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Seattle University

**Educational Access in King County for Adult Refugees from East Africa and the  
Democratic Republic of the Congo**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Departmental Honors in International Studies

By  
Colleen Cronnelly

June 2020

This honors thesis by Student Name is approved

Serena Cosgrove Digitally signed by Serena  
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Dr. Serena Cosgrove, coordinator



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Dr. Nova Robinson, external reader

**Abstract**

While there is global research on the topic of adult refugee education, there is limited research into accessibility of education for adult refugees within King County, Washington. My research offers an analysis of educational accessibility in King County for refugees from the African nations of Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which together make up the largest refugee population in the area. I conducted interviews with representatives from the local organizations: Refugee Women's Alliance, Refugees Northwest, Seattle Public Libraries, and Literacy Source in order to gain a better understanding of the strengths and challenges the organizations and refugees face regarding education. I argue that adult refugee education must be culturally aware and trauma informed in order for refugees to achieve the highest level of success. Additionally, a diversity of programs is necessary to meet all educational needs. In order to ensure that these types of programs are available within King County, city, county, and state governments must allocate more funding to refugee resettlement. The ultimate goal of this research is to advocate for refugee success and independence through education.

**Key Words:** refugee resettlement, refugee education, King County, Seattle, African Refugees

## Introduction

Since his election in 2016, President Trump's administration has continually lowered the refugee admittance cap, allowing fewer and fewer refugees to find relative safety in the United States of America. Although Trump's restrictions have been celebrated in conservative circles who place the highest value on American border security, he has been widely criticized for turning his back on families escaping violence, famine, and persecution ("Seattle Mayor Durkan...", 2019). One critic of Trump's limited refugee admittance policies is Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkin. On November 14, 2019, Durkin voiced her support of refugee resettlement in Seattle in a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ("Seattle Mayor Durkan...", 2019). This mirrors a decision made earlier in 2017 by the city of Seattle, King County, and the Seattle Foundation to provide \$2.25 million for refugee and immigrant services (King County, City of Seattle..., 2017). What remains unclear is the effectiveness of these services in integrating refugees into society once they arrive in Seattle. This paper will focus on one of the greatest factors that determines a refugee's ability to integrate into society: their access to education.

Refugees require education, regardless of age, gender, or previous education status, but each refugee has different educational needs (Winchester, 2016). All refugees must first learn English in order to be independent members of society. They need to be able to go to the store, go to the doctor, call the police, and generally function in their new communities. Additionally, refugee professionals need re-education (Winchester, 2016). For example, doctors, lawyers, and engineers need to relearn their trade within the context of the American language and societal norms. All this education ensures that refugees are given the tools to succeed socially and economically in their host communities. Education unlocks opportunities for advancement in addition to community (Winchester, 2016). Within Seattle, there is a tremendous diversity of refugees with an even greater diversity of educational needs.

This paper is first comprehensive review of accessibility of refugee education in King County, Washington. My initial research revealed a gap in secondary literature about refugee education in King County despite an abundance of research concerning refugee education globally. The limited secondary literature about refugees in King County focused primarily on Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the 1970s and 1980s. The up-to-date literature emphasized health risks and medical conditions refugees in Seattle face instead of focusing on resettlement or education.

This paper specifically considers educational accessibility for adult refugees from African countries. The decision to focus on adult learners was made because I believe there is great potential for growth in opportunities for adult learners within King County. African refugees, specifically East African and Congolese refugees, are the focus of this study because they make up the largest group of refugees in King County (Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs briefing book, 2019). This paper uses secondary sources about refugee education on a global scale to provide a basis for primary source analysis relevant to King County. The primary sources used include federal, state, county and city policies, regulations, and declarations, and interviews with representatives from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). My research is limited because Seattle University's Internal Review Board's restrictions on interviewing refugees as they are a vulnerable population. Additionally, this project was conducted during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which further restricted the interviews and site visits that I was able to conduct. From these sources, I compiled a summary of programs and services available for refugees in King County. I determine the necessity of culturally aware, trauma informed, and comprehensive educational programs for refugees. I conclude that the greatest barrier to refugees seeking educational opportunities is a lack of time and the greatest barrier organizations face in providing educational opportunities is a lack of funding. Local

governments can help refugees and organizations to overcome these barriers by allocating more funds for refugee resettlement grants.

### **Defining Refugee and Education**

For the purpose of this research, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees definition of Refugee will be used:

a refugee is a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Convention relating to the status of refugees, 1951).

This definition differentiates refugees from internally displaced people, who are forced to flee their homes because of instability or violence but do not cross state borders (McBrien, 2005).

This definition also differentiates refugees from migrants, who chose to relocate to a new region or country for financial or personal gain (McBrien, 2005). This research will focus primarily on the experiences of refugees, who are an especially vulnerable population. That being said, there are many similarities between the educational opportunities for migrants and refugees (McBrien, 2005). Due to holes in the existing literature, I will utilize some sources pertaining to migrants. When using a source focusing on migrants, I will explain why it is relevant and how it can be applied to refugees.

