

# Creating Communities

## Working with Refugee Students in Classrooms

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the reality of building community in public schools and specifically identifies the obstacles faced by teachers who try to create community with refugee students. The research in the article focuses on Ms. Patricia Engler, a teacher in a newcomer center for refugee students located in an urban setting. Engler created and fostered a sense of community for middle-school students in her classroom who often felt disconnected to their fellow students, their school, and the neighborhoods in which they lived, and was able to focus on work that she intuitively felt was right for her students based upon their specialized needs. The article also presents multiple ways of thinking about how to build community for all students through a description of different classroom activities and instructional strategies Engler employed in her classroom with newcomer children.

**A**S AN EDUCATIONAL researcher interested in the educational experiences of refugee children, I have been visiting a school designed to specifically serve this population. On a recent visit, I arrived to find middle-school students who had just been relocated to the United States from various war-torn countries throughout the world painting and working side-by-side on a canvas about 15 feet long and 5 feet high. Each student had been given an approximately 1 foot wide and 5 foot high section of the canvas to work on, and each was being encouraged by staff members from a local, nonprofit arts organization to paint whatever they wanted to symbolically represent themselves and their families. Throughout the period, the students laughed, talked, and painted their section of the canvas and seemed to genuinely enjoy both the task and each other's company. At the beginning of the year some of these students came into the class hesitant to engage with one another and their teacher, and some were very withdrawn. As the bell rang to mark the end of the period, I was struck by how far these children from refugee groups had come in a year both socially and academically and also by how much of their progress hinged on the work of their teacher, Patricia Engler, and her focus on the building of community—within the classroom itself but also between the students in the classroom and members of the local community that surrounded the school.

As educators, we often hear that the development of communities is an important part of the work to be accomplished by teachers in public school classrooms (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad,

2004). Teachers are encouraged to spend time and effort trying to build community within their own classrooms and also between their own classrooms and the local communities in which they reside. The popular societal argument is that helping students learn to work collaboratively with one another will help them as citizens in our society in the present, yes, but also in the future as they develop into young adults (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). I wonder, however, just how easy it is to build community of this sort. Aren't there societal factors at play that hinder community building, especially for those students historically disadvantaged and marginalized by society, such as refugee children? Building communities, I have learned through study and research, is a complicated endeavor that needs to be further explored and reenvisioned.

For example, what happens in a classroom when refugee students, who have been discriminated against by their local

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communities in their countries of origin in the past, are asked to suddenly build community and trust everyone around them? Will they immediately listen to their teachers' entreaties that emphasize the importance of building community, or will they, conditioned by their previous negative experiences in local communities hostile to them, resist the invitation to trust other people wholeheartedly? Sometimes refugee students, influenced by their past experience in their home countries or by the ambivalent context of their reception in the United States, feel disconnected to a sense of community within their own ethnic group, in the local communities to which they have been resettled, and within the local school communities in which they have been enrolled (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2009; Boyson & Short, 2003).

These questions about the difficulties of building community with refugee students become especially important when we take into account that the United States is the largest of the ten traditional resettlement countries in the world. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2008), of the 88,000 refugees resettled worldwide in 2008, the United States accepted approximately 60,000. In fiscal year 2009, the United States admitted close to 75,000 refugees—more than in any year since 1999 (United States Department of State, 2010). The refugee resettlement projection for fiscal year 2011 as set out by President Obama is 80,000 new refugees (The White House, 2010). With approximately 350 refugee resettlement agencies spread throughout nearly all 50 states, refugee children can be found in classrooms throughout the country. Together with immigrants, these newcomer children make up one in five children in the United States (Hernandez et al., 2009).

