

Refugee REACH ROUNDS Harvard Graduate School of Education

Purposes of Data in Refugee Education¹

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Students engage in English language and literacy classes in the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan (2018).
Photo credit: UN Women/Christopher Herwig. CC BY-NY-ND 2.0. No changes were made. bit.ly/2VP0oIG.

Refugee REACH ROUNDS aim to foster discussions on common dilemmas of practice experienced by researchers, policymakers, and educators working in settings of migration and displacement. Our hope is that through dialogue and debate on really challenging questions and dilemmas in our field, together we can advance our collective understanding and find ways to promote quality education and welcoming communities for all in settings of migration and displacement. Please read more about our work at www.reach.gse.harvard.edu

Dilemma Definition: Data Matters

Accurate and timely data on refugee students is needed to drive effective education systems and in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Data that captures refugee student status and experience in the education system can be critical for driving program design and policy decisions, such as trauma-informed emotional care and flexible curricular approaches,² toward promoting student success, well-being, and longer-term opportunities.

In the United States, the focus of this ROUNDS dilemma in practice, young people who enroll in school after arriving through the refugee resettlement process are often identified in data systems as ‘English Language Learners’ or as ‘immigrant students.’ These categories can hide specific experiences as refugees that many of these young people bring to the classroom, including complex academic and social-emotional needs, trauma, interrupted access to formal education, multiple languages of instruction, and experiences of exclusion in schools.³ These categories can also hide specific assets and areas of unique or advanced ability and performance that can serve refugee young people in their transitions and in their contributions to schools and communities, including multiple language proficiencies and advanced skills in math, science, and geography, which are often taught differently in other education systems. Moreover, these categories can miss nuances of experience: one refugee student’s English level may be notably higher than the level of another refugee student entering in the same term, depending on factors such as previous experiences and amount of time living in the US prior to enrollment.

Recognizing these assets and needs can guide education systems in better serving refugee students from the classroom to the policy level. When teachers and education systems are aware of needs and capabilities, they can avoid disadvantaging students by setting expectations that are too high, risking discouragement, or too low, risking boredom and lack of progress. First, systems must first find ways to mindfully and meaningfully capture dynamic refugee identities within data.

What principles do you think should guide decision-making about collecting meaningful data on refugee students’ backgrounds and experiences?



Dilemma in Practice

Seif is a twenty-two-year-old in Philadelphia. Originally from Iraq, Seif spent his adolescence in Jordan, where financial pressures led him to drop out of the 10th grade in order to join his father and elder brother in working as day-laborers. When he arrived in the United States as a

refugee at the age of 19, Seif came with a cumulative eight-year gap in his formal education. Since Seif had no readily translated documentation of his previous education, he was placed in the ninth grade at Liberty High, his neighborhood high school. This was common practice by the School District⁴ of Philadelphia for adolescent students arriving with six years of formal education. Seif had brought his Jordanian school transcripts with him and submitted them upon enrollment, but due to the centralization of transcript processing at the district office, coupled with massive cuts of teachers, staff and school personnel, there was a significant backlog of transcripts waiting to be translated. Starting high school in the United States, Seif hoped to make up for lost time, and access the education that was denied to him in Jordan.

By the time he was in eleventh grade, Seif had developed a basic command of English with the help of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. He had also built a community of friends and become a regular member of extracurricular activities within the school, including an Arab American cultural group offered by a local nonprofit and a workout club that allowed him to interact with English speakers and practice his growing language skills. Unknown to his school, he was juggling part-time employment with his school schedule in order to help support his large family. While the principal and many of his teachers were aware that Seif was an older student, they knew little of his pre-migratory history: where he had spent the past few years before coming to the United States, why his education was interrupted, or even that he was waiting for his transcripts to be processed at the district level. Because Seif's transcripts had been moved to the district, his own school knew little about him save for what he chose to share.