Education is not easily defined. Beista explains that when we say “education” we are generally referring to one of five things or ideas (2015). The first is formal institutions, such as schools and universities. The second is domains of practice, such as adult education or vocational education. The third is processes associated with formal institutions and domains,

such as lessons or lectures. The fourth is the activity of education, such as teaching or mentoring. The final idea is the outcome of education, such as a graduated person or an educated person (Beista, 2015). However, even within these five meanings, there is uncertainty. What about learning that takes place outside of formal institutions? What are the boundaries to educational activities? What is an educated individual? The definition of education is difficult to grasp because any attempt to clarify or specify education easily turn in to rhetoric about what education should be (Beista, 2015). For the purpose of this research, I will be using a broad definition of education that includes the formal institutions we often associate with education, but also less structured ways of learning new skills and information.

### **Background: Refugees in King County**

Where refugees have been coming from to Washington state has been shifting throughout the past 40 years. After the Vietnam war, the highest percentage of refugees in the state were from Southeast Asia (The changing face of refugees in Washington state, 2015). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, most refugees came from the former Soviet Union. Today, Africans - mostly East Africans - make-up a significant portion of the refugee community. (The changing face of refugees in Washington state, 2015). Of the refugees that have settled in the state since 2003, refugees from Somalia rank third, refugees from Eritrea rank ninth, refugees from Ethiopia rank tenth, and refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) rank twelfth (Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs briefing book, 2019).

Each African country has a variety of unique push factors, or reasons for displacement. The African country with the highest number of refugees in Washington, Somalia has struggled since its conception to maintain peace and order because of the borders drawn by colonial powers after World War II. Leadership shifted constantly because of coups, and a civil war amongst clans vying for regional authority broke out in 1991, followed by a devastating drought. Despite intervention from both the United States military and the United Nations peacekeepers,



a stable government has yet to be maintained in Somalia, resulting in continued violence (Lansford & Tom 2019). After Somalians, Eritreans are the most common African refugee in Washington. Eritrea's prolonged war of independence from Ethiopia that lasted from 1962-1991 and the continued border wars that followed have crippled the Eritrean economy. War and poor economic prospects combined with the oppressive regime of President Isaias Afewerki resulted in about 12% of Eritrea's population fleeing the country (Lansford & Tom 2019). Another large refugee community in Washington is Ethiopian refugees. In addition to the lengthy war with Eritrea, Ethiopia faced a famine in the 1980's amidst a tumultuous regime change that caused many Ethiopians to flee as refugees (Lansford & Tom 2019). The final community of African refugees is Congolese refugees from the DRC. The First and Second Congo Wars were fought over the course of six years by a multitude of armed groups and various state actors vying for power over the Congo's resource rich land. The conflict devastated the already poverty-stricken nation, killing over 5 million people and displacing over 2 million. While the war officially ended in 2002, armed conflict persists through proxy militias (Cosgrove & Curtis 2018). While each of these conflicts derive from local tensions, one commonality is their roots in colonialism. The lines and borders drawn by Europeans in Africa ignore the geography of Africa's ethnic groups, causing uncertainty around who has the right to rule. This colonial legacy stretches into today, and the African refugee population continues to grow globally because of the persistent conflicts (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018). Because refugee resettlement offices try to place refugees in cities or areas that already have refugees of the same nationality, the African refugee population in Seattle has continued to grow along with the global African refugee population (Forrest, Mott, & Brown, 2014).

After their arrival to America and King County, African refugees faces a multitude of unique challenges. Ferriss, Strode, and Shandra's study on Somali refugee post-traumatic stress explained that before they are forced to leave their country, refugees experience trauma

such as “catastrophic destruction of homes and communities, the murder of family members and neighbors, rape, being lost, torture, kidnappings and bombings” (2018). As they flee, their trauma continues in the harsh and often violent conditions of overpopulated refugee camps. Stress and anxiety are compounded in these camps as refugees await news about their applications for refugee status through the US Refugee Admissions Program (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018). After refugees are finally able to arrive to the United States, their trauma and stress does not end. Refugees struggle to build community within the context of American culture, and their own family unit is often fractured by transit to the US (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018). Refugees must also grapple with a loss of professional or social status. In their home countries, they may have been respected, well-off members of the community, but in America they are low-income and face racial discrimination (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018). All of these factors have a negative impact on the mental health of refugees, which results in a compromised physical health (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018).

### **Existing Literature: Global Refugee Education**

This section explains the necessity for adult refugee education and explores its challenges. It concludes with a discussion of some typical adult refugee education models to provide a context for my analysis of King County refugee education.

#### *Prioritizing Adult Refugee Education*

Because most countries prioritize the security and prosperity of their citizens, each country has unique goals and agendas concerning refugees. Countries can either be considered a “transit country” or a “destination country” for refugees. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a transit country as “the country through which migratory flows (regular or irregular) move” (Perruchoud, Richard, and Jillyanne Redpath-Cross, 2011). Transit countries typically border a refugee’s country of origin. The primary priorities of

transit country governments are to provide temporary food and housing, and they often offer support in helping refugees apply for refugee status so that they can continue on to their destination countries (Duvell, Molodikova, & Collyer, 2014). An example of a transit country would be Kenya in the case of Somali refugees (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018). The ISO defines a destination country, also called third country, receiving country, or host country, as “the country that is a destination for migratory flows (regular or irregular)” (Perruchoud, Richard, and Jillyanne Redpath-Cross, 2011). The primary priorities of destination country governments are to integrate refugees into their society. This more long-term approach focuses on employment and community building (Duvell, Molodikova, & Collyer, 2014). Education, and especially language acquisition, is necessary for both employment and community building. In the case of Somalia, the United States is a destination country (Ferriss, Strode, & Shandra 2018).

