

Executive Summary Report

Advancing Teacher Development in Colorado Refugee Education Programs

November 2010

Principal Investigator:
Janet Shriberg, EdD
Assistant Professor
Program in International Disaster Psychology
University of Denver

Graduate Student Assistants:
Kristen Frost, MA, Alicia Melgoza, MA/MSW(c), Abigail Wolfe, MA
University of Denver

i. Table of Contents

Project Description.....	3
Study Background and Sample.....	4
Study Location and Methodology.....	5
Summary of Findings.....	8
Lessons Learned and Recommended and Next Steps.....	11
References.....	3

ii. Acknowledgments

This report was written by Janet Shriberg, Ed.D. in collaboration with University of Denver graduate students Kristen Frost, Alicia Melgoza, and Abigail Wolfe. Special acknowledgement is owed to Paul Stein, Marilyn Eaton, Marty Tombari, Susan Downs-Karkos, Brooke Breazeale, and Gloria Miller for the invaluable expertise and time they offered throughout the project.

The authors benefited greatly from the contributions of several funding sources. The data collection, transcription, and writing stages of this study were supported the Public Good Grant, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Graduate School of Professional Psychology, all at the University of Denver.

In addition, the authors are grateful to all of the community advisory members who contributed to the design of the research questions and protocols. They include Drucie Bathin, Mirjana Bijelic Olujic, Donna Baicco, Estelle Matus, Sophie Mayen, Lavita Nadkarni, and Shyam Shrestha. The authors also wish to express their sincere gratitude for the generous knowledge and support of Denver and Ft. Morgan principals Brenda Kazin, Stacy Miller, and Khoa Nyugen, as well as administrator Mark Rangel. Finally, the authors are deeply appreciative to all of the Colorado teachers who shared their time and experiences by participating in this study.

It is to these schoolteachers, principals, administrators, staff, and members of community agencies who are working tirelessly to enhance the quality of education and quality of life for refugee students that this report is dedicated.

iii. Affirmation

Except as acknowledged through citations of other authors and publications, the project study described herein consists of our own work undertaken to describe and advance learning. This study was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on 04/06/2009.

Primary qualitative and quantitative data collected throughout the study remain the property of the principal investigator. The information and data contained in this report must be cited appropriately.

Janet Shriberg, Ed.D.
November 2010

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Community-Based Action Research:

The purpose of this pilot community-based action research project was to gain insight from Colorado teachers about their experiences in working with refugee students within Colorado Public Schools. This project was intentionally structured as a community-based action research project designed to bridge knowledge, policy, and practice gaps by soliciting information directly from teachers about their professional needs and interests relative to teacher development in refugee education programs. Currently, a number of state and community partners are working to assist Denver schools in developing teacher education and programs for refugee children and youth. Community partners were involved in every step of this project and are considered key actors in providing ongoing support to teachers and students. An advisory panel of experts in education, psychology, and social services with an interest in refugee youth was formed to contribute to the design of the research protocols and the dissemination of findings.

In line with the study's community-action research approach, the findings are being shared with relevant stakeholders, including those who participated in the study. The initial findings were shared in preparation for the Colorado State 2010-2011 application for the

Shriberg, et al., p.3

Refugee School Impact Grant sponsored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In addition, preliminary findings were shared with educationalists interested in refugee education programming at local and national conferences.

Purpose of Executive Report:

The purpose of this report is to disseminate the findings of our 2009-2010 pilot study to a wider audience. Data to answer the study's research questions were gathered from brief surveys, key informants, and in-depth interviews.

The preliminary results offer support to several teacher development programs already underway for Colorado teachers working in refugee education programs. Additional recommendations for research and programs are provided in this report.

II. STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHODS

A. Background

Children and youth affected by armed conflict and/or natural disaster are among the world's most vulnerable populations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that of the approximately 12 million refugees worldwide, more than 50% are children (Hamilton & More, 2004). According to the International Rescue Committee (2007), in fiscal year 2006, approximately 47% of all refugees admitted to the United States—roughly 19,500—were under the age of 21. In the past decade, Colorado has become home to rising numbers of refugee youth from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. As survivors of war, refugee children and youth arrive in the United States after enduring varying levels of conflict, trauma, and disruption to their education and lives. Their experiences may include the loss of loved ones, economic decline, flight, hunger, rape, conscription into fighting forces, and/or torture. As these children adjust to their new social, political, linguistic, and cultural contexts, their lives may be fraught with the ongoing psychological and social consequences of war. Studies have demonstrated that trauma, grief, and loss are common concerns for refugee children (Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, & Rath, 1996; McBrien, 2005; Miller et al., 2008; Reichenberg & Friedman, 1996). As refugee children contend with these issues, their parents and other caregivers may struggle with English language learning, acculturation, and financial concerns and may feel overwhelmed and overextended.

In recent years, there has been growing international recognition that education is one of the strongest psychosocial supports for children affected by conflict (see Sinclair, 2001; Winthrop & Kirk, 2005). Central to efforts to educate this population is the recognition of the role that teachers can play in promoting psychosocial health among their students. For instance, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2004), in a report on emergency education programs worldwide, suggested that teachers are able to foster students' development of academic and social skills and prepare the future generation for the challenges ahead. A growing body of literature from developed countries in the fields of psychology, education, and anthropology describes how teachers can support students' efforts to cope and can help to build resiliency in violence-affected children (Garmezy, 1993; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Werner, 1999). While the importance of schooling and the role that teachers play in helping war-affected students are slowly being understood, there is a dearth of research about how teachers understand and respond to the psychosocial needs of their refugee students. In fact, educators are often not fully equipped to address the extensive needs of these students, who may perform below grade level, pose disciplinary problems, or exhibit high-risk behaviors. Additionally, educators may not be fully aware of the unique and creative strategies and coping skills refugee children possess that can help them attain success as students.

As an initial step, this research aimed to fill this research and practice gap. Specifically, through in-depth interviewing, we explored teachers' perceptions about working with refugee students in relation to their teacher training, classroom experiences and interests for future professional development.

III. STUDY LOCATION AND METHODOLOGY

A. Study Location

Each year, Colorado is the site of resettlement for between 1,500 to 2,000 refugees, most of whom arrive from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The majority of these newly arrived families initially resettle in the capital city of Denver, which provides the greatest number of refugee services in the state. However, as a result of the recent economic downturn, secondary migrants from within and outside Colorado have begun moving into rural regions in the eastern part of the state, where they are better able to support themselves by obtaining jobs in the agricultural and meat-packing industries.

These demographic shifts make Colorado a particularly interesting place for a study of teachers' experiences serving refugee students. In keeping with these trends, the present study involved the collection of views from teachers from a large urban school district as

well as teachers from a smaller rural district. Two schools in the urban district offer *newcomer programs*. Schools that offer such programs use various criteria to define what a newcomer is. In general, a newcomer is someone who has recently arrived in the United States, has extremely limited or no English language ability, and is likely to have encountered limitations or interruptions to formal education in the country of origin. The overarching goals of newcomer programs are to increase beginning English language skills for newly arrived students and to help these students acclimate to U.S. schools and culture (Boyson & Short, 2003; Short, 2002; Boyson et al., 2002; Constantino & Lavadenz, 1993). Newcomer programs are primarily located in urban areas of the United States, as the majority of immigrants and refugees settle in these locations. Data collection for this project was conducted over eleven months beginning in May 2009.

B. Study Sample

The study sample was drawn from eight schools in two counties in Colorado: Denver and Ft. Morgan. Participating schools were chosen using purposive sampling; they were identified as those that received higher numbers of refugee students relative to other schools. A non-random sampling technique was used to enroll teachers in our study. We asked all teachers from each selected school who worked with refugee students in their classrooms to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. From those who responded with interest, we used a combination of representative and convenience sampling to select participants for in-depth interviews. Participant selection was intended to produce a sample that was diverse in terms of sex, grade level and subjects taught, and years of teaching experience.