During his eleventh-grade year, however, Seif turned twenty-one. Under Pennsylvania state policy, this meant that he had reached the age limit for public education and would not be able to finish earning his high school diploma at Liberty High. As teachers and administrators called it, he was being "twenty-one'd." Understandably, Seif was angry, for if his documents had been translated on time, his education in Jordan would have been recognized and he would have been placed in a higher grade, allowing him to complete his high school years at Liberty High.

The district did have an adult education program that Seif could attend, the "Second Chances Program" (SCP). SCP was designed for students above seventeen, including previous high school dropouts, to earn between 6-9 credits a year towards a high school diploma. But when Seif began attending SCP, he found that it did not include any ESL instruction. Without that language support, he found the classes nearly impossible. Because SCP was only offered from 3-6pm every day, he also found it impossible to fit around a work schedule and lost his part-time job.

You know, I had my grades, my credits; I had teachers I was used to. I had friends, and I had a work schedule figured out that went along with my school schedule. The Second Chances Programs is from 3-6 in the afternoon, every day, so I lost my job. They should have let me stay there [at Liberty High]; finish my high school diploma, stay with my friends, stay with the same school system and team of teachers. And I was a regular at the school gym, at the gym I had friends,

and I was doing well. I was playing sports with them and stuff, and now all that is gone. I lost everything.⁵

A program administrator of SCP offered one other option to Seif, which was to attend classes at one of Philadelphia's GED⁶ centers and sit the GED exams to earn a high school equivalency diploma. However, many of the GED centers did not offer ESL support either, including the only center in the northeastern region of the city where most Iraqi refugees have been resettled. For Seif to attend the closest center with an ESL component would require over an hour-long trip on two forms of public transportation. Seif's choices were to either stay at the SCP for the next three years where he would continue to attempt to earn between 6-9 credits every year, or to try to sit for the GED exams, even though there were no nearby classes available that accommodated for his language needs. After several attempts to prepare for and sit for the GED exam, which was a final resort for Seif, he finally gave up. In an interview, Seif said, "Even though all I wanted from America was an education, I can't do this anymore."



From the Research: National Education Data Systems

Globally, the collection of data on school-aged refugees is uneven and often carried out by UNHCR or other international organizations independently of national education systems.⁷ In some host countries, such as Ethiopia, the importance of capturing refugee education data for inclusive educational planning and monitoring spurred the development of a customized Refugee Education Management Information System (R-EMIS). A collaborative effort between UNHCR and the Ministry of Education, the system is designed to run in parallel with but still separately from Ethiopia's national data management system.⁸ Elsewhere, such as in South Sudan, information from both schools serving exclusively refugee students and schools serving national students is collected in the same system, but without differentiation between school type or the ability to disaggregate educational data by refugee status.⁹

While UNHCR has identified refugee inclusion within national Education Management Information Systems as key for achieving the aims of its Refugee Education Strategy,¹⁰ it also recognizes serious protection concerns in identifying student refugee status within national data systems.¹¹ Even for families for whom immigration status is not a sensitive topic, probing for a student's full educational history – or lack thereof – may feel invasive and raise concerns. And if this information is not then captured in a way that makes it available to all who would benefit from the knowledge across a system, every repetitive probe raises the likelihood of experiencing exclusion. Systems are thus faced with the dilemma of balancing considerations to determine meaningful and actionable data collection practices.

In the United States, collecting data on refugee status and educational histories calls for significant time and resources, particularly in larger or more decentralized systems. Legal and

ethical considerations are consequential as well. Federal education policy in the United States warns against collecting information related to student or family immigration status in accordance with the Supreme Court's 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* ruling.¹² As districts receiving national, federal funding are required to identify recent immigrant students, identification is therefore intentionally defined based on a student's first date of enrollment into a United States school, and not on when, how, or why they first came to the country.¹³



From the Research: Classroom Data Collection

In the face of these challenges, one alternative approach to collect data on refugee students' educational histories is to employ screening and assessment tools at the classroom level. Teachers of refugees can administer formal and informal screening and assessment tools to measure their students' content knowledge, primary and English language proficiency, level of former schooling and capture complex refugee experiences and needs on a one-on-one basis. This personalized and nuanced way of collecting data can create a safe space for students to share their family background and migration histories without the fear of a refugee label persisting in their educational record long past resettlement. Teachers who understand their students' backgrounds, experiences, and previous learning are then better equipped to interpret and respond to their needs as learners, as well as to build upon their assets.