After months or, more likely, years of displacement and trauma, refugees arrive in their new location with hopes of stability. Before that is possible, refugees must learn how to independently exist in their new settings. Practically, they need to be able to fill out forms, go to the doctor, and complete all the other small tasks that make up life in America (Benseman, 2014). Among other things, refugees want to find work, be active in their children’s educations, and perform basic societal functions, like grocery shopping (Balahadia, 2016). For many adult refugees, true independence requires a level of education that allows them to work and be financially autonomous. This typically means being conversational in the local language, having, reading proficiency in that language, and possessing technical skills (Stepping up: refugee education in crisis, 2018). Refugees obtain these skills – and therefore independence – through educational programs and classes (Benseman, 2014).

From a psychological standpoint, education contributes to improved mental and social wellbeing as it allows adult refugees to build communities in their new setting (McBrien, 2005). While this is true for refugees of all ages, adult refugees take longer to adapt to their new

environment than younger refugees (Khamphakdy-Brown, Jones, Nilsson, Russel & Klevens, 2006). Education is a necessary part of stability for refugees. It is for these reasons that the UNHCR has determined that education is a pillar to emergency response, prioritized with nearly equal importance as food, water, and shelter (Stepping up: refugee education in crisis, 2018).

Adult refugee education after resettlement is also imperative because it improves the quality of education that refugee children can achieve. Students are most likely to succeed when parents can have an active role in their children's education. When parents understand how to check grades and can attend parent-teacher conferences, their children are more likely to achieve satisfactory educational outcomes (McBrien, 2005). Additionally, the more education and language comprehension parents can attain, the less dependent they are on their children to act as translators. These child-translators bear the weight of family stress, causing them to "grow up too fast" and feel obligated to provide stability for their family, negatively impacting the child's education (McBrien, 2005). Teenage and young adult refugees often drop out of school in order to work to support their parents who cannot work or can only work low income jobs due to their level of education and language proficiency (Stepping up: refugee education in crisis, 2018). Educating refugee parents sets up refugee children for educational success.

### *Challenges to Adult Refugee Education*

Many of the frustrations that refugees seeking an education face are familiar to anyone who has learned a new language. In John Benseman's study, "Adult Refugee Learners with Limited Literacy: Needs and Effective Responses," interviewees described the struggle of learning to pronounce and hear unfamiliar sounds in new languages, understanding people speaking too fast, and recalling new vocabulary (Benseman, 2014). However, there are additional barriers and frustrations that refugees face outside of language acquisition, such as health issues, family care, transportation, and a lack of understanding of available resources (Benseman, 2014). The most universal struggles were financial barriers - especially regarding

higher education (Lipka, 2006), and time constraints (Benseman, 2014). Refugees experience significant time constraints because of inflexible work schedules and familial responsibilities. As a consequence, refugees find themselves lacking time to attend classes and/or study (Benseman, 2014).

Teachers and educators have reported that the trauma of forced displacement also negatively impacts refugee education (Benseman, 2014). Continuously uncertain circumstances and unforeseeable futures cause refugees to worry about themselves, their immediate families, and their extended families. This worry manifests in short attention spans, nervous energy, and indifference to class topics (Benseman, 2014). These educators emphasized the importance of informed teachers trained to accommodate for adult learners with traumatic experiences (Benseman, 2014).

A consistent theme for refugees with high levels of education achieved in their home country were the challenges associated with the loss of professional certificates (Zolberg & Benda, 2001). In most cases, refugees fleeing countries are unable to bring with them evidence of their academic qualifications. Even if they do bring their credentials, they may not be accepted because of language or because of varying national, state, and local standards (Zolberg & Benda, 2001). Therefore, many of these highly educated refugees cannot obtain a job in their field or continue their studies. This gives refugees very few options to continue their careers. They can attempt to start over in an American school, or they can obtain a job that they are for which they are overqualified (Zolberg & Benda, 2001). East Africans specifically expressed frustration over this “brain waste” (Balahadia, 2016). One man said, “I know many taxi drivers that have PhDs. It’s incredible that their assets can’t be recognized” (Balahadia, 2016).

### *Adult Refugee Education Programs*

Every refugee has a unique background of education and experiences. Therefore, there is a nearly unlimited number of programs and methods being utilized to educate adult refugees around the world. Many programs work to teach refugees the basic language proficiency necessary to enter the workforce. In the United States, these are the most common type of program offered nationwide (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019). They offer classes in reading, writing, and speaking in the English language, and some programs combine classes to also include job skills like digital literacy (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019). Some programs are targeted towards refugees with English literacy who need to expand their vocabulary for their target field of work or study (Balahadia, 2016). Refugees in cities or areas that prioritize refugee support, or have colleges that do so, are more likely to continue their higher education (Lipka, 2006). Programs that teach professional language or vocabulary specific to fields of study are imperative to the success of highly educated refugees (Balahadia, 2016). Additionally, programs that assist in applying for scholarships, crafting resumes, and job finding are equally crucial (Lipka, 2006). Meanwhile, other programs, such as low literacy classes, focus on refugees who are illiterate in their primary language who have to “learn how to learn” (Benseman, 2014). Low literacy classes demand teachers with high levels of educational experience and often utilize bi-lingual tutors (Benseman, 2014). The goals of these programs are that learners can recognize letters, write simple sentences, and be conversational (Benseman, 2014).