C. Mixed Methodology

The majority of the data collected from elementary and middle school teachers were gathered through in-depth interviews that included both open and closed questions. To triangulate information about the policies and procedures teachers follow as well as expand our understanding of refugee education in Colorado public schools, we wrote memos based on information from key informant discussions with school counselors, principals, school administrators, community agency members, and interpreters. We also wrote memos based on an extensive review of available literature and resources on refugee education.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the in-depth interviews were considered the primary sources that drove the data analyses. Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a “mixed methods” design. For closed questions, descriptive statistics were calculated (i.e., frequencies and means), and responses were stratified by demographic variables of interest (sex, age, teaching experience). Responses to open-ended questions from our interviews and memos were

analyzed by employing a content analysis of all responses to find emergent categories (i.e., the most important themes such as “training”). Three of our research team members independently coded each interview into set categories, helping us to reach consensus on criterion-based categories on our stated themes. Using a constant comparison method, we noted areas of inconsistency, which are reflected in our write-up of each theme. We performed this process until we reached saturation or felt that our themes were able to describe the majority of our data. Frequencies of responses in each category (and, where appropriate, means) were then calculated. Finally, descriptive-quantitative methods (frequencies, means) were employed to characterize group data.

Table 1. Teacher Participant Sample

	Urban District <i>n</i> =18	Rural District <i>n</i> =6	Total <i>n</i> =24 <i>N</i> (%)
Sex			
Male	3	2	5 (21)
Female	15	4	19 (79)
Age (years)			
20-30	4	2	6 (25)
31-40	1	0	1 (4.2)
41-50	5	3	8 (33.3)
Over 51	8	1	9 (37.5)
School Level			
Preschool	0	1	1 (4.2)
Elementary	8	2	10 (41.7)
Middle	10	2	12 (50)
High	0	1	1 (4.2)
Highest Degree			
BA	8	5	13 (54)
MA	9	1	10 (42)
Doctoral	1	0	1 (4)
Mean Number of Years Teaching in Formal School	12.4	16	13 years (1-24, SD=10.7)

A. LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First and perhaps most importantly, the intention behind the study was to focus on the

Shriberg, et al., p.7

diversity of teachers working with refugee students; therefore, we did not attend to the differences among and within refugee groups. It was never our intent to homogenize refugee students within a single group, but given the small scale of the study and our focus on gathering in-depth insights from teachers, we did not attend to the uniqueness of the groups and individuals that make up the Colorado refugee population. Second, the experiences of high school and/or early childhood teachers working with refugee students are largely unaddressed in the findings due to issues of the feasibility of data collection. Third, despite a concerted effort to gather data from diverse teachers, little comparison between teachers based on demographic factors was made. Rather, our analysis focused on common trends as we sought to define areas of interest and suggest further directions for research. Finally, in this pilot study, the small sample size severely limited the generalizability of the findings. Caution should be taken in interpreting all of the results.

III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A. Refugee Education Unaddressed in Higher Education Programs

Challenges

- The majority of teachers interviewed, 96 percent (23 of 24), reported that they had not received formal training in their teacher higher education programs regarding how to educate refugee students. This was true of both newer and more experienced teachers.¹
- The principals interviewed also indicated that there had been a lack of discussion of refugee education in their principal preparatory courses.
- A key informant with the Department of Higher Education indicated that issues of refugee education are usually left unaddressed in multicultural teacher training and overall higher education for teachers in Colorado.

Promising Practices

- Teachers conduct their own research via web and other media resources to gather information about the socio-cultural backgrounds of their refugee students.
- Community agencies can provide further training and support for networking to share information among teachers and school staff.

¹ In our study, we defined *newer teachers* as teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience and *experienced teachers* as those with more than five years of teaching experience.