As refugees continue to enroll in schools in increasing numbers throughout the country, questions emerge about how to build classroom and schoolwide learning communities for newcomer refugee children and their families. These questions are especially pertinent during a time of heightened focus by policymakers and school administrators on the importance of standardized testing and curriculum. When teachers are directed to teach from a packaged, scripted curriculum, how can they also find time to be creative and imaginative about building community for the students in their classroom? We are told that building community is an important ingredient to classroom success (Goodlad, 2006), but how can teachers, particularly teachers of refugee students, find ways to go against the increasing pressure to standardize their classrooms? In what ways can teachers create space to individualize their classrooms and instructional approaches based upon the needs of their diverse students? In sum, how can we begin to design and implement strategies for building communities for refugee students at the classroom, school, and local community levels that honor the complexity of the teaching-and-learning process and the unique perspectives and experiences of these students?

To begin to answer some of these important questions, this article critically examines the reality of building community in public schools and identifies the obstacles faced by teachers who try to create community with refugee students. This research focuses on Patricia Engler, a teacher in a newcomer center located in a Denver public school. Engler created and fostered a sense of

community for middle-school students in her classroom who often felt disconnected to their fellow students, their school, and the neighborhoods in which they lived, and was able to focus on work that she intuitively felt was right for her students based upon their specialized needs. The article also presents multiple ways of thinking about how to build community through a description of different classroom activities and instructional strategies Engler employed in her classroom.

### **A Critical Examination of Building Community**

The building of classroom and school communities has been argued in the field of education to be an important ingredient to a successful classroom environment and a vital task of public schools (Goodlad et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 1994). By creating classrooms and schools where students and parents feel a part of a community, educators help students feel valued in their school experiences and, as a consequence, feel more motivated to do well academically. A focus on community building also encourages students and their parents to consider the school and its surrounding neighborhood as an important part of their lives. Consequently, these students and their families will feel invested in improving the condition of their classroom and school so that all in their learning community benefit (Allen, 2007). The creation of strong communities within schools also has implications for the larger neighborhoods in which these schools are located. By providing their students a small-scale, living model of how members of a community care for one another and by helping their students to engage in activities that improve the lives of those around them, schools can play a fundamental role in preparing their students for civic engagement in the larger surround and for the eventual creation of a healthy democracy in the United States (Goodlad, 2006; Epstein, 2010). Although schools have the potential to prepare students for civic engagement, Nieto (2004) argues that:

*Our schools reflect the sociocultural and sociopolitical context in which we live. This context is unfair to many young people and their families and the situations in which they live and go to school, but teachers and other educators do not simply have to go along with this reality. I believe one of our primary roles as educators is to interrupt the cycle of inequality and oppression. We can do this best by teaching well and with heart and soul. (p. xxii)*

Although the creation of strong, vibrant school communities can result in positive academic and social outcomes for students, some scholars (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005), arguing from a critical perspective, have identified institutional and societal factors that make community building too difficult relative to the possible positive results, especially given a context of social injustice and the marginalization of poor youth. Critical theorists argue that a lack of funding for appropriate resources, an absence of programming and teacher professional development for the specialized needs of students, and discriminatory policies can create school environments where teachers find it difficult to create warm, welcoming environments for the students in their classrooms. Negative societal beliefs about minority students, school

and national educational policies that focus largely on testing and standardized test scores, and the biases and misconceptions of the teachers themselves are other obstacles that teachers may face in creating classroom and school communities.

Language barriers, a student's lack of trust in public authorities due to previous experience with discrimination and alienation, and unresolved trauma may feel insurmountable to educators—and to the students and families. The question remains then: How can teachers build community for refugee students and their families when societal and institutional factors stand in the way?

## **Refugee Students and Culturally Responsive Instructional Strategies**

Refugee students and their families have been, by definition, the target of repeated violence, discrimination, and trauma in their countries of origin (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007). Upon resettlement, few refugees experience school programs that provide resources to meet their unique psychosocial, academic, and developmental needs (Igoa, 1995; Zhou, 1997; Boyson & Short, 2003). Refugee students face difficulty in their transition to public schools in the United States due to a lack of familiarity with the English language (Guerrero, 2004), unresolved trauma and stress disorders (Suarez-Orozco, 2000), and an absence of academic and counseling support services (Olsen, 1998). The key factor then, in creating successful classroom communities, is teachers who are able to identify the specialized needs of refugee children and who are culturally responsive to the needs of refugee children in their classrooms (Candappa, 2000; Olsen, 2006; Goodwin, 2002).

