



# Educator Brief

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## Forced Displacement: Implications for Refugee and Asylee Students

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At the end of 2022, a record number of approximately 108.4 million individuals, including 43.3 million children, were forcibly displaced.<sup>1</sup> Forced displacement occurs when people flee their homes due to various factors, including wars, conflict, persecution, natural disasters driven by the escalating climate crisis, and economic instability.

This *Educator Brief* is designed to give educators the knowledge and tools they need to effectively support displaced children and to learn effective strategies to provide them with the support they need to thrive.



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## BEGINNING WITH DEFINITIONS

Displaced people are often grouped into two categories: refugees and asylum-seekers.

### Refugees

People granted refugee status are entitled to legal protections by the nation state. They have successfully demonstrated that they fled their country due to credible fears of persecution based on factors like race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group membership.<sup>2</sup>

Notably, climate change is increasingly displacing people across the globe both within and across borders (an estimated 43 million children alone over the last six years).<sup>3</sup> While eco-migrants could be considered “ecological refugees,” international law established by the 1951 Refugee Convention does not designate eco-migrants as refugees. However, these laws implemented by this 1951 convention were written before there was general understanding of the catastrophic scope and scale of climate change and its effects on human living.

Despite the current significant global displacement crisis and considerable media focus on the issue, the United States only resettled approximately

31,800 refugees in the first eight months of 2023.<sup>4</sup> This represents barely a fraction (less than a quarter of one percent) of the total displaced global population.

### Asylum Seekers

Similar to refugees, asylum seekers often flee their homes due to unlivable conditions, economic instability, or fear of persecution. Asylum seekers, in contrast to refugees who have been officially granted refugee status and its associated legal protections, do not have guaranteed legal safeguards in the country where they are seeking refuge since their asylum application is still being processed and a final determination has not yet been made.

According to recent data, over 2.5 million people are currently awaiting processing and adjudication of their asylum claims across the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and immigration court systems in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> The asylum backlog has grown significantly in recent years, leading to average wait times of over 6 years for USCIS cases and 4.3 years for immigration court cases.<sup>6</sup> While awaiting a final decision on their asylum claim, asylum seekers confront

legal uncertainties and the looming risk of deportation.

## FOCUSING ON DISPLACED CHILDREN – THEIR KEY CHALLENGES

The experience of displacement can have profound psychological and educational implications for refugee and asylum-seeking children and youth. These young people often face a range of potentially traumatic events before, during, and after migration, including exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, dangerous journeys, and the stresses of resettlement.<sup>7</sup> These experiences lead to high rates of mental health challenges including Post-Traumatic Stress (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Without the support and supervision of adult family members, unaccompanied minors are at particularly high risk of exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the individual mental health burden, the accumulation of stressors and disruptions to family and social systems can impair children’s cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development.<sup>10</sup>

Displaced children often experience interruptions in their education. After resettlement, they may face language barriers, social exclusion, and difficulties adapting to new educational systems.<sup>11</sup>





Because of the unique challenges faced by displaced children, they are more likely to be absent from school, in both primary and secondary education. Strengthening educational access for displaced children requires trauma-informed, culturally-responsive interventions at individual, family, school, and policy levels to promote resilience and mitigate the long-term impacts of forced displacement.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the experience of displacement often causes trauma in children, which can be intensified by the challenges of resettlement. Trauma may make it difficult for children to regulate their emotions and manage their feelings profoundly impacting schooling experiences and overall well-being.<sup>13</sup>

## FOSTERING GENERATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR DISPLACED STUDENTS

Schools are well-positioned to serve as safe havens for displaced children. Unfortunately, when displaced children arrive in new communities, they often encounter ignorance and xenophobia. Establishing an environment conducive to children's thriving starts with the relationships educators build with refugee students and their families. Achieving this goal involves addressing systemic and individual barriers that impede equitable support for refugee students.

Educators can create an environment in which students thrive by embracing diversity and understanding how dynamics of privilege impact their displaced students. Building a welcoming community is not a one-size-fits-all approach. However, supporting students in developing a positive sense of their ethnic and cultural identity can reduce the negative effects of past and ongoing discrimination on their academic performance and mental health.<sup>14</sup>

### Center Social Emotional Dimensions of Learning

While displaced students encounter challenges in adapting to new curricula and standards, prioritizing their mental well-being, especially for those with high levels of



trauma, is paramount to fostering their resilience and improving their academic performance down the line. The skills encompassed in Social Emotional Learning (SEL)—managing emotions, setting goals, showing empathy, building relationships, and making responsible decisions—are particularly essential for displaced students' well-being and academic success. By focusing on SEL in the classroom, educators are supporting refugees and asylum-seekers in navigating challenges like trauma and cultural adjustments while fostering a positive learning environment for long-term success.