B. Teachers Are Concerned About Addressing the Psychosocial and Educational Needs of Their Students

Challenges

- Teachers from all departments (including art and music) expressed the need for more understanding of how trauma can affect refugee students' learning and behavior. In particular, teachers in middle school noted a lack of discussion of child development in their training.
- Due to language issues, many teachers did not have access to the resources they needed to provide psychological and psychosocial referrals for refugee students about whom they were concerned.
- There may be an over-reliance on PTSD-related explanations for the behavior of refugee students.
- Persistent inter-ethnic conflicts among various groups can play out in the classroom.
- Shifts in teaching pedagogy and classroom expectations based on prior educational experiences can cause confusion for both teachers and students.
- English language learning remains a barrier to educational advancement for many refugee students and their families.
- Disaster preparedness exercises such as emergency drills may trigger responses in students who have experienced trauma. Often, there is lack of preparedness in terms of explaining the purpose of these drills to students and parents.

Promising Practices

- Many community-based agencies provide the additional support that teachers of refugee students need and seek to attend to the psychosocial adjustment of these students. *However, teachers in rural school districts had much less access to such community services than teachers in urban districts at time of this study.*
- Paraprofessionals who are able to provide language and cultural translation for various students in the classroom are very helpful to teachers.

C. Teacher Well-Being and Motivation

Challenges

- The majority of teachers are intrinsically motivated to work with refugee students and recognize these students' strengths and resiliency.
- Teachers have limited resources for networking and sharing information related to refugee education, especially in rural communities.
- Given the multiple roles that teachers can play in refugee students' lives, there is a danger of teacher burnout.

Promising Practices

- Principals, school staff, and parents can offer holistic support to refugee students and their teachers. This support may be expressed through events that celebrate cultural pride, etc.

VI. TEACHERS' TRAINING HOPES

The following findings were made regarding what teachers of refugee students identified as important for their professional development:

- 50% reported interest in receiving training in the culture, history, and politics of the countries of origin of their refugee students.
- 50% reported that training in refugee education systems would be extremely helpful to them, as they were interested in learning about the education provided in refugee camps and in countries such as Somalia, Iraq, and Burma.
- 42% of teachers replied that training in child development and common signs of and responses to trauma would be beneficial.
- 29% of the teachers replied that additional training in the process of acculturation and in their students' cultures, including students' cultural customs, mannerisms, holidays, beliefs, and behaviors, would be helpful. Several teachers reported that although they had received training in issues of multiculturalism and diversity in their teacher preparation programs, much of the information presented did not target specific issues related to refugee education, such as forced migration and interrupted schooling. The rural teachers in this study expressed the specific desire to learn practical teaching

techniques for working with refugee students, such as “best practices” for teaching refugees and ways of adapting curricula to this student population. They expressed concern that they would not be able to receive this training due to the lack of resources provided to their district.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Lessons Learned

- A.** There exists a dearth of training opportunities for teachers and other school staff concerning refugee education within higher education programming, especially for teachers working in art, music, or subjects other than ELA classes only.
- B.** Teachers are concerned about the best way to attend to the psychosocial needs of their refugee students.
- C.** Among professionals working with refugees, there may be an over-reliance on PTSD to explain social-emotional issues that refugee students experience. This overemphasis may result in the marginalization of other psychological and social concerns such as underemployment, poverty, physical health, depression, substance use, domestic violence, and so forth.
- D.** Community agencies in Colorado are well-positioned to offer non-formal educational programming to teachers and refugee students and families in Denver. Expansion of applicable resources to rural communities is necessary.
- E.** Teachers and principals value the work of paraprofessionals in classrooms with refugee students. Paraprofessionals can provide assistance related to language and cultural translation in addition to offering specialized attention to refugee students.

Recommended Next Steps

- A.** Expand higher education training programs for teachers and principals to include issues related to refugee education, forced migration, and conflict resolution skills. Provide ongoing in-service and teacher training opportunities for teachers to enable them to gain experience in and mentorship regarding working with refugee students.
- B.** Increase funding for and promotion of activities by community-based agencies that provide psychosocial and educational support to refugee students and families, especially in locations with growing secondary migration populations.

- C.** Increase professional opportunities for school and community professionals to share practices with and provide support to one another. Examples of such opportunities are listservs, conferences, brownbags, and media events.
- D.** Incorporate a holistic approach to supporting refugee education programs whereby teachers, parents, and other community members benefit from each other's experience.
- E.** Increase professional and certification opportunities for parents interested in becoming paraprofessional teachers.
- F.** Increase attention to the well-being of teachers of refugee students through peer support, defined professional boundaries (e.g., time off), and acknowledgment of the ongoing challenges they face.
- G.** Increase evidence-based practice by developing evaluation measures that explore the effectiveness of community-based and educational intervention and prevention practices.
- H.** Expand empirical research in the area of refugee education, particularly in terms of parental involvement and student well-being (explore the perspectives of refugee students and their families).

References

- Boyson, B. A., Coltrane, B. & Short, D. J. (Eds.). (2002). *Proceedings of the first national conference for educators of newcomer students*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved July 15, 2010, from <http://www.crede.berkeley.edu%2Fresearch%2Fcrede%2Fpdf%2Fnewcomer.pdf> Boyson, C.A., & Short, D. J. (2003). *Secondary school newcomer programs in the United States* (Report No. 12). Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, University of California. Retrieved July 15, 2010, from http://www.cal.org%2Fcrede%2Fpdfs%2Frr12.pdf&ei=FGRPTKa_DYj4swP_p73YBw&usg=AFQjCNFQwi6cVMBXT3r0mPUte0Ua4asDMg
- Constantino, R., & Lavadenz, M. (1993). Newcomer schools: First impressions. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 69(1), pp. 82-101.
- Garnezy, N. (1993). Children in poverty: Resilience despite risk. *Psychiatry*, 59, 127–136.
- Hamilton, R., & Moore, D. (2004). *Educational interventions for refugee children: Theoretical perspectives and implementing best practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Henderson, N., & Milstein, M. (2003). *Resiliency in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- International Rescue Committee. (2007.). *National students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) project*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kinzie, J., Sack, W., Angell, R., Manson, S., & Rath, B. (1986). The psychiatric effects of massive trauma on Cambodian children: II. The family, the home, and the school. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 25(3), 377–383. doi:10.1016/S0002-7138(09)60260-0
- McBrien, J. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 329-364. doi:10.3102/00346543075003329
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, K., Kushner, H., McCall, J., Martell, Z., & Kulkarni, M. (2008). Growing up in exile: Psychosocial challenges facing refugee youth in the United States. In J. Hart (Ed.), *Years*

of conflict: Adolescence, political violence, and displacement (pp. 59-86). New York: Berghahn Books.

Reichenberg, D., & Friedman, S. (1996). Healing the invisible wounds of children in war: A rights approach. In Y. Danieli, N. S. Rodley, & L. Weisaeth (Eds.), *International responses to traumatic stress: Humanitarian, human rights, justice, peace and development contributions, collaborative actions and future initiatives* (pp. 307-326). Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.

Rutter, J. (2006). *Refugee children in the UK*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Short, D. J. (2002). Newcomer programs: An educational alternative for secondary immigrant students. *Education and Urban Society* 34(2), pp. 173-198. doi: 10.1177/0013124502034002004

Sinclair, M. (2001). Education in emergencies. In J. Crisp, C. Talbot, & D. Cipollone (Eds.), *Learning for a future: Refugee education in developing countries* (pp. 3-9). Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations.

Werner, E. E. (1999). How children become resilient: Observations and cautions. In N. Henderson, B. Benard, & N. Sharp-Light (Eds.), *Resiliency in action: Practical ideas for overcoming risks and building strengths in youth, families, and communities* (pp. 11-20). Gorham, ME: Resiliency in Action.

Winthrop, R., & Kirk, J. (2005). Teacher development and student well-being. *Forced Migration Review*, 22, 18-21.