As the student population in U.S. public schools continues to become increasingly diverse in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and language, teaching that is responsive to the different cultures students bring with them to school continues to be an important priority for teachers today. Ladson-Billings wrote about the need for a culturally relevant pedagogy “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right” (1994, p. 18). Gay wrote that teachers who use culturally responsive pedagogy “use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (2000, p. 29).

Despite the numerous recognized specialized needs of refugee children, little has been written about how culturally responsive pedagogies with these populations might look, particularly in newcomer centers and in other school sites with high refugee populations. Although refugee children face many challenges similar to other groups in poverty or in racialized minority groups, one important difference is the extended period of time refugee students may have been absent from school due to war or overt discrimination. Exposure to wartime violence, such as murder and rape, is a substantive difference between refugee children and other students.

Therefore, additional important questions about successfully working with refugee students and their families emerge. For example, how can teachers in public schools begin to identify and also address the specialized needs of children from refugee groups? What culturally responsive pedagogical practices are currently in use by teachers of refugee children? Finally, what can we learn from teachers identified by their administrators, peers, and students as successful teachers of refugee children? To fill this gap in the research, I conducted a year-long study that sought to examine culturally responsive pedagogies intentionally used by teachers of refugee children in newcomer centers to build classroom communities.

The remainder of this article examines and illustrates how these pedagogies were seen in Patricia Engler's classroom during the 2009–2010 school year. Putting into practice what we can see in the culturally responsive theories advanced by Ladson-Billings and Gay, Engler developed instructional and relational strategies with her students that focused on the strengths refugee children and their families brought to the school environment, held high expectations for the children in her classroom, and situated teaching, learning, and the curriculum around the different cultures the students represented in her class.

## **Data Collection Methods and Analysis**

This article is based on part of a larger study I conducted during the 2009–2010 school year. In this larger study, multiple, semistructured interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with 20 school stakeholders who worked at newcomer centers for refugee children in Denver, Colorado. Newcomer centers in the Denver Public Schools system are instructional centers within schools that are designed to “serve English language learners identified as having limited or interrupted education as well as minimal literacy skills in both their native language and English. Students in the Newcomer Centers are served for one or two semesters to prepare them for participation in an English as a Second Language program” (Denver Public Schools, 2011). Newcomer centers provide newcomer students and their families with language support, academic support, and social support when these families first arrive in the United States.

All teacher participants in the study were identified through the use of snowball sampling (Berg, 2008). This paper focuses on the work of one newcomer teacher, Patricia Engler, who focused her efforts on building community in her classroom and connecting her students to the larger community in which they lived. Data collected during the study includes field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) of observations of the teacher in in-school settings (classrooms, extracurricular activities, parent-teacher meetings) and in out-of-school settings (visiting refugee families at home, working in the community with social workers from local refugee resettlement agencies); transcripts of formal interviews and notes on informal discussions; and copies of class newsletters and letters sent home to parents. Themes were identified through an open coding process in which interviews, field notes, and primary-source documents were analyzed for common themes and patterns in a line-by-line analysis. Coding frames were then constructed to

organize the data and to identify findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). These findings were recorded frequently in the form of analytic and integrative memos, and used subsequently to write the findings sections of this article. Multiple sources of evidence were used to triangulate the findings of the study.

