educational equity in the neighborhood of City Heights—a home to significant refugee and immigrant communities in San Diego. Taking cultural humility as the foundation of their advocacy, the PSRO seeks to forge an intentional collective that recognizes and draws upon members' distinct experiences, differences, and identities, while empowering them to work together as educational advocates. As well, cultural humility enables an approach to institutional engagement that seeks to build understanding and inclusivity of diverse voices across power structures. In practice, the PSRO's approach to advocacy is structured around smaller language-based meetings, alongside larger group gatherings and interactions (supported by translators and interpreters) at school and district sites. By bringing individual and embedded (community) narratives together to identify shared concerns, and collectively seeking solutions with educators and decision-makers through a process of mutual empowerment, the PSRO forms a powerful structure for strengthening the connection between policy frameworks, the school system, and the lived experiences of refugees.

4.3. Education Advocacy for Students With Interrupted Formal Education

For almost a decade (2008–2016), newcomer students—an umbrella term that includes categories of immigrants born outside of the US, including asylees, English learners, refugees, SIFE, and unaccompanied youth (US Department of Education, 2016/2017, p. 3)—spent their first year in a class with others like them in what the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) called New Arrival Centers (NACs). In practice, all students under 18 who arrived in SDUSD with some form of interrupted formal education (including lack of transcripts) were considered NAC-eligible, and could remain

in NACs for at least one year before transitioning to mainstream grade-level academic classes or until they were reclassified—a process whereby a student is reclassified from English learner status to English proficient status (California Department of Education, n.d.). While it is difficult to get an accurate count on the number of refugee students within SDUSD (since the district does not track this population specifically), in 2017, the PSRO estimated that there were between 2,000 and 3,000 refugee students attending City Heights schools, with 400 to 600 new refugee students arriving each year (PSRO, 2017). Within the NAC, students stayed with the same teacher for the majority of their day, learning English and core subjects like math, science, and history in self-contained classrooms, then joined other students for classes such as physical education and art. Parents were welcome to visit the NAC to meet their children's teachers, ask questions concerning education, and connect with other families. In this way, the NAC provided a supportive space for refugee students and their parents to cultivate community and feel included in the education system. But in the 2016–2017 school year, SDUSD abruptly restructured its approach to educating NAC students, placing them immediately into mainstream classrooms to learn math, science, and other core subjects alongside fluent English-speaking students. According to the district's office of language acquisition, the new program would accelerate the students' English language acquisition, provide equal access to the curriculum, and more quickly integrate newcomer students into the education system (Morrissey, 2016), thus reflecting a "good intentions" approach, in which equality is equated with sameness.

As the PSRO presented these changes to the community, parents, students, and NAC teachers expressed concern that abruptly dismantling the NAC would result in less social support for refugee students and their families, particularly students who were classified as SIFE—"students in grades four through twelve who have experienced disruptions in their educations in their native countries and/or the United States, and/or are unfamiliar with the culture of schooling" (US Department of Education, 2016/2017, p. 3)—the majority of whom were refugees (PSRO SIFE Committee, 2017). In response, the PSRO called for the district to "take a step back" and partner with them to study how best to educate these students. Specifically, the PSRO advocated that the district establish a vertical line of support—from elementary to middle to high school (consisting of teachers, support teachers, and intervention counselors)—as well as a platform for parents and other community members to identify issues, advance recommendations, and engage in reflection with decision-makers. Through this advocacy, a district-wide SIFE Committee (backed by the San Diego Unified School Board) and (a now annual) Community Dialogue on Education were established, both hosted by the PSRO, with a joint aim of developing a model of accountability and communication between the community and the district so that what happened to the NAC—the dismantling of a service for refugees without community consultation—would not happen again.

To elaborate on this structure, we reflect on the first Community Dialogue on Education, which was organized in response to the dismantling of the NAC, but also in response to ongoing education concerns the PSRO had been raising with the district. On the morning of Saturday, March 25th, 2017, more than 130 parents, students, and community members from City Heights schools gathered to hold a Community Dialogue on Education. The intent of the day was to identify themes and develop recommendations expressing what the community saw as important and wanted to see reflected in the district's efforts in the coming year. After a presentation of data on City Heights schools, the Dialogue participants spent time reflecting, and then, in small groups, responded to two questions: As parents, students, and educators, what can be done to address disparities in City Heights schools? Given the solutions you have identified, what focused, specific, actionable effort should the district take next year? The plan was for members of the district's administration to interact with parents and join in their conversation as they discussed the questions. However, with the exception of two school board members and staff from the district's family and community engagement department, no one from SDUSD administration or any principal from a City Heights school attended. Their lack of attendance was interpreted as showing a lack of concern for the community, with one group commenting: "[The lack of attendance from SDUSD and principals] shows that they don't care about us, or our community, also our students' education." During the Dialogue, parents expressed little trust in the decision-making processes of the district and interpreted the district's interactions with them as disrespectful. They felt that the district ignored their input on how policies and practices impacted their children, failed to recognize them as a community with a distinct set of needs, and viewed students and families in a pejorative way. Parents also expressed feeling left out of school activities and ill-informed about their children's academic progress. The students in attendance conveyed that the schools did not encourage them enough because they did not expect them to succeed. The low expectations were seen as rooted in the stereotype that, as refugees and immigrants, they did not value education and, therefore, did not require the same level of investment as made in other students. These feelings of being ignored or left out of important conversations were exemplified by the community's frustration with the way in which the NAC was dismantled—without the inclusion of community voices in a decision-making process that directly impacted them. The community expressed frustration with always being asked to react to district policies rather than being invited to help create the policies. Parents interpreted the district's failure to draw upon parents' knowledge of, and experiences with, their children as a sign that the district did not value their knowledge.

