

Education for Resettled Refugee Youth in Houston: Critical Issues through a Children’s Rights Lens

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With an estimated 2,000 refugees arriving in Houston annually¹, the city is the top site for resettlement in the United States. Among resettled refugees, 30-40 percent are children². The more than 3,000 refugee youth who attend schools in the Houston area, in particular middle school and high school students, encounter significant barriers to exercising their rights as children relating to education.

The Partnership for the Advancement and Immersion of Refugees (PAIR) is a non-profit organization that serves more than 400 of these students each year with group and individual mentoring programs at schools in the Houston Independent School District and in the community. PAIR mentors guide students through activities that support the development of refugee youth’s social and emotional skills, help them acquire the English language, and assist them with completing school work and preparing for higher education.

Non-discrimination

In Texas, all children between the ages of 6 and 18 are required to attend school. At the national level, the No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to identify English language learners and makes the schools accountable for the academic progress of these students. In practice, however, the different backgrounds of refugee children make it difficult for their right to education be met equally and adequately.

When refugee children arrive in the U.S., they have varying levels of prior schooling and English proficiency. For refugee students in a particular grade, their ages, refugee experiences, and cultures vary widely, presenting a challenge for the educators and community organizations that service them. Of special concern are students who arrive with limited, interrupted or no formal education, and those who arrive in the United States and are placed in school at older ages. Students who enter the school system at later ages must complete enough credits in a short period of time to graduate before they “age out.”

The emphasis on standardized testing required for advancing grade levels, receiving a high school diploma, and being admitted into college introduces more obstacles. In our mentoring programs, for example, designing activities that all refugee students can understand and from which they can gain knowledge is complicated. We have to adapt our lessons constantly to fit the needs of these diverse demographics, and the outcomes depend on the background of each student. Public school curricula and college admissions have less flexibility to address specific refugee needs.

Another problem dealing with non-discrimination is that refugees are placed in neighborhoods zoned to schools that are under-resourced. Given the location of schools in poverty areas, refugee children attend low-performing schools where services are insufficient or inadequate in relation to the scale of their needs. Additionally, programs for refugee children may compete with services for other at-risk youth who attend the same schools.

When support services exist at the schools, language is a significant barrier for refugee students to access these services and receive a fair education. For instance, career counselors and social workers are interested in supporting refugee students, but the school may lack interpreters who can facilitate communication between students and school staff. Language also hinders parental involvement in the education of refugee children.

¹ Based on Refugee Arrivals data from the Department of State for calendar year 2015.

² <http://www.brycs.org/aboutRefugees/refugee101.cfm>

In response to the challenges facing schools with large numbers of refugee children, the U.S. government makes available specialized funding for certain states. The refugee school impact grant provides funding to support Texas schools that enroll refugees. Until recently, the decision of whether to accept the funds and how to use them rested on school district leaders. As a result, programs and services for refugee children are highly variable across schools.

Best interests, survival and development

Services that are part of the U.S. resettlement program focus on adults and on meeting immediate basic needs, such as housing and health care. Consequently, the best interests of refugee children are not the primary consideration. Resettlement policies place the burden on refugee parents and guardians to find a job within few months of arrival in the U.S. While the resettlement process aims to make the family self-sufficient and has the intention of ensuring protection and care for the well being of the family, program policies can have a negative impact on the education of refugee children.

Due to cultural factors and the high level of need among refugee families, older children are expected to contribute to the household. They do this by working to provide financial support to the family, or by taking care of younger family members, often at the expense of their own education and participation in activities that promote healthy development.

At PAIR, we find that at young ages and upon arrival in the U.S., children are motivated and attend programs with high frequency. As they get older, they have to balance greater responsibilities at home and we have to boost our efforts to keep them involved. Nonetheless, withdrawing from the program is in some cases an indication that they are integrating successfully into the larger community, for example if they have joined extracurricular activities outside of PAIR or are finding resources on their own.

Voice

Refugee youth have little say in the decisions that affect them. Resettlement and education policies are made at the federal and state levels, with minimal engagement with the refugee community. Again, language is a barrier for the youth to share their experiences, voice their demands, and express their views freely.

PAIR programs give students a safe space to use their voices and encourage them to be active participants in decision-making through activities focused on teamwork, leadership, and civic education. We also seek their feedback and take their opinions into account when developing our programs. When they are given an opportunity to speak, refugee youth offer unique perspectives that can strengthen educational programs.

Recommendations

Possible responses to protect the rights and meet the educational needs of resettled refugee youth include:

- Fund programs and special services that allow refugee children to feel supported. Building the capacity of schools and community programs requires physical and instructional resources, especially given the varying needs of refugee youth that cannot be addressed with a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

- Train teachers and school administrators to increase their capacity to support refugee students in developing English language proficiency and closing gaps in academic competence. Additionally, school staff should be aware of and be able to address social, cultural, mental health, and other barriers for refugee youth to attain a high school diploma and pursue higher education.
- Improve research to evaluate the impact of programs and interventions. Participatory approaches inclusive of the opinions and demands of children themselves could contribute toward identifying the factors that help refugee children adjust to and succeed in school. This will require interpreters and qualified researchers who understand the local refugee population.
- Broaden refugee resettlement policy to include strategies for long-term integration. Education should be a key component of resettlement efforts, as it can improve the economic conditions of refugees and allow them to participate fully in their new communities.