The case-study method (Stake, 1995) was used to report the findings of the study to provide a close-up analysis of the work of one teacher trying to build community through culturally responsive pedagogies for the refugee students and families in her classroom. In the field of educational research, very little has been written about the experiences of refugee students in school (Ngo, 2010; Olsen, 1998), and even less has been written about the experiences of teachers who teach these refugee children and who work with their families (Lee, 2005). This case study seeks to provide teachers currently working with refugee children concrete recommendations on how they might be culturally responsive in their use of instructional strategies and outreach to families in the community. Although this research paper focuses specifically on a teacher's perspectives on her work with refugee students and their families, I am pursuing further work on the equally important experiences of students and families in her classroom.

The analysis of Engler's work in building community with refugee students and their families yielded a number of themes including: her work at addressing head-on the lived realities of her students and helping them to solve the difficulties they faced in and out of school, her efforts at intentionally building community within the classroom walls, and her belief in the importance of bringing members of the local community in to her classroom to work with her students and, conversely, bringing her students out to serve the local community.

### **Addressing the Elephants in the Room**

After a career as an elementary teacher for over 19 years, with 150 hours of training in English-language acquisition, Engler jumped at the opportunity to work with refugees at a newcomer program starting in 2008. The newcomer program at her school is for students who are typically refugees, have had little to no formal education or severely interrupted formal education, and are illiterate in both their own language and English. In her shift from a mainstream elementary classroom to a classroom with refugee students who recently arrived in the United States, Engler immediately noticed the real difficulties of trying to build community with and for refugee students. Because of their past experiences with discrimination and hostile treatment, refugee students often have tenuous connections to each other and to the communities in which they live due to factors beyond their control.

For example, refugee students and their families typically leave their home countries under stressful and violent conditions and end up living in refugee camps for extended periods of time, uncertain of their chances for resettlement. Refugee students and their families who are fortunate enough to be chosen for resettlement arrive in their host country to some financial, social, and work-related support from refugee resettlement organizations for a short period of time (often six months to a year), and then they are usually on their own in terms of building support systems

within their neighborhoods and local communities. Due to this life in constant transition, students sometimes feel lost, alone, and unsupported by their teachers, classmates, and neighbors and confused by the expectations of their new schools' environments. These feelings sometimes make building classroom communities a challenge.

Facing problems such as poverty, depression, and loneliness, students often long for meaningful connections with their peers and teachers in school but sometimes struggle in initiating and sustaining these relationships. One additional obstacle in thinking about building community and relationships with their peers is the fact that sometimes refugee students are seated at tables directly next to or across from refugee students who come from ethnic communities that were previously their oppressors in their shared country of origin. For example, one day in Engler's classroom, Maxammed, a male student, was fighting verbally with Amina, a female student. Maxammed became so agitated during the argument that he pointed to the bottom of his shoe and told Amina that her face was "as black as the bottom of my shoe." This, as Engler put it later, was "the trifecta of insults." Calling Amina's complexion dark was one part of the insult and being compared to the bottom of a shoe, the dirtiest part of one's attire, was yet another insult. Finally, the insult included overtones of past tension between their two ethnic groups, with Maxammed, a Somali male, belittling Amina, whose family had lived in Somalia but were part of the Somali Bantu, a historically oppressed ethnic group who were denied educational opportunities and political rights and were the victims of centuries-long discrimination.

As soon as Engler heard this insult, she intervened right away. She informed Maxammed that this type of insult was unacceptable in her classroom and in other places in the school. He replied in English: "I will not say sorry to a girl; we don't do that in my country." Engler saw this exchange not only as a "teachable moment for Maxammed and Amina but for all the other students in her class." Together, they could explore the differences between cultural and gender norms in the students' home countries and the United States, what forms of behavior and language are acceptable in public school classrooms in the United States, and just as important, the reasons why Maxammed's type of discriminatory behavior and language is problematic within the context of the country in which they all now reside. Engler explained to me the importance of addressing these situations quickly and directly by guiding students to think further about what constitutes:

*Acceptable and unacceptable behavior, obviously in terms that they can understand, because their English is still emerging. But always when something would come up, you need to call them on it. In my classroom environment, I let them know immediately that language that demeans or belittles fellow students is not tolerated, and it's never allowed.*

