



CULTIVATING TRUST: HOW EDUCATORS CAN BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR AFGHAN REFUGEE STUDENTS

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Summary

More than 20 years ago, I arrived to the US with my family. Two weeks later, I entered a first-grade classroom, silently repeating to myself the English alphabet and a list of phrases that my dad, an English teacher for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, reviewed with me the prior night. “Hi.” “Thank you.” “A-B-C.”

In the last year, a new group of Afghan children has entered American classrooms at a time when what it means to be Afghan and Muslim in America has shifted considerably after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, rising Islamophobia, and xenophobia.

Recent Afghan refugees to the US come from all corners of Afghanistan with disparate educational trajectories, experiences with conflict and trauma, and access to resources and opportunities. Moreover, these children and their families come with differing levels of trust in schools. For American educators to support these new students, we must keep in mind the multiplicity of experiences that continue to shape their lives.

We know educators want to know about their students’ experiences to better support them. As an **Afghan-American and education researcher**, I draw on my understanding of experiences of students in both Afghanistan and the US to develop a resource that can support American educators to cultivate trust and build relationships with their new students. This process requires curiosity, openness to learning, grappling with our discomforts, and time.

I choose to use the words children, students, and new students and limit my use of ‘refugee’ to only when it is descriptive of specific experiences. This decision is purposeful. While these children have had experiences that have forced them to flee their homes and seek refuge, the word refugee often places them in a box that feels constraining and exclusionary.

Two central principles motivate this resource. Firstly, to authentically engage with our new students, we must create **openness to discussion of hard questions** and become comfortable learning about culture, religion, and conflict. In my work, I purposefully integrate common cultural and Islamic concepts that illustrate the sociocultural realities of Afghan children. Moreover, Islamic concepts are relevant because almost all Afghans are first exposed to mosque-based education and, for many, it's the gateway to formal education.

Secondly, the process of building trust must embrace **agency** and expand the ways we learn from students and families. This resource provides practical suggestions for ways to elevate student and family agency and open conversations.

It is my hope that this resource can help us appreciate diversity and disrupt deficit frameworks through which, unfortunately, so many of us have come to know Afghanistan and Afghans.

The resource highlights three central elements that can cultivate trust:

- **Safe classrooms,**
- **Community connections, and**
- **Quality learning.**

It ends with suggested questions for educators to facilitate conversations about each of the three elements of trust with students, families, and community leaders.

Portrait of a classroom in Afghanistan

Aisha tightens her lavender headscarf as she follows her cousin and little brother into a classroom in the Qari's home. Red-henna on hands and sparkling bangles dangling from her wrists, Aisha is a ten-year-old in the first grade at the community-based school (CBS). Although Aisha has attended different types of "public schools," she developed basic reading and writing skills at the neighborhood madrassa. Like many people, her family moved to Kabul from Paktia province ten years ago for better job opportunities. Other families were drawn to Kabul for greater education opportunities and better security.

Afghan children might have experiences with different types of schools		
FORMAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS	COMMUNITY-BASED SCHOOLS	ELEMENTARY MADRASSAS
are based within traditional school buildings with age-based classrooms and use the national curriculum.	are part of the public system (use national curriculum) but are within homes or community centers; CBSs are typically designed for out-of-school children and often have multi-age classes.	(or mosque-based schools) focus on learning the Quran and Islamic traditions and values.

The two-classroom school is in the home of one of the teachers. As children repeat lessons after their teachers, two chickens curiously roam the small concrete courtyard, searching for bread crumbs. Boys and girls of varying ages who either did not have access to or, for security reasons, opted out of going to the formal public school, attend the CBS. Younger students (five to six year-olds) sit on the floor in the front and center of the room for a better view of the whiteboard.

Older students (10 to 13 year-olds) sit on the peripheries. Each older student is paired with two younger students who provide them with additional support, helping them find page numbers and follow lessons. While students in the classes reflect diversity in age, social class, ethnicity, and language, one core factor draws them to the CBS.

“People’s trust in the Qari is good in this environment. People wouldn’t allow their children to go to anyone’s house,” explains Ms. Yusra, the other teacher at the CBS.

The Qari—a religious title—and what he is called by his students, is a 38-year-old teacher at the CBS established in his home with the help of an international NGO. In addition to ten years of teaching experience in madrassas and public schools, the Qari has also attended NGO teacher trainings on innovative, student-centered pedagogies.

Though he grew up in Kabul, his family has experienced multiple waves of internal and cross-border displacement similar to other families in the neighborhood. Now back in Kabul, his regular interactions with the men in the neighborhood mosque mean that he personally knows many of his students’ fathers, uncles, brothers, and grandfathers. The women in the neighborhood know his wife and daughters, who are students at a formal public high school. These relationships form foundations of trust.

Cultivating trust is a critical component of building welcoming and inclusive classrooms for students who have experienced displacement. Through a profile of the Qari below, I highlight a few elements that can enable trust between teachers, students, and communities:

- Safe classrooms,
- Community connections, and
- Quality learning.