A classroom level data collection approach, in contrast with a national education data system that identifies students' refugee status, relies upon the discretion of families and students to provide information. This agency-oriented mode of engagement with students can as a result strengthen their trust of their teachers. Teachers can gain deep awareness of their refugee students' strengths and vulnerabilities, mobilize resources according to their needs, and enable student-focused dialogues. Further, a data collection approach based on voluntary participation of refugee students also decreases the likelihood of experiencing exclusion amongst other school employees and students because the decision making to share sensitive information on their immigration status will reflect students' own pace and readiness.

However, students' shared information at a classroom level relies heavily on stable schooling and housing experiences for communities who already face a high degree of uncertainty. With unpredictable data sharing practices and systems within and among schools and districts, data may not move with a student from one teacher or school to another. Additionally, the voluntary approach carries the risk that schools will overlook refugee students' experiences in cases that students and families choose not to provide information, particularly if they do not match assumptions about who a refugee is.

Even refugee students who are visible to their teachers through this approach will continue to remain invisible in the education system as a whole. Static data that identifies refugee students within national education data systems and captures students' unique experiences can guide how resources should be funneled to provide the right kinds of support in the long term. In the absence of such data, meeting refugee students' disparate needs will have little impact on strategic decisions on program design and policy. This will also hamper post-graduation efforts in mobilizing resources and opportunities for the refugee student population, limiting pathways for education, employment, and civic engagement in the future.



Dilemma Revisited

When Seif aged out of the public education system, there were options available for him to finish earning his high school diploma. But while both the Second Chances Program and the GED courses were designed to serve students in his situation – adult learners seeking to earn a diploma – he found that neither were able to meet his needs as a refugee student with significant gaps in his formal education in addition to the challenge of instruction in a new language. School systems designing such programs might have data on high school dropout rates and how many students over the age of seventeen would be served by alternate pathways to earning a diploma. But that data does not necessarily capture the needs of students like Seif.

Other data, if available, might have driven different decisions for these programs. How many of the district's students are resettled refugees with interrupted schooling? How many students in ESL classes will age out before acquiring enough high school credits to graduate? Where in the city are refugee families geographically concentrated? What are the options for those who age out of public education? But collecting this data takes time and resources that school districts sometimes struggle to piece together. On the other hand, data collected through assessment tools at the time of enrollment could have allowed Seif's teachers to better understand the barriers he was facing as a newcomer and identify resources and collaborative efforts that could have helped him in achieving his ultimate goal of graduation.

However, Seif's high school experience was also a product of policy decisions that had been made at the state level, such as setting the maximum age for free public education at twenty-one. The emphasis placed on on-time graduation rates as a common performance metric holds districts and schools accountable. But for Seif, the resulting system designed to produce college and career ready students within the space of four years served him poorly as he tried to catch up on eight years of lost education prior to his arrival in the United States.

Some states have taken steps towards addressing the specific needs of students like Seif. Since 2016, districts in Minnesota have been asked to identify and report on students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). With this data available, 2019 state legislation then allowed students identified as SLIFE working towards a high school diploma to remain enrolled and generate state education aid for up to one year of instruction after turning twenty-one.¹⁴ But the process to identify and report eligible students from schools through to the state level is cumbersome, and the end result will yield only a small subset of students who benefit from this policy change. For the majority of families, the process to identify students as refugees or as SLIFE calls for them to complete time-intensive surveys and provide sensitive information regarding immigration status and family history – all with no real impact on the services that students receive at school as a result.