Other programs do not distinguish themselves based on the level of learner, rather they target a specific demographic, such as women, young adults, or people from specific countries (Balahadia, 2016). These programs focus on challenges that the specific demographic desires to overcome. For example, a program working with women may spend a class learning how to discuss their children’s wellbeing with a teacher (Balahadia, 2016). The goal of having a variety of teaching methods is to ensure that as few refugees as possible slip through the cracks.

The literature surrounding adult refugee education focused intensely on language acquisition. While language training is at the core of refugee education, it is irresponsible to only focus on language acquisition. The primary reason that refugees desire language education is so that they can work. However, in the job market, literacy is considered a minimum for employment. Employers seek to hire employees with hard skills such as computer literacy, and soft skills such as organization, integrity, and leadership. If refugee education does not incorporate skill acquisition, then the resources given to refugee education cannot be fully utilized.

### **Research Design**

In 2016, Seattle's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) commissioned a comprehensive report about the experiences of East Africans in the city of Seattle. The researcher, Aileen Balahadia interviewed community leaders and held focus groups with East Africans in Seattle where they discussed housing, economics, social identity, education, and other topics the community deemed important. The goal of my research was to replicate the methodology of the East African study, but to focus exclusively on education. Balahadia integrated stories and experiences of East Africans with data and background about the communities living in Seattle (Balahadia, 2016). The interview questions were broad, and interviewees were encouraged to direct the conversation to their concerns and points of interest. Only after listening to the needs of the community did she make recommendations to policy makers and the general public (Balahadia, 2016). This approach is favorable because it prioritizes the voice of the people who work within the system and best understand the community's needs. In my research, I built background information and worked to understand the structures that support refugee education, but like the OIRA report, the policy recommendations are reflective of the needs and interests of the organizations that support refugee education.

Through my initial research, it was evident that the system for educating refugees in King County is not reliant on one organization or office to provide all its necessary services. Rather, a web of governmental offices, public services, non-profit organizations, and community-based organizations collaborate to maximize the reach and depth of refugee education. The governmental structures for refugee support in King County are rooted in the United States Refugee Act of 1980, which created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The goal of the 1980 Act was to create a permanent organization to support refugee relocation and assimilation (Refugee Act, 1980). Within the first section of the Act, it is established that the part of role of the ORR is to “provide refugees with the opportunity to acquire sufficient English language training to enable them to become effectively resettled as quickly as possible” (Refugee Act, 1980). Throughout its original document and updated resolutions, the ORR has emphasized the importance of education in refugee resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019). The ORR dictates that all states must have formal resources to support refugees, but the state has the freedom to choose the exact structure of these resources (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019). In Washington State, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) houses the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) (State of Washington plan for refugee assistance, 2015). OIRA administers programs to assist in the transition of refugee resettlement. They do this through programs like the Limited English Proficient (LEP) Pathways program (State of Washington plan for refugee assistance, 2015). The LEP pathways program works with community colleges and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide English training appropriate to the skill levels of the refugee (Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs briefing book, 2019). If necessary, OIRA covers the cost of refugees to attend these classes (Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs briefing book, 2019).



In the course of my research, I worked with a variety of organizations and offices that either offer refugee education programs or refer refugees to educational opportunities so that I could better understand the refugee education system in King County. I interviewed the annual giving officer/ youth program director and the executive director of the Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA), the director of community programs at Refugee Northwest Seattle, the adult literacy program manager at Seattle Public Libraries (SPL), and the volunteer outreach coordinator at Literacy Source. I chose my interviewees by reaching out to all organizations in King County that support refugee education and conducting interviews with the representatives who returned my calls and emails. The process of trying to gain contact with some organizations was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and I ceased sending follow-up emails and phone calls. My interviews were conducted at either the locations of the organizations being discussed or over the phone, and they each lasted between 30-45 minutes. I focused on four primary questions regarding the interviewee, the organization, the programs/ classes offered by the organization, and the participants who enrolled in the programs/ classes. Based on the interviewees' answers to these questions, I asked follow-up questions (Appendix A).

## **Analysis of Interviews**

### *Overview of Organizations*

The Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) is a local NGO that was founded 35 years ago with the goal of assisting refugee women in integrating into their new society. Today, they have eight locations throughout King County including childcare centers, a domestic violence center, and an immigration center. They also offer a variety of resources ranging from English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes to housing assistance programs. In 2018, they served 3,072 refugees and immigrants through their various programs and workshops. They receive their funding through federal, state, county, city, and private grants, in addition to private contributions.