In each section, I provide suggestions for how educators in the US can draw on these elements to cultivate trust and build relationships in their classrooms.

[This data is based on the author’s research conducted during the 2018 academic year in southern Kabul.]



Safe Classrooms

Aisha and her cousin transferred from the formal public school to the CBS due to security concerns. For Aisha, this is the third school she has attended after previous interruptions. There are more girls than boys at the CBS. Families believe the CBS is more secure as it is located within the neighborhood and does not entail their girls walking alone to get to and from school. Formal public schools can be located more than several miles away.

As I speak with teachers and parents, a subtle difference emerges between security, connected to physical well-being, and safety, connected to social well-being—both of which are critical to enhancing inclusivity. In a context where many families have not had consistent experiences with the formal education system due to displacement, insecurity, and lack of schools, the Qari explains there is a lack of trust between some families and formal public schools. He explains that parents worry about their children developing character traits that are perceived to differ from values parents instill at home—for instance, respect for adults and modesty.

This school is different because, “Everyone knows me. They trust me. Because of this they send them here.”

Security vs. Safety

Security: Involves physical well-being.

Safety: Involves social well-being in community (related to conceptions of good character—See Learning section for more).

There is an assumption that once refugees are permanently resettled in countries, such as the US, they have access to both security and safety. While some sense of stability can be established, refugees might experience new threats to a sense of security and safety. Educators can proactively mitigate these concerns.

Ways educators can cultivate security and safety in the classroom

SECURITY

- As many recent refugees are of a Muslim background, consider the unique experiences of Muslims in the US as related to physical well-being to foster more secure classrooms. Many Muslim refugees face Islamophobia and bullying.
- Resources:
 - The Family and Youth Institute (FYI): [Bullying Prevention Toolkit](#).
 - Islamic Networks Group: [Anti-Bullying Resources](#).
 - Harvard Graduate School of Education: [Dismantling anti-Muslim bullying](#).

SAFETY

- Safety can be established by focusing on curriculum and culturally sustaining pedagogy (see Learning section for more).
- Consider how curricular content that examines US interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia might put students at risk.
 - Open lines of communication (inside and outside the classroom) to understand how students might be experiencing classroom conversations.
- Consider student experiences when teaching about 9/11 to ensure that one group (Muslims, Afghans, etc.) does not become a target.
 - Teaching about 9/11: [Supplemental Resources for Educators](#).
- Create inviting spaces where students are given **choices** in how they participate. When refugees first arrive from some settings (particularly Muslim majority countries), boys and girls might interact in ways that are different from those educators in the US are typically used to. Welcoming spaces create **possibilities** for students to belong and relate to one another in many different ways.
- Foster an environment where **different ways of dressing** are accepted and respected. Refugee children might dress differently (hijab, looser clothing, etc.) from their peers.

Community Connections

As alluded above, the Qari's connections with families in the community strengthen trust. Of importance is how the Qari developed trust through different mechanisms with two distinct segments of the community: old residents and new residents. In regards to the old residents, his family roots in the community meant that some level of trust was ingrained.

With the new residents—consisting of internally displaced families—trust was not similarly inherent. Rather, trust was cultivated over time through relationships developed at the mosque and informal classes in his home. The Qari recounts, “I didn't know them from the past, but we've been here for a year. I see people in the mosque and I teach their kids who come to the mosque. They have also developed trust.” Such examples highlight the importance of recognizing diversity within community. No community is homogenous, and relationship building requires understanding and different ways of engagement.

Ways educators can cultivate community connections in the classroom

- Assess how **communities** are willing to engage to avoid placing unwanted responsibility and expectations on refugee communities to need to explain their journeys, values, or practices.
- Respect different ways of **family engagement**. In some cases, fathers might be more participatory than mothers as they might have better English language skills. In other cases, mothers who have been through the public education system in their home countries might be more participatory.
 - Parents' lack of engagement does not necessarily indicate indifference. In contrast, it might indicate **respect** for educators' experiences and suggestions.
 - Create spaces for families to share their **hopes and aspirations** for a good education for their children and invite them to collaborate on ways to realize their visions.
- Seeking partnership with community centers and places of worship, such as mosques, might be a good way to learn how to engage more families.
- Some community centers are well established. See examples below:
 - Many **mosques** offer support for refugees and other vulnerable groups: [North Austin Muslim Community Center](#); [Metropolitan Denver North Islamic Center](#); [Islamic Society of Boston](#).
 - **Youth group**: [Muslim Youth for Positive Impact](#) partners youth with new refugee families to help them learn about the community and resources that are available to newcomers.
 - **Islamic Networks Group**: Provides online workshops on Muslim Americans and a list of speakers who can present at schools. [For Teachers](#); [For Administrators](#).

Quality Learning

Trust is an ongoing process, and requires ongoing dedication to learning in the classroom. Parents of students in the Qari's class compare his efforts with other teachers. One mother says, "This school puts in more effort. They have students do work at the board. We asked the children what they learned. The girls said we go to the board to solve questions." While having students do work on the board might not seem extraordinary, it signals engagement and trust—elements that are critical to fostering community in the classroom. Meanwhile, to parents—even ones who might not have had an opportunity to access school themselves—children's stories of classroom engagement demonstrate attention to learning. Students and parents appreciate regular checks on learning and active learning opportunities.