Five years later, the efforts of the PSRO to develop an engagement process that empowers and connects community voices to policy frameworks are reflected in the first cohort of community schools within SDUSD, which serve students from kindergarten through high school. Community schools are a century-old model of education that integrate the voices of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners into the vision and design of a school. Across the United States, they have taken different forms, for example, as neighborhood hubs, providing families with access to health screenings, connecting parents to job-training opportunities, or delivering clothing, food, and furniture (Maier et al., 2017). Although community schools vary in the programs they offer and the ways they operate, all share four common pillars: integrated student supports; expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities; family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership and practices (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). As part of a community schools coalition, which includes teachers who opposed the dismantling of the NAC, the PSRO facilitates an engagement process, with continuous student and parent representation, aimed at introducing and embedding community schools in San Diego. Departing from the persistent deficit positioning of refugee parents' interactions with US schools, the PSRO champions a community schools model where families and school authorities position refugee parents as collaborators, educators (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017, p. 329; Shufflebarger Snell, 2018), and experts in their children's lives (Isik-Ercan, 2018, p. 2). Structurally, community schools offer a holistic approach to education, however, in order for them to be effective, wraparound services, student supports, and (community) partnerships (e.g., translation, counseling, after-school programs, tutoring) must be intentionally identified, expanded, and scaled up to meet the distinct needs of the community in which the school is embedded. In other words, no two community schools should look exactly the same, and ongoing, collaborative community engagement is vital to preventing a superficial implementation that looks good on paper but does little to improve schooling in practice. In the case of SDUSD, the PSRO advocated introducing community schools incrementally, as opposed to all at once, since proceeding cohort by cohort allows for more intentional community consultation that is neighborhood-specific, and cumulatively, contributes to system-wide change. Following this approach, the PSRO contributes to transforming San Diego Unified schools into community schools over the next few years, until the community schools model is reflected district-wide, and the educational trajectories of all students within SDUSD take place in community schools. Throughout this transition, the design, development, implementation, and continuous evaluative process will be overseen by the Community Schools Advisory Committee, a shared decision-making body, which meets monthly, and is composed of community members committed to public education and building schools that serve the needs of the community (Center on Policy Initiatives, 2022).

Given the importance of community consultation, it is thus necessary to emphasize that community schools alone do not engender systemic change. Rather, it is through ongoing dialogue and collaboration between school administrators, teachers, students, and their families that transformations are enacted, assessed, and sustained. The PSRO thus recognizes the establishment of community schools as a compromise—one which allows the school district to respond to the PSRO's call for change without developing targeted supports tailored to refugee students specifically. At the same time, by embedding their advocacy in the concept of cultural humility, the PSRO acknowledges that the district's ability to act is limited, often by funding constraints (Vázquez Baur, 2022), and engages the district as a collaborator rather than as an adversary. Cultural humility thus enables refugee student, parent, and family representation in the spaces where the decisions to shape community schools are made. By providing a platform for community members to hold the district accountable—while recognizing the ways in which existing policies and practices limit institutional decision-makers' capacities for action, and then working with those decision-makers to collectively seek solutions—the PSRO innovates the mechanisms for effecting systemic change by modeling an engagement process based upon humility and mutual empowerment.