In Seif's case, even if he had been able to remain in his high school for another year, he may still not have amassed enough high school credits or language proficiency by that point to fulfill the requirements for his diploma, including a senior project. Three out of seven periods in his schedule were taken up with ESL classes. Those classes provided the language support he badly needed to be able to access the content of his other classes. But in many cases, the state and district policies that set graduation requirements consider such classes elective, and credits earned through them do not contribute to fulfilling credit requirements for high school diplomas. For many English Learners starting school in the US, this model serves them well. Students who arrive as immigrants with a strong foundation of content knowledge and transferrable credits from prior schooling may benefit more from intensive language instruction than from content courses. As Seif's experience reflects, aggregate data on English Learners does not necessarily lead to policies and programs that meet specific needs and position refugee students for success.



Questions to Consider Ahead of Discussion

- What do you see as the main or underlying dilemma(s) at hand?
- What data, if it had been available, might have guided decision making with different results in this case? In what ways would these different results be positive or negative, and for whom?
- What were the various policies that played a role in Seif's educational experience after arriving in the United States? Were there additional factors beyond official policies – such as individual decisions or the implementation of those policies in practice – that also played a role?
- How should decisions about data collection and reporting be made? To what extent should autonomy remain with districts or schools to determine what information is most important to capture about their students, and to what extent should actors at

higher levels set common standards or require state-level reporting so that data is available to guide policymaking at those levels as well?

- In your professional experience, how do you see data on students' refugee status being used to support decisions within the education system? In what ways does this experience shape your perspectives on this dilemma?
- In your work, what data-related ideas, initiatives, practices, or policies do you see as promising?



Additional Resources

- [WIDA Focus Bulletin: SLIFE](#)
- [Migration Policy Institute: Which English Learners Count When?](#)
- [Migration Policy Institute: Beyond Teaching English: Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students](#)

Notes

¹ Many people have contributed to the conceptualization and writing of this brief: Eve Woogen, Aybahar Qarqeen, Bethany Dill, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Vidur Chopra, Elizabeth Adelman. Sally Bonet has contributed her research on experiences of refugee students in US schools, in particular data related to Seif's experiences. For more on this research, please see citation 5 below.

² Mendenhall, Mary, Lesley Bartlett, & Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher. (2017). "If You Need Help, They Are Always There for Us": Education for Refugees in an International High School in NYC." *The Urban Review*, 49(1): 1-25.

³ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. (2015). "Refugee Education in Countries of First Asylum: Breaking Open the Black Box of Pre-Resettlement Experiences." *Theory and Research in Education*, 14, 131-148.

⁴ A school district is a geographical area where local public schools are administered together.

⁵ Bonet, Sally W. (2018). "So Where are the Promises of This America? Where is the democracy and where are the human rights?": Refugee youth, citizenship education, and exclusion from public schooling." *Curriculum Inquiry*, 48(1), 53-69.

⁶ The General Educational Development exam is an alternative pathway for obtaining a high school equivalency degree.

⁷ Sarzin, Zara. (2017). *Stocktaking of Global Forced Displacement Data*. Research working paper WPS 7985; Policy Research Working Paper 7985. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-7985>.

⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2017, April). *2016 Annual Report: UNHCR – Educate a Child (EAC) Programme*, 17. <https://www.rc-geneve-international.org/en/documents/download/121491/educate-a-child-annual-report-by-unhcr>.

⁹ UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning. (2016, November). *E-Forum Report: Planning for the Inclusion of Displaced Populations in the Education Sector*, 45. http://www.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/report_final_sml_online.pdf.

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019, September). *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*, 41. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.

¹¹ UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning. *E-Forum Report: Planning for the Inclusion of Displaced Populations in the Education Sector*, 44.

¹² Lhamon, Catherine E., Philip H. Rosenfelt, & Jocelyn Samuels. (2014, May 14). Plyler Dear Colleague. U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201405.pdf>

¹³ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Fact Sheet II: Additional Questions and Answers on Enrolling New Immigrant Students. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/unaccompanied-children-2.pdf>

¹⁴ Minnesota Department of Education. (2019, October 10). MARSS Memo. https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=MDE088585&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary