



## Going Beyond a Single Story: Experiences and Education of Refugee Children at Home, in School, and in the Community

X. Christine Wang, Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes & Hyonsuk Cho

To cite this article: X. Christine Wang, Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes & Hyonsuk Cho (2019) Going Beyond a Single Story: Experiences and Education of Refugee Children at Home, in School, and in the Community, Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 33:1, 1-5, DOI: [10.1080/02568543.2018.1531670](https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2018.1531670)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2018.1531670>



Published online: 02 Jan 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1570



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

INTRODUCTION



## Going Beyond a Single Story: Experiences and Education of Refugee Children at Home, in School, and in the Community

X. Christine Wang<sup>a</sup>, Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes<sup>b</sup>, and Hyonsuk Cho <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York; <sup>b</sup>University of Missouri at Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri; <sup>c</sup>University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota

One of us (Wang) recently attended a talk by Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Vietnamese American author of *The Refugees* and *The Sympathizer* and a Pulitzer winner and 2017 MacArthur Foundation Fellow. He shared his own experience as a refugee and emphasized the importance of understanding refugees' experiences, their voices, and their perspectives. He joked that the *New York Times* book review got it wrong when it praised his works for giving “voice to the voiceless” and noted, “Have you been to a Vietnamese community? We are loud! *You just have not been listening!*”

The intention of this themed special issue is to listen and to capture the complexity of refugee children's<sup>1</sup> lived experiences and their education at home, in school, and in the community. There is an unprecedented refugee crisis around the world. Among the 22.5 million refugees, one half are children younger than age 18 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017). Although the world is identifying solutions for this crisis, nationalistic backlashes against refugees are also heating up across the globe. Against this backdrop, the important issues of understanding refugee children's experiences and their education in different settings (e.g., refugee camps, post-resettlement communities, schools, and homes) and how to support them are often left out of the debate. The limited education literature on refugee children tends to focus overly on trauma, needs, academic struggles, and poor socioemotional skills, thus perpetuating a deficit model and negative narratives. This themed special issue aims to move beyond such a single narrative and toward ones about refugee children's agentic experience and about educational solutions and opportunities at home, in school, and in the community.

The response to our initial Call for Papers was overwhelmingly positive. Although we received many submissions, space limitations only allow us to include 10 articles. We would like to thank the authors who submitted their manuscripts. We would also like to thank the reviewers for generously volunteering their time and expertise. Without their support, this special issue would not have been possible. In this introduction, we address the following three topics: providing an overview of the context for this special issue, introducing the articles in this volume, and identifying important areas and issues that need continued research.

### Social, educational, and research context for the special issue

The UNHCR was established in the aftermath of the World War II to help resettle refugees of the war. Initially envisioned as a temporary agency, UNHCR is now working at an ever-increasing pace nearly 70 years later. A case in point, the number of global refugee population reached the highest known to date in 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). The political, economic, and cultural turmoil in the new millennium continue to create circumstances for ongoing displacement at a growing rate. The global response to this refugee crisis is not without tension. On the one hand, the world is making efforts to update refugee resettlement policies toward more equitable sharing of responsibilities across countries (UNHCR, 2018) and calls for collaboration and expertise sharing across countries as well to effectively scale up refugee

resettlement programs (Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2018). On the other hand, growing nationalistic sentiment and policies (e.g., the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the campaign for building border walls in the United States, the "stop the boats" campaign in Australia) has led to decreased numbers of people being granted asylum. For example, the U.S. refugee admission dropped from 84,994 in fiscal year 2016 to 19,899 in FY 2018 (Refugee Processing Center, 2018) and threatens the well-being of resettlement communities. In the midst of these opposing agendas, we attempt to draw attention to these issues by focusing on how children, families, schools, and communities respond to the displacement and resettlement phenomenon.

Children of school age comprise slightly more than one half of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2017). As children from refugee backgrounds enter schools, challenges and opportunities arise for schools and local communities (Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2017). Understanding the diverse backgrounds of these children and meeting their unique needs is a complex and challenging task. Teachers may overlook the children's traumatic experiences, for example, and interpret a child as being inattentive though the behavior could be a direct manifestation of posttraumatic stress disorder (Szente & Wang, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum, a teacher may attribute a child's behavioral issues solely to the trauma the child experienced and so neglect to examine the relevance of the school curriculum for the student's cultural/ethnic identity or make efforts to engage the student. Educational challenges such as this kind affect not only teachers but also parents and local communities. With our special issue, we hope to highlight these challenges and encourage efforts to grapple with the tensions and seek some solutions.

