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Community-Based Education Practices in Resettlement: Insights from the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership

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Abstract

Education is a key component of the processes refugees undertake to (re)establish their lives in their new communities. In many cases too, displaced individuals have had interruptions in their education paths. In the United States context, nonprofit and community organizations provide essential services to supplement publicly funded resettlement and educational programs. The Blacksburg Refugee Partnership (BRP) has been filling service provision gaps in Southwest Virginia for a group of resettled refugee households since late 2016. BRP provides tutoring, English as a Second Language (ESL) training, and summer supplemental programming. Based upon an interview with BRP's Education Coordinators and a survey of leaders and volunteers in September 2018, this article explores the organization's work, connecting it to challenges and opportunities similar education initiatives encounter. I organize research results around three primary themes: the benefits of resettlement in a "college town" and the importance of leveraging university resources; the complexity of volunteer-led programming; and the need for comprehensive services to facilitate students' education. I conclude by sketching the implications of this case for other educational initiatives serving refugees.

Keywords: *Refugee resettlement; education; community-based organizations; non-profits; NGOs*

Introduction

Education is a key component of the resettlement processes refugees undertake to (re)establish their lives and to acclimate in their new communities. In many cases too, displacement causes interruptions in individuals' formal educations. Some individuals have lost the chance to pursue education at all, either in their home countries or in their countries of asylum (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Other factors, including lack of access to healthcare and other necessities during long stays in camps, may compound these challenges (Nunnery & Dharod, 2017). Little or no knowledge of the language(s) of a resettlement country—and lack of government or privately provided language training for newcomers—may also present a barrier to the pursuit of educational opportunities (Hauck, Lo, Maxwell, & Reynolds, 2014). Moreover, those with degrees from universities in their home countries often find that employers and educational institutions in their countries of resettlement do not recognize those credentials (Gangamma, 2018).

While children who resettle as refugees in a third country such as the United States (U.S.) may have opportunities to (re)enroll in formal primary and secondary education, adults may not be eligible for such possibilities or for university education to the same extent (Baker, Ramsay, & Lenette, 2019). In the U.S. context, newly resettled refugees are eligible for public support directly through state and federal government programs and government-contracted,

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nonprofit resettlement agencies (Nelson, Hess, Isakson, & Goodkind, 2016). However, much of that assistance is time-limited and means-tested, leaving those unable to find adequate employment quickly in difficult circumstances. Nonprofit and community organizations provide essential services to supplement those offered by publicly funded institutions, including education programming for both children and adults.

In Southwest Virginia, a community initiative called the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership (BRP) has been filling such service provision gaps since late 2016, providing school-aged tutoring in school and homes, adult English as a Second Language (ESL) training, and summer supplemental programming for a group of resettled refugee households.[2] I interviewed BRP's Education Coordinators and surveyed leaders and volunteers in September 2018 concerning the structure and function of their education programs, and asked them to evaluate the successes and challenges confronting those initiatives. The data collection yielded rich insights into BRP's work as well as generalizable themes that strongly accord with existing literature on education initiatives serving resettled refugees. This research provides an empirical example of community-based education provision for resettled refugees that reinforces the findings of previous studies. First, BRP's work affirms the importance of understanding and leveraging the specific characteristics of resettlement locations (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Smith, 2008). Second, literature suggests that volunteer-led programming presents challenges, particularly in the area of training and preparation to carry out roles (Harvell & Prowle, 2018; Rossiter & Derwing, 2012). Third, successful resettlement requires addressing a wide array of individuals' needs simultaneously—social, health, psychological, and economic—in addition to education (Bargainnier et al., 2018; Rossiter & Derwing, 2012; Stewart, 2014).

In this article, I first describe the methodology I employed to gather and analyze the data for this research. Thereafter, I briefly describe the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and its work. The third section of the article presents and analyzes the interview and survey results, organized by major themes and illustrated with quotations from respondents. The three primary themes explored are the benefits of resettlement in a "college town" and the importance of leveraging resources universities can provide; the complexity of volunteer-led and staffed education programming; and the need for comprehensive services—for example, childcare, transportation, and physical and mental health assistance—to support students' education. I conclude by sketching the implications of this case for other educational initiatives serving resettled refugees.