Displaced children often carry the burden of traumatic experiences from their past, including conflict, displacement, and loss, making trauma-informed care crucial for their well-being. Trauma-informed care focuses on understanding how trauma affects behavior and learning. It promotes a culture of safety, trust, and empowerment, while also offering opportunities for self-expression and emotional regulation. It helps displaced children feel seen, heard, and valued, ultimately facilitating their successful adaptation and integration into new communities.<sup>15</sup>

### Language Acquisition

For refugee and asylum-seeking

students, mastering the language of their new country is crucial for empowerment and integration. Proficiency allows them to navigate their environment, connect with peers, and engage in society. However, it's equally important to preserve their home language, as it is intricately tied to their culture and identity. Before settling in the US, refugee children may have experienced different languages of instruction and varying levels of schooling quality. As a result, they might have had limited opportunities to fully grasp educational content. Therefore, it is essential to assess their skills and educational needs, early on.<sup>16</sup>

To support these students in navigating their language learning journey, educators should create a multilingual environment that celebrates diversity while respecting linguistic differences. Research suggests that approaches focused on inclusion, engagement, and comprehension are particularly effective in creating a supportive language learning environment for Students with Interrupted or Limited Education (SLIFE).<sup>17</sup> These approaches can be implemented through a range of inclusive activities, such as drama and role play, translanguaging, graphic organizers, flashcards, visuals, and scaffolding. Educators keen on delving deeper into these strategies can access additional resources on websites such as Edutopia.org, Bridge.edu, and the British Council's English Teaching Resources.<sup>18</sup>



## Including Parents and Caretakers

The parents and caretakers of displaced students made considerable sacrifices for their children's welfare. The promise of education is often at the center of the family's dreams for their collective future. However, they may not always understand how the educational system works in their new lands nor do they always feel comfortable or welcomed in schools. Prior to settling in the US, refugee students' schooling may have been interrupted and sporadic, shaping students' readiness for school. As such, teachers may need to put in additional effort and time to engage displaced students and their families by cultivating trust.<sup>19</sup>

To cultivate trust and foster a welcoming environment, effective communication is essential. Regularly updating parents on students' progress and inviting the parents' participation can be particularly important. This encompasses written, in-person, and digital communication channels. For instance, schools should promote discussions between parents and children about their reading assignments to increase parental involvement in their children's education.<sup>20</sup> To overcome language barriers, written communication should be translated into the parent's native language. To promote and

enhance in-person parent involvement, schools can organize workshops on the education system and equip parents with effective strategies for supporting learning at home. Working with community liaisons and providing a translator at parent-teacher conferences both serve to enhance trust and communication between parents and educators, facilitating collaboration to ensure student success.

## Making Explicit Cultural Norms and Addressing Biases

Prior to settling in the US, displaced children have often been taught using teacher-centered pedagogy. This contributes to the potentially differing understanding of the behaviors and approaches required for learning in many US student-centered classrooms. Therefore, explicitly teaching displaced students US classroom behaviors like how to ask questions during class may be important for student engagement and learning.<sup>21</sup>

It is also particularly important to attend to how biases affect displaced children's school experiences and strive to create classroom environments that address them.

Teacher biases have negative impacts on students' academic performance and social network. Refugee students assigned to biased teachers are less likely to befriend other students and are more likely to experience bullying.<sup>22</sup> By becoming aware of our biases we are better able to address their negative repercussions.<sup>23</sup>

Student biases can also negatively affect displaced children's school experiences. Helping all students develop perspective-taking increases the likelihood of other students befriending refugee students and decreases rates of bullying. This can be done through a series of readings and visuals that focus on encouraging students to understand and empathize with the experiences of others who have undergone displacement both throughout history as well currently across regions.<sup>24</sup>

## Other Recommendations:

- Customize education to individual students, avoiding just placing all displaced students in remedial classes without a comprehensive assessment of their strengths and needs.
- Implement a buddy program, as recommended by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), by pairing displaced students with empathetic role models, thus fostering support and solidarity. <https://www.rescue.org/uk/resource/being-buddy-application-form>
- Cultivate year-round opportunities for students to share their diverse histories, cultures, and experiences, moving beyond only designated multicultural days.
- Provide resources in multiple languages for students and families.
- When feasible, hire staff from the local community to enhance connections with essential services.



## Recommendations for Children's and Young Adult Literature:

### For emerging readers (ages 5 to 9):

- *The Silence Seeker* by Ben Morley - This book follows a young refugee boy who discovers the power of storytelling to express his feelings.

### For middle-grade readers (ages 9 to 14):

- *The Red Pencil* by Andrea Davis Pinkney - This novel explores the transformative power of education for a Sudanese girl in a refugee camp.

### For upper-grade readers (ages 14+):

- *Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town* by Warren St. John - This non-fiction book explores the experiences of a soccer team made up of refugee boys in a small American town.



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## About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

