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Patricia J. Higgins

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, phiggin5@vols.utk.edu

Mitsunori Misawa

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Developing an Inclusive Learning Environment for Refugee Students in Higher Education

Patricia J. Higgins and Mitsunori Misawa
University of Tennessee-Knoxville

Abstract: The purpose of this session is to facilitate a dialogue focused on creating an inclusive learning environment for a marginalized population of adult learners, refugee students in higher education.

Keywords: inclusive learning environment, refugee students, higher education

As of January 2019, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Office reports that a total of 699,571 refugees were admitted into the country in the last 10 years. In the fiscal year 2018, 22,491 refugees were admitted to the U.S., with the largest number of refugees coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the greatest number of total refugees by region come from Africa and South Asia (U.S. Department of State, 2019). In addition, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Educational Attainment of U.S. Adults by Nativity and Country of Birth Survey (2016) indicates that 31.6% of U.S. born adults achieved a bachelor degree or higher, while 30% of Immigrant U.S. adults achieved the equivalent of a bachelor degree or higher (MPI, 2016). This statistic exemplifies that U.S. immigrants pursue higher education degrees as often and as successfully as U.S. born citizens.

Considering these statistics, not only are the number of refugees in the U.S. on an upward trend, refugees are prioritizing higher education as they seek to establish a new life within a new country and culture (Larrotta, 2010). However, the UN Refugee Agency (2018) reports that the number of refugees accepted into the U.S. rises and falls over time as much depends on the country's administration and leadership, making an examination of political policy and practices essential to gaining a holistic understanding of the refugee experience. Currently, of the 22.5 million refugees worldwide, only 189,300 refugees were successfully resettled into a new home country in 2016 (UN Refugee Agency, 2018).

By better understanding the lived experience of refugees, adult educators and practitioners can be better informed to negotiate changes required in order to serve the needs of refugee students (Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Phan, 2018). This research not only contributes to higher education, but more specifically to adult educators, practitioners, and adult learning professionals. Through the study's discourse, educators and program planners will be able to make more informed decisions about how to plan curriculum, support services, and programs to enhance the social environment and learning experience for refugees (Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Phan, 2018). Prior literature does not address the lack of equity in access to higher education for adult refugees, nor does it address level of service available for refugees within the higher education system in the U.S. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to facilitate a dialogue focused on creating an inclusive learning environment for a marginalized population of adult learners, refugee students in higher education.

As the population of learners within an academic setting changes, teaching strategies must also evolve to accommodate new learning populations, cultural backgrounds, and learner needs (Chen, 2014; Merriam, 2010). Research on international and refugee students' perceptions, barriers and struggles, learning characteristics, and different learning styles has drawn much attention by scholars (Ewert, 2013; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Kim & Diaz, 2013). Yet there is a gap in existing research concerned with the students' personal journey to

pursue education in the U.S. and the relative sociocultural experiences. Straker (2016) confirms this gap by proposing that international students are represented in literature as a subject of study, rather than as authors of the experiences. As we reach beyond traditional methodologies of student services to integrate a deeper understanding of the students' lived experiences, we can facilitate students' journey to find their voice in a new language or culture (Stewart, 2010).

As reflected in prior research, the pursuit of education can lead to complex challenges for all students; however, the socioeconomic, academic, and cultural challenges can be intensified by competing priorities for adult refugee students (Goulah, 2010; McBrien, 2011; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011). Refugee students have unique challenges as they seek personal, professional, and academic growth in the U.S. They report facing obstacles as they strive to balance educational pursuits with familial obligations and newly encountered American social and cultural adjustments (Goulah, 2010; McBrien, 2011; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011).

Refugee students have persisted through much hardship and trauma to reach the point of participating in educational opportunities in the U.S. It appears that it is incumbent upon educational professionals to strive to mediate injustices and persistent marginalization for this population of students. The process of resettlement can also be influenced by the prevailing social attitudes of acceptance or discrimination toward a refugee's cultural heritage (Urdu, 2012). Urdu (2012) proposes that adult refugees' level of personal and professional success in a new culture is impacted by the level of acceptance and mutual respect offered by the local community.

As we can learn from prior scholars' research, higher education is of the utmost importance to refugee adults' resettlement process (Kim & Diaz, 2013; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; McBrien, 2005). By exploring prior literature, adult educators and higher education practitioners can better understand the refugee experience – and subsequently be better prepared to facilitate the needs of refugees for the access and opportunity for higher education in the U.S. Even with the increasing demand for education from refugee students, the landscape of higher education lacks the resources to understand what the students need based on their lived experiences. How can we meet the needs of this critical population without expanding our awareness of how they view and experience the world? During this time in our history, where discussions about international and immigrant populations are especially politically-charged and at the forefront of popular media, it is even more vital that scholars seek to expose refugees' voices so that their personal stories can serve as a testament to the importance of social justice and educational advancements for refugees in the U.S. In order to push against discrimination and inequities in our social systems, refugee voices could hold power to expand sociocultural awareness and open pathways to educational advancement.

This narrative study helps to humanize the refugee experience to enhance public understanding of the challenges, hardships, motivations, and lived experiences of refugees in the U.S. By hearing the descriptions from the participant, a larger audience could begin to understand on a deeper level what it is like to be a refugee and how social interactions and experiences can impact the experience and mentality of refugees. Viewing life through a refugee's experience, pre-existing biases and mindsets may be challenged.