In addition to letting students know that she does not allow this type of put-down to occur in her classroom, Engler made sure to provide opportunities for her students to discuss conflicts with their peers and others in the school during class meeting time. She explained that "we have constant conversations about how we treat



each other and ourselves within our classroom. We have lots of dialogue in class and we use simple language books that talk about peace, respect, and kindness.” Maxammed did end up apologizing to Amina for his multiple insults and, according to Engler, went on to become one of the “most humane, open students that I’ve ever had in my classroom, helpful and respectful to all of his fellow students.”

When looking at her past few years in working with refugee students, Engler shared that acknowledging obstacles to building community, the elephants in the room, is an important first step in rethinking how to create conditions conducive for building classroom community and help refugee students feel at peace within the classroom space. If teachers recognize and become knowledgeable about the often challenging contexts for why refugee children are or aren’t receptive to certain ideas and activities, those teachers gain important background information on the possible roadblocks they may face in trying to build a strong sense of classroom community.

### **Building Community Within the Classroom Walls**

One important strategy for teachers working to overcome roadblocks in building classroom community is to focus first on building community within the classroom walls. Engler highlighted this when she stated:

*Students can’t begin to learn if they don’t feel safe in their own classroom. On many levels it’s crucially important for any child in my newcomer classroom to feel safe and secure. They need to have that support system because the classroom community could be that child’s only sense of security and sense of structure for the day as their home life might be very difficult. The classroom structure is their safety net because everything else around them could be in turmoil due to possible transition issues. They are often trying to help take care of their family, interpreting as they acquire more English or assisting as a bridge in the transition process, and they may have to babysit their siblings because at night the parents are going to the meat packing plant to work on the night shift. Due to all the transitions going on in their lives, they need that community in their classrooms in order to go forward in their schooling and language skills.*

She pointed out that a teacher can build community within the classroom by making students feel welcome and cared for by their teacher and by their fellow peers. Engler created this feeling in part by her encouragement of camaraderie and teamwork within the classroom. She explained:

*When somebody new comes in to our room, they are automatically paired up with possibly somebody that speaks their language or at least from their area and a student from another culture and country to help guide them for at least the first week. The helping students take on a community role as a big brother/big sister to watch over them and take them around. They are pretty much swept into the “classroom family.” Students are given school supplies and a backpack the minute they come in to the Newcomer Center. Sometimes, if I happen to be in the office when a new family arrives, I have been able to clothe the*

*entire group with our donated clothing. It isn’t unusual for a family to have just arrived in the U.S. without anything so when that is the case they are basically supplied as best we can and welcomed.*

Engler has also asked students to create shared classroom expectations together at the beginning of the school year of how students and their teacher would work together during the year in an atmosphere of mutual respect and support for one another to build a classroom community. Engler also held frequent class meetings, both about school itself and about how students were negotiating the local community; she allowed students to take on leadership roles in facilitating the growth of community in their classroom. Additionally, Engler made special efforts to create a curriculum that encouraged students to depend on one another for completion of schoolwork and that focused on her students’ involvement in community building both within and beyond the classroom. Finally, Engler took time in class, once her students had acquired more English, to acknowledge and discuss past differences of ethnic groups within the class, but she also asked students to consider how it might be possible to build trust and understanding despite past differences.

### **Connecting the Local Community to Refugee Students in School**

Engler emphasized the importance of bringing members of the local community in to the school so that refugee students could see people from the “real world.” Throughout the school year, she reached out to members of local nonprofit agencies about providing support to her students and connecting the students to the world outside of school. This allowed the students to understand how communities exist in multiple forms and reinforced the importance of these communities because they can provide support and encouragement to their members.