Refugees Northwest is a refugee resettlement organization run through Lutheran Community Services Northwest. They are a regional NGO with their headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Refugee Northwest programs include cross-cultural mental health services, refugee elder programs, immigration assistance, and ESOL classes. Each of their programs is funded through a different source, but some of these include Medicaid and federal, state, and private grants.

Seattle Public Libraries (SPL) play a part in refugee education through their ESOL classes, advocacy workshops, speaking groups, and walk-in tutoring at their locations throughout King County. The adult literacy program manager explains that “the goal of public libraries is that any person can come in with any question, from ‘How do I fill out this form?’ to ‘How can I go to community college?’ and receive an answer and any help they need.” SPL’s adult education programs are funded through the Seattle Public Libraries Foundation, which is made up of private donors. Founded in 1986, Literacy Source is an NGO that provides educational opportunities to all adult learners, including ESOL, math, digital literacy, and citizenship classes. Their Ready to Work program is particularly popular amongst refugee learners. Literacy Source is contracted out by SPL, Refugees Northwest, and the city government to provide classes and programs.

### *Impactful Services*

The existing secondary literature about refugee education focuses primarily on language acquisition. However, every representative that I talked to stressed the importance of education beyond ESOL. Refugees Northwest’s director of community programs explained to me that refugee education must include education of American culture and society or else the refugees will be unable to use their English language skills. This challenged me to ask myself how I define education. When I started this project, I expected to define education as English and job skills classes. However, I have shifted my framing of education to encompass a range of

programs, including cross-cultural awareness. This is because educational programs can include classes, but also educational workshops, field trips, meetings with case managers, and engagement with local representatives. Each of these must be considered part of refugee education because it is through these programs that refugees learn to apply their language and career classes.

The first programs important to highlight are ESOL classes, sometimes called English as a second language (ESL) classes. ESOL classes were offered at each of the NGOs I interviewed, but because it is their primary focus, I will discuss Literacy Source's ESOL classes. Literacy Source's primary focus is on different types of English education (ESOL and Adult Basic Education). They offer five levels of ESOL ranging from no English knowledge to advanced reading and writing. Students attend an orientation where they are tested and interviewed in order to place them in an appropriate level. Literacy Source's classes are offered in 10-week quarters that mirror local universities' quarter systems. Literacy Source also practices student-based learning techniques, meaning that at the beginning of the course, students work together as a class to create goals and learning outcomes. The instructor then builds a curriculum to meet those goals. Classes are taught by certified adult educators with the help of volunteer class assistants. Students also have access to walk-in or scheduled tutoring with volunteer tutors. Additionally, students have access to Literacy Source's library that is organized for ESOL learners.

A common extension of refugee education is hard skills training. SPL offers classes through Literacy Source that combine English as a second language with computer literacy and job skills. Resume workshops, offered at every organization that I interviewed, are an example of hard skill development. At the end of these classes or workshops, refugees come away with a clear understanding of the American work culture and cultivated skills that employers seek in their employees. Additionally, ReWA offers programs in home healthcare training and childcare

provision. In order to take part in these classes, participants must have passed the first two levels of ESL classes offered at ReWA, but the classes incorporate ESL level three into the class. At the completion of these programs, participants earn professional certificates required in the state of Washington. Even for refugees with experience, these certificates are crucial. In a ReWA blog, one woman explains, "I have 40 years of experience teaching, but without credentials it was difficult to get a job." But after participating in the variety of programs offered, refugees can work at pre-schools, daycares, or as home care providers.

A key aspect of many refugee assistance programs is a case manager who work one-on-one with refugees to ensure they successfully gain employment. In addition to helping refugees navigate King County's job market, case managers can also refer refugees to programs, classes, and workshops to build the skills they need to enter the workforce. From there, case managers assist refugees with resumes and job applications. After a refugee has been employed, the case manager checks in on the status of employment. If a refugee needs to find a new job, then the case manager continues to support the refugee. In many cases, it is necessary that that case managers be multilingual in the language of the refugees they are working with. Organizations that use case managers include: ReWA, Seattle Public Libraries, and Refugees Northwest.

Some organizations offer programs and workshops to assist in general system navigation. These programs range from using public transportation to understanding family law. One unit of ReWA is dedicated to people experiencing domestic violence. Refugees Northwest has a program to support refugees with complex medical conditions navigate doctor visits, prescription refills, insurance, and other aspects of the American healthcare system. This may seem removed from education in the formal sense, but informing refugees of the laws that protect them and helping them to utilize the resources available to them is an important aspect of refugee education. Another example of system navigation is parent workshops where parents

learn how to communicate with their children's teachers. One of ReWA's youth programs requires that parents take classes so they can understand how they can best support their students. ReWA's youth programs director recalls one session of the class where parents were all taking pictures of a sick note, so they knew what to write to avoid their children being marked as truant. Perhaps the most important thing to note about all of the system navigation programs is that, according to Refugees Northwest and ReWA, stem from needs voiced by the refugee community.