Data and Methods of this Research

I conducted a joint, in-person interview with BRP's two Education Coordinators to gather information about the history and operation of its education programs. I recorded and transcribed the interview. The coordinators provided me with a list of approximately 100 former and current education volunteers. I shared a qualitative survey with those volunteers that addressed the same set of questions as the interview. Both the interview and survey aimed to capture the structure and operation of BRP's education programs and to explore the aspects of those programs that respondents viewed as most successful and/or most challenging to provide. I based the analysis in this article on the interview and completed surveys from 20

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[2] I have volunteered with the organization since 2016 and currently serves as a board member and treasurer. I also served as an in-school tutor during the fall 2016 semester. Neither I nor any other BRP board member receives any remuneration or other consideration for our service to the organization.

individuals who were either current or former BRP volunteers. Respondents' roles in the organization included: president (1), board member (3), family liaison (2), tutor (14), and intern (1). Some individuals had played several of these roles at various times.

I organized survey data in Microsoft Excel and then manually coded responses, looking for similarities first within each question and then across the survey and interview transcript. Taking an inductive, iterative approach to analyzing the interview transcript and survey responses, I derived the major themes that I present and analyze here (Bailey, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). I sought to compare those themes to recent literature on educational initiatives designed for refugees and former refugees. Finally, I shared a draft version of this article with BRP's co-founder and president to verify the accuracy of the information reported here. I lightly edited survey and interview quotations when necessary to ensure their clarity. In no case, did such changes alter the meaning(s) conveyed by a respondent.

Blacksburg Refugee Partnership Background

A group of residents founded the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership in summer 2016, incorporating it as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under U.S. law soon thereafter. As a community-based organization, BRP draws its membership from local residents and develops and prioritizes its activities with those residents (NCBON, 2011). The Partnership has worked with the resettlement agency serving Southwest Virginia, Commonwealth Catholic Charities, to identify individuals and families that may need and be interested in participating in its services in addition to the time-limited support available through the national resettlement program. The BRP seeks to provide assistance above the minimum to which resettled refugees are entitled by law. The Partnership offers a range of services, including coordinating healthcare, financial support, employment placement, and education for youth and adults.

At the time of data collection for this inquiry, BRP was supporting six households, comprising approximately 30 individuals, in Virginia's New River Valley.[3] BRP is a volunteer-run organization and has no permanent paid staff. It relies on several hundred individuals who provide their time as, for example, board members, organizers, tutors, drivers, and childcare providers. The only paid members are a cohort of professional tutors, whom the organization contracts to provide one-on-one education on an hourly basis.

English proficiency is a primary goal of BRP's youth and adult educational programming. A second, and equally important, aim for children is to help them perform at school grade level across all of their courses. The organization's education programs include in-classroom tutoring, in-home homework support, summer enrichment camps and ESL for children and adults. All of these services are offered in English. In the following section, I explore the major themes derived from the interview and survey regarding BRP's work and connect those themes to extant literature on similar initiatives.

Primary Interview and Survey Themes

There was significant thematic overlap across the interview with the Education Coordinators and survey responses of former and current volunteers. I developed three primary themes concerning BRP's education programs in the analysis of both. First, twelve survey

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[3] BRP also partners with the Roanoke Refugee Partnership (RRP), an organization founded on a similar model and with help from BRP in 2017. BRP and RRP jointly provide financial support and services to several households in Roanoke, Virginia.

respondents indicated that Blacksburg's position as a relatively diverse "college town" offered specific benefits important in facilitating the nonprofit's work. Second, seven survey respondents noted that the organization's strong reliance on volunteers and the limited opportunities for those individuals to obtain professional training in teaching strategies presents challenges to achieving its goals for clients. Third, ten volunteers described the interconnected goals and needs of clients and the importance of providing comprehensive programming to address them.

"College Towns" as a Potential Resettlement Exemplar

The particular characteristics of a given town, region, and country of resettlement shape former refugees' experiences as they pursue educational and other opportunities. Both the material resources of a locale as well as the attitudes of its population concerning newcomers can enable and/or constrain such prospects (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Smith, 2008). As its name implies, BRP operates in Blacksburg, a town in Southwest Virginia that is home to Virginia Tech (VT), a large public research university. The nonprofit's Education Coordinators, as well as twelve of its volunteers, identified Blacksburg's status as a "college town," with a major university at its center and openness to diversity, as a particularly important feature of the local resettlement context that has supported their work.

Virginia Tech offers an array of resources, including its library and Language and Culture Institute (LCI), which are available to BRP's students. It has also offered employment opportunities for the Partnership's clients. Many VT faculty and staff members have been involved in the Partnership in multiple capacities, including providing tutoring and coordinating programs. Various student groups have held fundraisers to support BRP as well. As one volunteer put it in a survey response:

> Having a large university like Virginia Tech is a huge plus to this program. It allows students to become more involved in the local community and to give back. … Utilizing the university as much as possible is a huge benefit.

Blacksburg has a population of more than 50,000 people, which includes approximately 25,000 Virginia Tech students living in the area.[4] This large student body supplies a significant pool of globally-minded, potential volunteers eager to engage in their community. Each semester, BRP recruits several dozen students to assist with its tutoring program. VT draws students and faculty from throughout the United States and the world ("Demographics," 2019). The international composition of students and staff, many of whom are bilingual, has made it easier to attract volunteers who speak the native languages of BRP's clients, primarily Arabic and Dari/Farsi. One of BRP's board members argued that Blacksburg's "international atmosphere" was a crucial element to the nonprofit's operations in that it had:

> Helped us tremendously as we have sought translators. … It has also helped a great deal in acceptance of these families in our midst, which has made our overall work easier than it might have been in other communities. This is also a very generous community so we are able to find … lots of volunteers willing to give of their time and talents, students and community members alike.

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[4] Current population statistics are available here: http://www.blacksburg.gov/community/community-profile/demographics.

Negative attitudes toward refugees, particularly individuals of Arab and Muslim backgrounds, are persistent among a significant segment of American society (J. McCarthy, 2018; Zogby Analytics, 2017). However, as one of the tutors explained in a survey response, "I think Blacksburg is a relatively open community and has enough foreigners so that refugees can get exposure to a new place and culture, but not feel completely isolated or cut off from their own." Another volunteer pointed to the diversity of Blacksburg's population and the supportive local context as important to their work:

> [The] eagerness of community volunteers has been critical to BRP's success. … [The] diverse college town community has provided necessary translators [and the] generosity of local faith communities, businesses, and individuals has meant we can focus on service instead of fundraising. … [P]artnership with school administrators, counselors, and teachers has been phenomenal.

As Rossiter and Derwing (2012) note, resettlement efforts are most successful when they involve comprehensive support from government, schools, and community initiatives. According to the Education Coordinators, local teachers and administrators have generally been supportive of incorporating BRP's students and tutors into their classrooms.[5] Moreover, area schools have provided space for afterschool tutoring and allowed volunteer tutors to support students in classrooms during lessons. As one of BRP's board members put it: "We have a community that is incredibly supportive and wants this to work. The teachers have incredible love for our students. All of [the] kids and adults work very hard." Support from the local schools is particularly important given that there is no formal or uniform process to ensure children who resettle can successfully participate in American schools (Lerner, 2012).

The local context is not without its challenges, however, and some respondents viewed Blacksburg's status as a relatively "small town" as something of a mixed blessing for refugee resettlement. Generally, the community has welcomed resettled families. Nevertheless, according to one tutor:

> The community has a lot of good connections and does a good job trying to make the families feel welcome. However, it is a very rural area, and the population is relatively homogenous, so there are not a lot of areas where the family's culture is represented. I think this impedes the ability for the kids to make friends.

Additionally, while the town's size makes navigation easier, four survey respondents said transportation is an issue. Blacksburg has a low-cost bus service, charging 50 cents per ride and $8 for an adult monthly pass ("Fare Information," n.d.). However, like most communities in the U.S., transportation in Blacksburg is organized primarily around car ownership. Lack of access to a car can present a challenge for the Partnership's clients and volunteers to travel to and from activities.

Complexities of Volunteer-Run Programming

Because the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership is volunteer-run, it has been able to operate with relatively limited financial resources. As previously noted, access to a large pool of volunteers

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[5] This type of support is by no means a given. Education systems in the United States have significant structural problems and inequalities (Alba & Foner, 2015). As one board member said: "I wonder how any family that comes from the lowest socio-economic level survives the system."

has been essential to its efforts and has enabled and required significant flexibility in service provision. However, as previous studies indicate (Harvell & Prowle, 2018; Rossiter & Derwing, 2012), heavy reliance on volunteers to staff education initiatives creates challenges. The Education Coordinators and seven survey respondents shared a concern about ensuring that volunteers bring sufficient experience and/or receive adequate training to carry out their roles.

The large pool of college-age volunteers is enthusiastic and committed. However, they are unlikely to have significant training or experience in teaching or tutoring, particularly formal English as a Second Language (ESL) training. As one of the family liaisons explained: "I had no training about teaching ESL. We got a few tips and online resources but no real training. I did and do my best but could have benefitted from professional guidance." Two tutors suggested that additional pedagogical training would be the most helpful support they could receive.

Acquiring language skills is central to successful resettlement. Proficiency in the common language(s) facilitates educational pursuits and contributes to broader goals such as health literacy and employment (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Frost, Markham, & Springer, 2018; Hauck et al., 2014; Lerner, 2012). Multiple BRP tutors viewed mastery of English as a key capacity for students. However, the process of simultaneously teaching listening, speaking, and writing in the language can be challenging. For non-Arabic or Dari/Farsi speaking volunteers, explaining abstract and culturally contextual concepts in English has sometimes proven difficult. For younger BRP students, behavior can also be hard to manage when such students express disagreements in their native languages. Moreover, as one board member argued, it can be difficult for volunteers to know: "Whether [challenges] are cultural, socio-economic, trauma or language barriers. … It is probably a combination of all of the above." Another board member similarly noted:

> I have read that there are 'invisible rules' in any culture that are difficult for people not from a given culture to discern and understand. Sometimes I think when there are misunderstandings or a discomfort, it harkens back to some invisible rules that we don't know to teach or explain.

These difficulties can be compounded by the fact that some of BRP's clients experienced interruptions in their formal education due to displacement, a common challenge former refugees face (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Some also had not previously acquired written literacy in their native language(s). In such cases, providing instruction and programming based upon learners' individual needs and goals can be more complex than volunteer tutors are typically equipped to address. One of the family liaisons put it this way: "The reality of the challenge is often greater than the novice expects. The task could be daunting for someone with little or no teaching experience."

Locating volunteers proficient in students' language(s) can alleviate some of these concerns (Mcbrien & Ford, 2012). However, as one Arabic-speaking volunteer observed, shared culture can be a double-edged sword:

The Arabic speaking tutors and I have been able to form stronger relationships with other tutees because of our shared common background, however this can also make it difficult to focus on the task at hand … as we would often rather chat as friends. I don't view this as

completely a bad dynamic as it's important to build positive relationships with the broader community.

Several volunteers argued that because education can be a challenging process for both tutors and students, patience and empathy are key. For example, one tutor said of their experience:

> I've learned to be patient and open-minded with approaches to teaching. Each learner is different and responds to different techniques. It's incredibly rewarding to foster relationships with clients and to see them apply what they learn in classes successfully.

As the Education Coordinators explained in their interview, despite the difficulties, the education process can result in students and tutors learning from each other. Coordinators and the organization's president said additional training in strategies to teach ESL would be very helpful. As one board member suggested:

> If we had unlimited pots of money, I would spend it hiring professional tutors. … It would be great to have people who are trained specifically to work with kids. Volunteers are wonderful because they have huge hearts, but sometimes they have no idea what they are doing or what is expected of them.

Shortly after I conducted the survey, BRP applied for and received a grant to facilitate tutoring for students in need of extra support due to education gaps, previous traumatic experiences, and individual learning needs. The grant enabled the Partnership to hire specially trained educators to provide such services. Those paid tutors, the only non-volunteer members of the organization, began working with students in November 2018 and, as of October 2020, continue to do so.

Integrating Comprehensive Services to Meet Interconnected Needs and Goals

The Education Coordinators emphasized in their interview and ten survey respondents noted that BRP's clients have multiple, complex goals and needs beyond education. As Rogoff argues, there is no "one size fits all" for learning (Glăveanu, 2011: 416). Social support—access to formal and informal networks of friends, family, government, and organizations that can provide information, material aid, and a sense of community (Sethi, 2013; Stewart, 2014)—is a central aspect of settling in a new environment. Moreover, the availability of a wide array of programs to meet social, emotional, health, economic and other needs is critical to the resettlement process (Bargainnier et al., 2018; Rossiter & Derwing, 2012).

In addition to educational programming, the Partnership provides the families it serves financial support for their basic needs, such as housing, utilities, and medical care. It also engages hundreds of volunteers to provide transportation, translation, and employment placement assistance. Some volunteers form long-term, interpersonal relationships with clients. Simultaneously addressing these needs is necessary to ensure that activities such as scheduled tutoring sessions can proceed.

Even with these services and supports, several volunteers identified the busy demands of daily life for students as a barrier to learning, particularly for adults. In one tutor's words, "I think finding the time for learning English [outside of the classroom] is challenging given how busy families are with school and work." Moreover, adult students have commitments to care for young children in some cases, which can interfere with their lessons. Without the additional

supports provided by BRP such as childcare and transportation, overcoming these obstacles would be even more difficult. Another tutor argued that BRP could improve education provision by continuing to enhance and refine its services, "Babysitting for preschoolers and transportation to the educational location are important. The program also needs to be at a time that is convenient to the learners."

The need for care and attention to students' psychological wellbeing adds another level of complexity to education provision for resettled refugees. In his survey, BRP's president emphasized that clients have experienced significant trauma. Indeed, large percentages of resettled refugees have such experiences (Phillimore, 2011). Children who resettle as refugees face both the common issues that many immigrants face, such as acclimating to learning in a new language, and particular issues such as the long-term effects of experiencing traumatic events (Weddle, 2018). Therefore, education initiatives serving former refugees need to understand the challenges they face and "do what is within the educators' power to ameliorate those challenges" (Weddle, 2018: 440).

Two volunteers identified balancing the importance of respecting the privacy of former refugees and the reality that their traumatic experiences can create difficulties for their teaching efforts. One tutor of elementary-aged children noted, "One of the students that I worked with was absent frequently because [they] would get overwhelmed. Providing students and families emotional and psychological support is important as well." BRP trains its tutors not to ask students why they left their homes or under what circumstances. One of the Education Coordinators told me: "We emphasize: Don't ask questions. If somebody brings up their past, that's fine. But, you're never there to ask any questions [about it]." However, as one tutor put it, "I think that a lot of tutors might have liked to know more about the situations that the refugees came from. We were not supposed to bring this up, but I know many were curious. It might have helped with managing some issues."

In some cases, students need robust emotional and psychological support services that require professional expertise that likely falls outside the purview of both volunteers and professional educators. As Bemak and Chung (2017) argue, the unique circumstances that refugees face make providing culturally competent counseling interventions a top priority. BRP has assisted its clients to connect with such professional services when needed. Because it is the prerogative of individual clients to disclose this fact or not, volunteers may not be aware of it.

Conclusions

In light of the above discussion, I conclude by sketching several ways that similar organizations might gain from the experiences of the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership described here. First, community resettlement efforts would do well to think about the types of settings that they could most readily leverage to provide services successfully. There are several thousand colleges and universities located in towns and cities throughout the United States. Many of those communities have characteristics similar to those found in Blacksburg, VA and, as a result, would be strong candidates for resettlement programming. Indeed, in Virginia, nearby Roanoke and Harrisonburg are long-standing resettlement cities and both also host colleges and universities. Creating a robust network of community institutions, including those without a specific mandate to assist refugees, can best support resettlement (Smith, 2008). Colleges and universities seeking to encourage their faculties and students to engage in service-learning—and students and faculty pushing institutions to fulfill deeper

commitments to their communities—could look toward developing partnerships with organizations similar to BRP.

Second, organizations that rely on volunteers to carry out important programmatic functions must navigate the challenges that fact implies. All organizations must make decisions on where and how to allocate their resources. A large and dedicated volunteer base enables organizations like BRP to provide a wide range of educational and other programs with limited financial resources. However, it is important to provide high quality, rigorous and effective services. Culturally competent and trauma-informed programs are also important to meet the needs of clients. Given these imperatives, allocating resources to ensure adequate training for volunteer and professional educators should be a high priority.

Third, comprehensive services addressing a full range of clients' needs and goals can support successful educational programming. Understanding clients' complex needs, desires and goals is key. It is also crucial to adopt a self-reflexive approach to work with those who have experienced difficult circumstances and traumatic events. While it is important to identify and meet the needs of clients, it is also critical not to allow one's self to (re)produce narratives and assumptions about those who are or were refugees as helpless or passive victims in need of support from others (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Those who have been displaced are and must remain agentic individuals with the capacities to make decisions about their lives (Espiritu, 2014). As Rogoff argues, it is important to include learners in the design, planning, and implementation of education programs (Glăveanu, 2011). One of BRP's board members captured this point well, noting:

> [Programming] works best when a partnership of stakeholders works closely to determine purpose and direction - i.e., the parents, the students, the students' teachers, the tutors, and the BRP organizers. At first, [our education] programs [used] models and experiences that the organizers and teachers had had in the past. As time went on, everyone including the students themselves started seeing how things could be improved. Slowly we all worked together, and the programs improved.

With this in mind, while this research focused on volunteers' interpretations of the success and challenges of BRP's work, future work incorporating the insights of resettled individuals themselves is essential to understanding more fully what constitutes effective and appropriate service provision.

Acknowledgements

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