Historically, the research community has not paid enough attention to refugee children, either conflating differently layered experiences of immigrants and refugees or excluding refugee experiences (Arzubiaga, Noguerón, & Sullivan, 2009). The literature that focuses on the refugee community alone tends to overcentralize the experiences directly related to the circumstances granting refugee status (e.g., traumatic events and transition to the new country) (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). We hope this special issue can move the research agenda forward by focusing on the agentive voices of refugee children and youth and by speaking to their complex identities, experiences, and aspirations. By expanding our shared understanding of refugee children and youth, we hope this special issue can inspire educators and other key players to find solutions and take actions for positive change.

### Articles in this special issue

The 10 empirical research articles included in this volume are unified by their effort to foreground voices of children and youth from refugee backgrounds. They all address lived experiences of refugee students (e.g., opportunities, struggles, resilience, agency) and view refugee students' identities and experiences as assets that should be valued and incorporated into their school learning and community engagement. At the same time, these articles are diverse in three important ways. Topic-wise, they examine a wide range of topics or cultural/learning activities related to refugee children's experiences, including identity, writing, social-emotional skills, second language development, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) learning, storytelling, journey, plan, tattoos, and quilts. They explore these topics in diverse settings, including home, home-school, mainstream classrooms, and a pull-out English language learner classroom at elementary schools, community-based programs, communities, and a refugee center. They also cover a broad range of age groups from early childhood to adolescence (ages 6–19 years). Theoretically, the articles adopt a wide range of frameworks, including critical race theory, funds of knowledge, culturally sustaining pedagogies, New Literacy Studies, multimodal literacy, third space, refugee critical race theory, liminality, cultural model theories, post-human theories, and sociocognitive, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural perspectives. Methodologically, the articles take on an interpretative research stance and use different qualitative research methods, including ethnography, micro-ethnographic approach, case study, cross-case analysis, interview, observation, artifact analysis, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis.

The first two articles focus on the experiences of children from refugee backgrounds at home and the connection between home and school. “Perspectives of Children From Refugee Backgrounds on Their Family Storytelling as a Culturally Sustaining Practice” by Ekaterina Strelakova-Hughes and X. Christine Wang explores how children from refugee backgrounds (Nepali, Somali, and South Sudanese) perceive family storytelling as a culturally sustaining practice and compare family and school storytelling experiences. They found that children identified unique ways of family telling stories and internalized family storytelling as an important culturally and linguistically sustaining practice. Furthermore, the children not only made connections between family and school storytelling practices, but also identified conditions for authentic incorporation of family storytelling at school. Implications for culturally sustaining pedagogy and research are discussed. “Countering the Misguided Interpretations of Fashion Shows and Thug Life: A Material-Cultural Analysis of Hmong Father and Son’s Experience in School(s)” by Janice Kroeger, Mustary Mariyam, and Janis S. McTeer examines the relationship between one Hmong parent and his child within their school. Ten years after the first author interviewed and observed them (when the son was in 1st and 2nd grade in an elementary school), interviews and observations were performed again, asking father and son to reinterpret childhood experience of incorporating cultural objects in school and how social positionality and privilege played out in their adult lives. From a school-partnerships perspective, the authors examine what was missing in opportunities to connect home to school for a more transformational impact.

Refugee students in the school context are the focus of next two articles in this issue. The article by Hyonsuk Cho, X. Christine Wang, and Tanya Christ, “Social-Emotional Learning of Refugee English Language Learners in Early Elementary Grades: Teachers’ Perspectives,” investigates teachers’ perspectives about the social-emotional needs and learning of refugee English language learners (ELLs) in early elementary grades. Based on the critical perspective, the findings suggest that a teacher’s deficit view of refugee students’ social-emotional development could make refugee ELLs and their families feel marginalized, which leads to missed opportunities for cultural pluralism in the classroom. The authors contend that instead of focusing on what social-emotional skills refugee ELLs “lack,” teachers should shift their attention to identifying students’ strengths and integrating these in their teaching practices and curricula to create space for refugee ELLs to sustain and enrich their strengths. The article by Laura M. Kennedy, Rae L. Oviatt, and Peter I. De Costa, “Refugee Youth’s Identity Expressions and Multimodal Literacy Practices in a Third Space,” explores how historically marginalized refugee youth express their identities and voice their experience while engaging in multimodal literacy practices in a pull-out ELL class at an American Midwest elementary school. By analyzing the journal and poetry writing of two 4th-grade Chin refugee students from Burma, the study illustrates youth’s nuanced and varied identity expressions and experiences in an elementary school.