Organizations in the Seattle area expressed the need for advocacy to be a part of refugee education. Through education about their own rights, refugees are able to advocate for themselves. SPL, ReWA, and Refugees Northwest offer programs to help refugees and immigrants understand the naturalization process, their rights regarding the police and Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and their ability to be involved in policy decisions. Once a year, ReWA, transports refugees to Olympia to meet with their legislators. Before the trip, ReWA helps refugees develop a plan to express their needs. Recently, the refugee organizations in Seattle have been working together with the United States Census Bureau to encourage all refugees and immigrants to fill out the 2020 census. Through fliers and word of mouth, these organizations are educating refugees about how the 2020 census determines policy impacting voting, welfare, infrastructure, education, and more.

### *The Imperfect Web of Refugee Services*

Currently a complicated web of offices and organizations support refugee resettlement in King County. Each organization has unique strengths and they have established an informal service network to meet the needs of the refugee community, often in a piecemeal fashion. Spreading services across several NGOs is far from ideal and could be improved with greater funding from King County. Underfunding drives these organizations to create formal and informal partnerships forming an imperfect system of refugee educational services.

In the absence of robust government support, organizations serving refugees work together informally through partnerships and coalitions. Some partnerships are short-term, such as ReWA working with Refugees Northwest to put on a mental health workshop. Other partnerships are more enduring, such as SPL and Literacy Source's ESOL classes. Coalitions, such as Northwest Immigrant and Refugee Health Coalition or the Eastside Immigrant and Refugee Coalition, are another way that refugee organizations work together. In joining a coalition, organizations commit to the goals of the coalition, and they meet regularly to determine each organization's role in achieving said goals.

ESOL classes provide an example of how these informal networks operate and the variety of services they offer. Literacy Source and ReWA pride themselves on their quarter long ESOL classes where students engage in community building with learning. In their programs, consistent attendance is necessary to succeed. Refugees Northwest and SPL offer drop-in tutoring and classes where anyone can stop in at any time. While these classes do not result in as high of language acquisition as the quarter long classes, they offer an option for students who are unable to commit to weekly classes. Between all the organizations and the variety of classes offered, the hope is that every refugee learner can find an option that works for their language goals and schedule.

These informal service coalitions are imperfect in their delivery of services to meet the needs of refugees. For example, the OIRA does not have the resources to provide refugee education, so they fund refugee education through the various organizations, like ReWA, Refugees Northwest, and Literacy Source. Refugees Northwest does not provide ESOL classes, so they rely on Literacy Source for English language acquisition. But Literacy Source does not provide childcare, so they use ReWA for those services. ReWA aids domestic violence survivors. Refugees Northwest provides mental healthcare assistance and education programs. Therefore, if a refugee needed all of the aforementioned services – ESOL, childcare, domestic

abuse assistance, and mental healthcare – they would need to go three or four organizations. Furthermore, these numerous organizations are spread throughout the greater Seattle area from SeaTac to North Seattle. The fact that these services are diffused around King County helps mitigate some transportation barriers to education, but not all services are offered at each location. Due to COVID19 several refugee organizations have moved their programs online. While access to the internet might be a barrier to some refugees attending classes, continuing to host some trainings in a hybrid or fully online format after the end of the social isolation period would mitigate the transportation barriers some refugees faced prior to COVID.

The web of offices and organizations serving refugees in King County attempts to serve all refugees, but the reality is many are slipping through the cracks. The organizations hope that if one program or organization is not accessible to them for whatever reason, another organization will be able to offer the support they need. While the organizations work together to communicate with refugees, the system can be difficult to navigate. I had the time and resources to dedicate to trying to understand all of the refugee programs offered, but many refugees do not have the time, ability, or resources to go through each organization's website to determine which program would be most beneficial to them. Educational programs such as a concise database and workshops are needed to refugees can learn about the educational system itself.

#### *Limitations of Providing Education Services*

There are shortfalls – holes in the web – that prevent organizational efforts from being completely successful in providing educational services to refugees. One hole in the web of educational services concerns refugees who come to the United States with degrees or professional certificates. While local organizations support refugees in their job search through case management and workplace workshops, there are no established programs that support refugees seeking American certification or degrees in fields they have previously studied. There

is an imbalance in the resources allocated to preparing refugees for service sector jobs and the resources allocated to re-education and recertification. These services might be available at local community colleges, but these local organizations, on the whole, do not provide these imperative services.

A reoccurring theme that organizations emphasized was understaffing. In order to offer the diverse programs that will improve educational access for refugees, organizations must employ a multilingual staff of highly educated people. This is not feasible with the current funding situation. In order to make a livable wage in King County, employees of local NGOs must do the jobs of several people. This affects their ability to serve all the refugees who seek their services. If someone is split between three roles, then they are unable to put their full energy into any role. To simplify, the employees of local NGOs are overworked and underpaid. The result is a high turnover rate in local NGOs and offices that support refugees. It is not a lack of care for the cause that pushes people from these jobs, but rather an inability to support themselves and their families on the salary they receive. Like the refugees they serve, employees are limited by time, and they must make difficult decisions dictating how they spend that time. Mahnaz Eshetu of ReWA explains that grants do not move with inflation, so each year their organization is expected to offer more services with fewer resources. She values her employees and wishes that she could offer them a more competitive wage, stating that “I think many people forget that these people are educated professionals, and the fact that they often cannot earn a livable wage is frustrating.”

There are some obstacles to refugee education, despite their best efforts, organizations can only mitigate, and not eradicate. Every organization identified time as one of the most significant barriers to refugee education. There is a saying that “We all have the same 24 hours in a day.” However, this is not true for the refugees who desire to seek an education but cannot because they must work several jobs to provide for their family, or because they must care for



their children, or because they have to travel long distances to class. For these refugees, 24 hours is not enough time for them to accomplish all that they may desire. There is an added pressure of time created by the limitations of financial support that refugees receive. When refugees come to Seattle, they receive financial support from the federal government for three months. At the end of the three months, they are expected to be fully acclimated into their new society and gainfully employed. Because of the high cost of living in King County, many refugees must work two or three full time jobs in order to support themselves and their families, leaving no time to study or take classes. Refugees cannot be expected to prioritize education when they are struggling to make a living. If a refugee is not working several jobs, they are likely the primary childcare provider in their household. Therefore, the absence of childcare services makes the classes offered by local organizations inaccessible. Yet another way that time limits refugee education is transportation. If a program or class is too far away via public transport or walking, refugees are extremely unlikely to commit to the program or class. Every interview I conducted reinforced the obstacle that not having enough time creates for adult refugees.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The solutions proposed by this research are centered around state, county, and city policy. Other possible solutions could be centered around NGO organizational structure or budget allocation, and more potential solutions could include institutions of public education. The decision to focus on public policy was intended to advocate for the people and organizations who work tirelessly to provide educational opportunities for adult refugees. I searched for an innovative solution to the challenges that refugees face when seeking an education. However, as I pursued this research, it became apparent that the most impactful thing that local governments can do is increase their financial support to refugees and the organizations that serve them. Recall that in 2017, King County and the Seattle Foundation allocated \$2.25 million for refugee resettlement efforts. While this refugee fund was beneficial, it

is insufficient when you consider the depth of the services that refugee resettlement requires. I propose state, county, and city governments support refugee education by offering financial assistance to refugees beyond the first three months of settlement and by providing more financial support to organizations in the form of grants.

The unfortunate truth is that no bill or act of law can give refugees more time in a day. However, by extending the period of government financial support to refugees beyond three months, local governments alleviate some of the strain put on refugees to dive into being fully independent members of the workforce. If refugees have a longer period to adjust to life in King County, then they are more likely to seek educational opportunities. Right now, many refugees are forced to choose between working two jobs to support their family and working one job while pursuing an education. One choice limits options for upwards mobility, but provides sufficient income for refugees and their families. The other choice secures higher future earnings but does not provide a livable income. The reality is that there is no real choice here; refugees must do whatever it takes to maintain their livelihoods, including sidelining their education. By giving refugees more money – and therefore more time – the state of Washington, King County, and the City of Seattle would be mitigating a significant barrier to refugee education.

The other way that local governments can support refugee education is by increased financial support of the organizations that serve refugees. Additionally, grants should move with inflation or be reevaluated on a yearly basis to account for inflation. While this answer may seem a bit obvious, it is imperative to understand why these organizations need increased funding and how that money will be spent. Primarily, these organizations need funding in order to expand their services, so they can meet the needs of all King County refugees. My research indicated that what works for refugee education is a variety of class times and locations, access to childcare, and programs outside of ESOL classes. Educational opportunities for adult refugees must be curated in many different fields of study or areas of skill. However, providing a

more holistic approach to education requires funding to rent out new spaces, to hire more educators and specialists, and to purchase learning materials. Classes, workshops, fieldtrips, and other programs are not free, and in order to provide the depth of education that refugees need, organizations require more funding from state, county, and city governments. In addition to more programming opportunities, increased funding allows organizations to pay their employees a livable wage. Having an educated, multilingual staff of educators, case workers, program directors, and other professionals is essential to ensuring culturally aware and trauma informed education for adult refugees. These hardworking individuals deserve an income that they can support their own families with. Also, a higher wage will result in lower turnover and more efficient operations. Refugee organizations in Seattle have proven their strength as they work together to provide a variety of opportunities for refugees to participate in education, but additional funding will ensure that more refugees have access to more necessary programs and resources.

### **Future Research**

Because of the gap in literature around refugee education in King County, there are many opportunities for future research. My research was limited by time constraints and the outbreak of COVID19, but there is a need for a comprehensive evaluation considering refugee education for refugees of all ages and national origins. Another limitation to my research is Seattle University's IRB restrictions concerning refugees. Ideally, research about adult refugee education would include the thoughts, ideas, and opinions of refugees because it is the goal of my research to determine the best ways to serve refugees. Therefore, future research should incorporate refugee voices.