In partnership with the social worker and nurse at her school and through contacts with local nonprofit organizations that her predecessor in the newcomer classroom had made, Engler also brought resources and expertise from outside of the school walls to let the students know that community members supported them in their schooling and wanted them to do well in school. These outside resources included members of community art organizations doing art therapy with her students and community mental health professionals providing counseling and emotional support to the students in her room who needed it. She made a special effort to connect to these community resources because:

*My children exhibit posttraumatic stress symptoms, and though we have psychiatrists and counselors in the school, they can’t speak their language. Therefore, to get my students the help that they need and in a nontraditional Western way, I have to be resourceful. If I hear of something that’s available out in the community to help these children, I’ll pursue it and see if it’s something that would work. As a teacher, I am not trained in any of the specialized counseling services, however; Jewish Family Services and the Other Side of Arts Organization are people who are all specially trained, or being trained in counseling. I do need the community’s help; I can’t do it all myself.*

Whether it was contacting local social service providers to provide academic and counseling support to the students in her room or calling her friends to donate winter clothes for children who didn't have any, Engler was constantly trying to find ways to connect members of the local community to the refugee students in her school. She did this to provide services to the children in her classroom but also to inform and educate the surrounding community about the existence of refugee children in their local communities and the ways in which they could help:

*The other thing is, the community seems very unaware about refugees. They don't know that they exist, they want to know if they are illegal, who brought them here, why is the U.S. government doing that? The reaction from the public is quite interesting; anywhere from what can I do to help to why are they here? I do what I can do to help educate the public about the plight of refugee children and their families.*

### **Connecting Refugee Students in School to the Local Community**

In addition to bringing community members to her classroom, Engler also recognized the importance of taking her refugee students out in to the community for academic enrichment activities such as snowshoeing, attending a play, and visiting local attractions so that they could become more familiar with their new surroundings and the opportunities available to them. These cocurricular outings were funded by grants Engler wrote. She made sure to bring students to places where they could get support (clothes banks, doctor offices, free clinics, dental clinics) so that they learned not only that these places existed for them and their families but also where these places were located. She explained:

*Every fall now for the last two years, I have taken my children to Project School Bell, an organization that supports Denver Public School kids. I sign my children up for an appointment as a class and I have a big enough car that I can take seven kids at a time. This past year was easier due to a smaller class size; my teammate and I were able to go in one trip. The year before I did it three days in a row, taking seven kids at a time. Project School Bell is awesome because they give students in need brand-new clothes. It is set up like a store so the students feel like they are shopping. They receive a winter coat, hat, gloves, and two outfits including packages of underwear, one to wash and one to wear, and a brand-new book. There are also clothes there that have been donated and which they can go through and look for clothes for family members and babies in the household.*

While Engler tried to help refugee students and their families see how the community could be of assistance to them, she also provided opportunities for refugee students and their families to see how they could possibly be of service in order to give back to those in the community around them. For example, Honey, one of the students in her classroom, started off the school year uneasy in her classroom and reluctant to even enter the school at the beginning of the day. When Engler sat down with the student to ask her about her anxiety in school, Honey showed her the scars on the back of her hand and said, "Miss, I want to go to school, but I don't

want to get hit. In my country [Somalia], we got hit if we didn't answer questions quickly enough. After a while, I never wanted to go back to school." Knowing the reasons why Honey was so nervous in school, Engler made special efforts to reassure her that their classroom was a safe place to learn and to also make mistakes. She checked in with Honey frequently during the course of the day to see how she was doing and worked with her one-on-one whenever she could on her schoolwork. Slowly Engler integrated Honey into the daily routines of the classroom and encouraged her to have trust in her teachers and in her fellow classmates.