5. Critical Refugee Studies Collective: The Refugee Teaching Institute

5.1. Curriculum Inclusion for Refugee Students

Our second case study analyzes the RTI in Merced, organized by the CRSC, whose goal is to create and implement refugee-centered curricula. Given that US school curricula are mostly normed to white, middle-class, English-speaking students, the majority of refugee students attend schools where their academic needs and social realities are not reflected in core content (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Li, 2018). Teachers who wish to incorporate students' perspectives into the curriculum often encounter structural and institutional constraints, including the hierarchical nature of school decision-making, the imposition of standardized tests that constrain creativity and criticality in the classroom, the lack of resources to assist students and families, and the lack of time and will for ongoing and sustained opportunities for professional dialogue and development (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011, p. 214). The research on curriculum support for refugee students thus largely elides structural forces and frames students in terms of a deficit, characterizing them in relation to the skills and knowledge they lack upon entering US schools (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 119). In particular, US schools tend to approach curriculum development with an "assimilative, ends-means

approach" that treats English language instruction as a mechanism for integrating language learners into a normative US context (Auerbach, 1992, p. 30). At best, this deficit framing urges teachers to be "interculturally sensitive" to "culturally diverse" refugee students to increase their chance to receive an equitable education and to bring "their uprooted lives back to normality" (Strekalova-Hughes, 2017, pp. 562–563). Although this "celebrating diversity" approach encourages teachers to be more responsive to refugee youth, it tends to reinforce teachers' focus on a static notion of culture, while leaving the existing curriculum largely intact and inaccessible to most refugee students. In contrast, the RTI advocates for curricular innovations that build on students' prior knowledge and promote collaboration with refugees' families and communities.

5.2. Critical Refugee Studies Collective

Founded in 2015 as a research group at the University of California Humanities Research Institute, and subsequently funded by a four-year grant from the University of California Office of the President in 2016, the CRSC is a group of interdisciplinary scholars who advocate for and envision a world where all refugees are treated and embraced as fellow human beings with all fundamental rights and privileges. CRSC advances that *refugee* rights, defined as having access to appropriate shelter and food and being able to lead a life of dignity, are *human* rights. Along with this, CSRC posits that refugees carry with them the power of their imaginations as they settle and resettle in lands not their own. Collective members not only study refugees, but many are also refugees themselves with long and deep ties to refugee communities in California and beyond. Committed to community-engaged scholarship, the Collective charts and builds the field of critical refugee studies by centering refugee lives—and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer. Through expanded efforts, CRSC grew to integrate a broader converge of not only scholars but also artists, community organizers, students, and teachers. Through the efforts of the CRSC, manifestations of critical refugee studies work have been diverse. They include numerous community events, multiple academic conferences, a book series in partnership with the University of California Press, an innovative and interactive website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com), university courses across the curriculum, a grants program, art exhibitions, documentaries, ethnographies, dance performances—and an RTI, the subject of this section.

5.3. Refugee Teaching Institute

Merced is located in the heart of California's Central Valley, a vast agricultural basin that produces twenty-five percent of the nation's food. Since the late 1970s, Merced has resettled large groups of refugees from Southeast Asia, Syria, and Afghanistan, whose presence has largely been maligned in public discourse as a problem for the region—a drain on its social and educational services. Countering this narrative, in July 2022, with funding from the Whiting Foundation, the CRSC hosted the first RTI in partnership with the University of California at Merced. Organized as a four-day professional development course series for local K–12 teachers, the RTI connected local teachers and university educators, but also parents and students, and community members to develop a curriculum focused on teaching refugees, teaching about refugees, and teaching by refugees. The RTI centers refugee stories on understanding Central Valley history, critically juxtaposing refugee histories with local histories of conquest, state violence, and incarceration that have been made largely invisible. All teacher participants earned salary-scale academic credits for their participation through the University of California, Merced, and all refugee participants and other community experts were provided a small honorarium for their time.

Traditional professional developments are typically led by private consultants hired by school districts who employ a "top down antidialogical teacher training" (Kohli et al., 2015). In contrast, during the two-year preparation period that preceded the RTI, CRSC organizers intentionally and meaningfully consulted with teachers and administrators in the Merced school district, eliciting their input on the pressing issues they and their students faced in schools. At the same time, what made RTI unique was the organizers' direct interaction and consultation with refugee families, students, and community organizers—the experts on refugee education—to gather ideas on content and approaches to curriculum development. As such, the RTI exemplifies a refugee teaching approach by enabling ongoing collaboration between researchers, teachers, and communities to embed refugee knowledge into the curriculum.

The RTI enrolled nineteen local elementary, middle, and high school teachers, the majority of whom identified as people of color. The first three days of the series focused on the following themes: refugee and immigrant history in the Central Valley; refugee storytelling and media; and refugee education, activism, and resilience. In each of the RTI workshops, refugee stories and epistemologies anchored interactive presentations by CRSC members as well as parents, community members, student leaders, activists, artists, and poets. As an example, the workshop on refugee storytelling and media showcased creative projects produced by refugee artists and offered suggestions on how to create space for students to access and learn from and with refugee stories. By centering refugees and their stories, the panelists offered the audience a much-needed understanding of the contexts, histories, creativity, and lifeworlds of refugees, elevating them as subjects of history. As one speaker emphasized during her presentation on refugee storytelling, the goal is to move from "refugee representation to refugee reclamation."