In addition to academic content, parents also expressed appreciation for socio-emotional learning. In particular, character development is regarded as a core goal of education. The same mother joyfully recounts, "They've learned the lessons well. When they come home, they respect us. The teacher said respect your mother and father, elders. They didn't say salaam before when they went out. Now when they go outside and see adults, they greet them with salaam. This makes us very happy."

Salaam means peace and is a common greeting. The longer version of the greeting is '*Salaam alaikum*,' which means peace be upon you.

Ways educators can foster learning in the classroom

- When planning interactive lessons, consider **cultural sensibilities** (e.g., limit touching) to create a sense of belonging.
 - While it is assumed that students will ask questions if they don't understand something, this expectation can be different from refugee children's previous schooling experiences (particularly in highly unstable contexts). Explaining general classroom expectations and creating a safe space can enhance belonging.
- Provide sufficient **guidance** for group activities to enable each student to participate in various ways.
- Share regular, clear feedback with students and families that offers concrete ideas on how to improve.
- Expand ideas of **character development and socio-emotional learning** by incorporating conceptions from non-western cultures.
 - Diversify curriculum and include resources from authors/contributors of various backgrounds.
 - Explore a plethora of resources through the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding: [Educators Toolkit](#).
 - Ensure assignments enable students to explore different types of knowledge, traditions, and values that feel authentic. Invite students to incorporate materials from home that represent a part of who they are.
 - Religious literacy is critical to creating inclusive spaces. [Yaqeen Institute](#) is a US-based research institute that focuses on conveying Islamic concepts (that range from mental health to women's rights) through accessible videos, infographics, and research articles.
- Additional resources for educators with refugees in their classrooms:
 - UNHCR: [Teaching about Refugees](#).
 - [Refugee REACH Initiative](#) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
 - The Family and Youth Institute (FYI): [Current Research on Muslim Youth](#).

Questions to Open Conversation

I end the resource with a list of possible questions to open conversations between educators and students, families, and community leaders. You are welcome to modify these questions, brainstorm follow up questions, and add other relevant questions. Keep in mind that questions should be phrased clearly and in simple language. And, while we want to embrace curiosity, reflect on how much we are asking students and families to disclose and at what stage of the relationship.

Lastly, the suggested questions are generic. In addition to some broad questions, I encourage educators to ask questions about specific classroom/school experiences as these might be more illuminating in understanding cultural nuances and help in the process of building a more inclusive, supportive learning environment for all students.

Questions For Students	
Safety	<p>What kind of classroom activities do you enjoy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you like working in groups or individually?• Who do you enjoy working with when we do group activities? <p>Is there a time when you didn't feel comfortable in class?</p> <p>What can we do so you feel more comfortable?</p>
Community	<p>Help me learn a little about your family so I can better support you.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who should I contact for parent-teacher meetings?• How do your parents prefer to engage? <p>I'd like to learn more about the type of community services that might be available to you and your family.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you connected to community organizations outside of school?
Learning	<p>What do you enjoy learning?</p> <p>Tell me about an activity you really enjoyed and why.</p> <p>Tell me about an activity you didn't enjoy and why.</p> <p>Tell me about a time when you needed extra support on a class activity/assignment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can we make sure I give you support next time?

Questions For Families

Safety



Has your child shared any experiences of discomfort or feeling unsafe in school?

What should I keep in mind about your child or your culture when I plan classroom activities?

How can I create a safer learning environment for your child?

Community



I love to keep open lines of communication that are not meant to be only to discuss problems but also what is going well. If I want to share something that happened in school, who should I contact? Father, mother, older sibling, community member?

How do you experience feedback I give about your child?

Should we invite a Dari/Pashto interpreter during our meetings? Is there a particular interpreter you prefer?

Do you know how to contact me if you have any concerns about school?

What do you hope for your children's future?

Learning



What do you appreciate from a teacher?

If you feel comfortable, I'd love to know more about your schooling experience. How do you hope your child's experience will be similar or different from your own?

Tell me about an activity your child enjoyed in school. How do you feel about it?

Tell me about an activity your child didn't enjoy in school?

How can I share feedback on your child's progress (email/phone call to mother/father/older sibling/another adult)?

What do you hope your child learns in school?

Questions For Community Leaders

Safety



If a student seems distressed, how can I ask about their well-being?

Can you share any community resources that focus on youth mental health?

How can I learn more about the experiences of Muslim/refugee children in American classrooms?

Community



Do you have suggestions for how I can involve families in school?

Do you know of any translation services for new refugees?

Are there community programs our refugee students can participate in?

Learning



Is there anyone I can reach out to if I want to find books or other resources that center refugee/Afghan children?

Is there anyone in the community who can come to our school to help us learn more about our new refugee students/Islam/Afghan culture?

How can we work together to support the learning of our new students?