**Word Count (without citations): 7081**

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself.
  - a. What is your role the organization/ office?
  - b. What compelled you to work for this organization/ office?
  - c. How long have you worked in this organization/ office?
2. Tell me about the organization/ office generally.
  - a. What is the history?
  - b. What are the main goals of this organization/ office?
  - c. Where is your organization/ office located?
    - i. Do you have multiple locations?
    - ii. Why are you located where you are?
  - d. What are your primary sources of funding?
  - e. Who are your educators? (paid employees, interns, volunteers, etc.)
3. Tell me about the classes and programs your organization provides.
  - a. How do you structure classes?
  - b. What subjects do you offer?
  - c. What is your average class size?
  - d. Do your programs utilize tutors, language partners, or any other teacher's assistants?
    - i. Why or why not?
  - e. What times of the week do you offer classes? How frequently?
  - f. Do your classes follow a standard curriculum?
    - i. Why or why not?
  - g. Are your participants literate in their first language?
    - i. If no, how do you adapt programs/ classes to accommodate?
  - h. Do some of your participants have higher levels of education?
    - i. If yes, how do you structure those programs?
  - i. What are your learning outcomes?
    - i. How do you assess if learning outcomes are met?
  - j. What limits your ability to serve refugees in King County?

- k. How have your programs changed in recent years?
4. Tell me about who uses your resources.
  - a. Who primarily participates in your programs (generally i.e. age, gender)
  - b. How are people typically referred to your programs?
  - c. What methods of transportation do participants use to travel to your organization/ office? Do they walk? Drive? Use the bus?
  - d. When people come into the classes/ programs what are their intentions/ goals?
    - i. Do you think that these are often met?
  - e. Walk me through the process of how refugees move through your program/ office. For example, say a refugee comes to you and says, "I want to learn English," what are your next steps?
  - f. What are the primary challenges students/ participants face?
  - g. What are barriers to people participating in your programs?
  - h. What do you think success look like for your participants?
    - i. How do you measure participant success?
  - i. How do participants use the skills they learn from your programs?
  - j. Do participants express desire to learn skills beyond the scope of what your organization/ office currently offers?
  - k. How long do participants typically participate your programs?
  - l. Does your program have an "end" or "graduation?"
    - i. Why or why not?
    - ii. If yes, what is the next step for your participants? Do you refer them to other services?
5. Are there any aspects of your organization that I didn't ask about that are important to highlight or address?
6. Is there anything else you think I should know?



## Appendix B: Fliers and Pamphlets

During my interview with Literacy Source, I was able to collect fliers and pamphlets created for their Arabic-speaking students. I translated these fliers to gain understanding of their class orientation process and class offerings.

### Class Offerings

دروس عامة ودروس خصوصية مجانية  
للبالغين في مدينة ليك سيتي



**Reading | Writing | ESOL | Citizenship |**



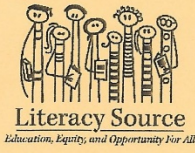
دروس في النهار أو المساء  
قريب على خط الحافلات في ليك سيتي

للتسجيل اتصل على الرقم  
**206-782-2050**

**3200 NE 125th St.  
Seattle, WA 98125**  
[www.literacysource.org](http://www.literacysource.org)

Arabic

## Registration/ Orientation Questions



## Student Registration Form

## استمارة تسجيل الطالب

1. \_\_\_\_\_ الاسم الاول
2. \_\_\_\_\_ اسم العائلة
3. \_\_\_\_\_ العنوان
4. \_\_\_\_\_ المدينة
5. Zip: \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_ رقم الهاتف المحمول
7. \_\_\_\_\_ البريد الالكتروني
8. هل لديك فيزا الطالب او فيزا تبادل الطلبة؟  
 نعم  لا
9. هل انت لاجئ؟  
 نعم  لا
10. \_\_\_\_\_ اللغة الاولى
11. \_\_\_\_\_ لغات اخري
12. هل انت بلا مأوي  
 نعم  لا
13. كم فرد من عائلتك يعيشون معك في المنزل؟ \_\_\_\_\_
14. كم عدد اطفالك تحت سن 18 \_\_\_\_\_
15. مجموع دخل الاشخاص الذين يعيشون في منزلك.  
 \$0- \$30,000  
 \$30,000- \$50,000  
 \$50,000- \$75,000  
 over \$75,000
16. هل تتلقي أي من المساعدات التالية  
 TANF  
 WorkFirst  
 LEP  
 Food Stamps  
 SSI  
 Apple Health (Medicaid)  
 برنامج الغذاء المدرسي  
 مساعدة في الاسكان

Arabic

## 17. ما هي اهدافك .

- تعلم الانجليزية  
 تعلم القراءة و الكتابة او الحساب  
 ان تحصل علي الجنسية الامريكية  
 ان تحصل علي شهادة الجي اي دي  
 ان تحصل علي شهادة المدرسة الثانوية  
 ان تندخل الجامعة او تدريب  
 ان تحصل علي عمل (انا ابحث عن عمل )  
 ان تحصل علي وظيفة اخرى  
 ان اتعلم استخدام الكمبيوتر

## 18. من أين سمعت عن مركزنا ؟

## 19. موافقة الطالب

لا مانع لديك في استخدامنا للاتي:

1. الصور او الفيديو الخاصي بي  لا  نعم  
 2. الأسم  لا  نعم  
 3. المعلومات التي اقولها او اكتبها في مقابلة اعلان جدول أو في نشرة اخبارية  
 لا  نعم



20. التوقيع \_\_\_\_\_

21. التاريخ \_\_\_\_\_

22. من نستطيع الاتصال بيه في الحالة الطوارئ

الأسم : \_\_\_\_\_

رقم الهاتف \_\_\_\_\_

صلة القرابة: \_\_\_\_\_