On day 3, the RTI featured a student panel and a parent panel, moderated by a Hmong community organizer who also served as a translator for one of the parents. Both the parent and student speakers articulated their experiences and expectations of the school system and spoke with authority about the issues that concerned them. The parent panel was temporarily paused when one of the parents was overcome with emotions, as she recounted the ill-treatment she endured from school authorities when her son, who struggled with mental health issues, racked up unexcused absences. Another parent summed up her uneasy relationship with school authorities: "It's not easy to speak up, especially when there's a power differential. You don't speak the language, know the system. Teachers are the adults." In a context where refugee students and their parents are often represented as a problem for teachers and school administrators, the insistence of students on access to quality education, and the parents' assertion of their rights to information and better communication with school officials emphasize refugee agency and efficacy, foregrounding them as enactors of educational change.

Listening to refugee speakers, interacting with refugee media, stories, and poetry, and participating in curriculum building workshops, the nineteen teacher participants actively engaged refugees' concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings. Throughout the course series, they had ample opportunities for critical self-reflection, discussion with peers, and conversations with panelists that encouraged and challenged them to develop course materials that not only offer refugee students a well-rounded education through the lens of their own knowledge, but also provide *all* students the analytical tools to better understand refugee experiences. As an example, the teachers had an animated discussion on how to integrate refugee lifeworlds into science courses, sharing ideas on incorporating refugees' foodway knowledge and practices into courses in biology, environmental science, and chemistry. On the final day, workshop participants were allocated time to process, collaborate, and consider how to recognize, sustain, and foster refugee knowledges and epistemologies in their teaching.

Creating meaningful refugee-centered curricula is the goal of, as well as a challenge for, the RTI. Given that California now requires ethnic studies—"the interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and other identities, focusing on people's lived experiences and perspectives" (California 100, n.d.)—as a high school graduation requirement, the RTI-trained teachers have the opportunity to create a refugee-centered curriculum as part of the ethnic studies curriculum. Research on ethnic studies curriculum indicates that culturally responsive pedagogy (pedagogy that responds to students' cultures and needs), while important, is not sufficient, and that key to the process of curricular change is community-responsive pedagogy that builds curriculum around ongoing engagement with students, their parents, and

the wider community (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Accordingly, a central component of the RTI vision is to build a firm and organized structure, much like that of the PSRO, for teachers to create and share their curriculum proposals on an ongoing basis with refugee students and their parents for feedback—a process that is already underway. In short, the RTI concludes that meaningful, respectful, and ongoing relationships and conversations with refugees are key for effective and lasting curricular change in refugee education.

6. Conclusion

Challenging the marginalization and misrepresentation of refugee students and their families, this article has shown how refugee parents and community partners in San Diego and Merced, California, have organized collectively to address exclusion within the education system. While previous studies have considered how agents within the school support and integrate refugee students and their families into the education system, we emphasize the agency and efficacy of refugee parents as educational advocates, revealing the multiple ways refugee parents and community partners empower themselves and work collaboratively to effect change within local schools. In the case of the PSRO, educational inclusion is not about integrating students into an existing education system, but rather, about intentionally creating an engagement process that empowers community voices for ongoing participation in decision-making. In the case of the RTI, a refugee teaching approach requires and enables respectful and ongoing collaboration between researchers, teachers, and communities to embed refugee knowledge within curriculum and pedagogy. By elevating the practices and processes of change-making, we have shown how refugee advocates promote their children's success and a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students through strengthening school support structures and curricular expansion.

Countering the deficit perspectives that continue to shape scholarly and popular understandings of refugee students, their families, and communities, we recognize refugee parents and students as educators and enactors of educational transformation in their own right. In doing so, we shift the reference point in refugee education from that of school authorities to that of refugees themselves. While there is no surefire approach to effecting systemic change in refugee education, our case studies point to the following set of dynamic principles to deepen social and curricular inclusion in refugee education: move away from deficit views of refugee students; foreground community voice and student, parent, and family empowerment; support an established group engaged in the pursuit of inclusive education; and develop a mutually empowering engagement process that involves all stakeholders within the school and local refugee community. This set of principles is generative

in that it recognizes refugees as changemakers, and elevates their subjectivities, knowledge, expertise, and creativity. Recognizing that there are no quick fixes, we have emphasized that systems change is labor-intensive, and requires committed accountability and action from all partners. In order to meaningfully confront the social exclusion of refugee students and their families within the education system, it is thus vital to create and maintain inclusive and community-based engagement processes that are ongoing, intentionally collaborative, and cumulative.

As such, refugee practices and processes are not just for refugees but contribute lessons for advancing epistemic justice and a vision for education that uplifts all of us—not just some of us.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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