As Honey became more comfortable in the classroom and in the larger school setting, Engler also encouraged her to become involved in helping other newcomer students transition into their shared classroom space. Engler saw that by helping Honey develop leadership skills, she could also help her build confidence in herself as a student and as an important member of the school community. Honey's peers eventually nominated her to become a schoolwide ambassador, a student who is called on by the school administration to represent the student body at official school functions and to greet visitors to the school. Looking back on Honey's growth as a student, Engler stated:

*Honey's growth this year has just been tremendous. She has discovered within herself a love of learning, a strong determination to succeed as a student, and a great community spirit. She now volunteers tutoring younger refugee children at the community center in her housing building, works with the elderly at a senior home, and is a nominee for a HOPE Scholarship. She is currently looking forward to going to high school next year. She now wants to become a teacher so she can go back to Somalia to teach, and have students, especially the girls, enjoy learning. She wants to take what she learned here in the U.S. to her country, so that no other child has to suffer like she did in school. Surrounding her with people who care about her in the classroom has shown her how to care herself for the community in which she now lives.*

Engler's work with Honey and with other students in her classroom highlights the important role that teachers play in fostering a sense of community not only within the classroom itself but also between the students in their classroom and the local communities in which they live.

### **Discussion: Rethinking How to Build Community**

The creation of classroom community has often been seen as an important responsibility of the classroom teacher (Goodlad, 2006). The classroom is seen as an important space for children to practice becoming responsible members of society and engaged members of a vibrant democracy (Allen, 2007). However, critical theorists (Nieto & Bode, 2011; Kozol, 2005) have argued that this vision of community building is very difficult to realize given the inequalities some children face in school in terms of a lack of funding for school programs, systemic racism, and the marginalization they face as minority youth. As refugee students and their families continue to be resettled to U.S. public schools in which these conditions occur, it is important for teachers to continue to

consider how they can help refugee students build a sense of community for themselves in their local classroom communities and also in the larger communities in which they reside. This article has sought to show how one teacher made concerted efforts to address some of the difficulties refugee children face in building community in schools through the use of instructional practices that sought to better understand the cultural lives of the children in her classroom and the specialized needs that her students exhibited.

By explicitly focusing her instructional efforts on the building of community within the classroom environment, Engler was able to foster for refugee students and their families a sense of belonging and connectedness to local communities, schools, and classroom peers. Although existing research shows that refugees are often disconnected from the local communities to which they have resettled and the new schools in which their children are enrolled (Candappa, 2000; Olsen, 2006; Goodwin, 2002), Engler's explicit move to use culturally responsive practices in her classrooms afforded her the opportunity to connect to the lived experiences of her children and to create spaces where the children in her classroom could connect with one another through their shared experiences as refugee youth. Teachers who currently work with refugee youth can build upon the examples provided in this article.

In addition to creating community within her classroom, Engler also saw the importance of creating opportunities for her students to learn about the local community by creating opportunities for them to interact with individual community members and organizations. All too often students are seen by society as solely being members of a school community, not of the local community. Because of their age, children are not seen as being capable of being positive contributors to the larger surround. This limited conception of what value students can bring to the local community does not allow these students to participate fully in the public life and world immediately surrounding the buildings that comprise their school. By providing a metaphorical bridge between the literal walls of their classroom and school and local communities, individuals, and programs, Engler provided important reminders of how teachers in public schools can give students access to community resources that can be invaluable for students and their families, and simultaneously introduce community members to refugee students and families who are willing, but often uncertain, contributors to the communities in which they live.

Public schools teachers are expected by the public to build communities in their classrooms. In addition to teaching academic core subjects, teachers are supposed to be teaching their students how to live in society, how to be supportive of each other, and how to prepare themselves to be productive and cooperative members of the communities in which they live. However, these idyllic goals become complicated when we consider the sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts for refugee children who enter public schools today. Students will not automatically buy into the importance of building community in their classrooms if they have always been marginalized by members of the communities in which they live. Hence, this paper points to the need for teachers to look more closely at the specialized needs of the children that enter their classrooms and respond intentionally in ways that are more culturally

responsive to these needs. I hope the case study of Engler presented in this article provides teachers working with refugee students and students from other marginalized groups ideas on how to engage in this important work and how to move forward in building strong communities of support for children who urgently need them.

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