The next four articles focus on refugee students in the community context and how community-based programs provide refugee adolescents with learning and development opportunities. Shannon M. Daniel, in “Writing Our Identities for Successful Endeavors: Resettled Refugee Youth Look to the Future,” explores resettled refugee youth identities in an after-school writing workshop, with a particular emphasis on their imagined futures and how they connected past and current experiences with their goals. Six teenagers’ conversations and their writings about the past and their visions for the future push back against stereotypical or deficit views of refugees as victims. Minjung Ryu, Mavreen Rose S. Tuvilla, and Casey Elizabeth Wright, in “Resettled Burmese Refugee Youths’ Identity Work in an Afterschool STEM Learning Setting,” examine how resettled Burmese refugee youth utilize their funds of knowledge and what identities were foregrounded in a community-based afterschool STEM program. The study illustrates how youth crafted creative ways to participate in the science discourse. Based on the findings, the authors call for implementing STEM programs that empower refugee youth by building on the rich and diverse funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom. The next article, by Carrie Symons and Christina Ponzio, titled “Schools Cannot Do It Alone: A Community-Based Approach to Refugee Youth’s Language Development,” investigates the ways in which a summer camp program for middle and high school immigrant and refugee youth provided opportunities for English language development. The findings suggest that the program

created conditions for English language development through socially mediated learning experiences in which immigrant and refugee youth could cultivate a sense of belonging in the community and investment in learning a new language. In the last article of this cluster, “Transformative Learning of Refugee Girls Within a Community Youth Organization Serving Southeast Asians in North Carolina,” Lan Quach Kolano and Liv T. Davila followed five self-identified refugee young women to explore how the lives of the adolescents change as they participate in an organization that functions as a site of critical social capital and how their participation in different opportunities for social activism shapes their identities and levels of community engagement. The study demonstrates how the five girls challenged the widely circulating and racially biased discourses around Asian youth and illuminates the importance of institutional spaces that nurture identities and social consciousness and provide opportunities for marginalized youth of color to mobilize around issues of importance to them.

The final cluster of two articles highlights how the travels and transitions during pre- and post-resettlement periods affect refugees’ experiences, identities, expressions, and perspectives. “Liminal Spaces of Temporary Dwellings: Transitioning to New Lives in Times of Crisis,” by Eugenia Arvanitis, Nicola J. Yelland, and Pandelis Kiprianos, examines the stories of five children from Syria who stayed temporarily in a refugee center before moving to a new country for resettlement. Analysis of the children’s narratives about journeys of border crossings to a new, yet temporary, place and plans for new futures revealed their endurance of liminality and powerful agency for their future plans. The article by Daniel Gilhooly, Michelle Amos, and Christina Kitson, “Reading the Ink Around Us: How Karen Refugee Youth Use Tattoos as an Alternative Literacy Practice,” examines the narratives of Karen youth refugees living in the United States regarding the tattoos they acquired either in the refugee camps in Thailand or in the United States. From the lens of New Literacy Studies and a sociocultural perspective, the authors found two thematic groups related to Karen youth tattooing: tattoos as expressions of solidarity (how Karen youth tattoos align with ethnic, religious, and nationalistic identities) and tattoos that signify remembering (how Karen youth are using tattoos to remember and reveal individual stories). By reconsidering what counts as literacy, this study shed light on Karen refugee youth’s tattoos as their agentive portrayals in the resettled society. The authors discuss ways that teachers may utilize student tattoos and other alternative literacies in the classroom.

### Future research needs

Novelist Chimamanda Adichie in her famous TED talk<sup>2</sup> warned us about the danger of a single story. Through sharing her own story about how she found her authentic cultural voice, Adichie warns that if we hear only a single story about another person/group/country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. We hope the articles in this special themed issue collectively counter some critical misunderstandings about refugee children and help us move beyond the single story about trauma and needs and toward more multifaceted stories regarding the experiences of these children across different contexts.

Among the different contexts (home, school, community, and transitional spaces) that these 10 articles explore, the most vibrant voice of the children and youth come out of community settings, such as after-school programs, summer camps, youth organizations, and so on. With the strong intention of fostering agency and resilience, these organizations empower the refugee children (e.g., Kolano & Davila). In contrast, the formal schooling setting presents a dispirited picture of teachers seeing refugee children through a primarily deficit lens and perpetuating the single story of being troubled and needy (see Cho et al.). This highlights the needs for professional development for in-service teachers and preservice teachers who will be working with refugee children and families. It also highlights the untapped potential of informal education settings. Questions such as, “How can we go beyond the constraints of schools and help refugee children find their voice and fulfill their potential?,” “How we can connect the positive experience in informal learning settings to formal schools?,” and “How can we foster the collaboration between these settings?” warrant further exploration.

The children and youth covered by the 10 articles are older (age 10–18 years) (e.g., Daniel; Gihooly et al.; Symons & Ponzio). As our own background focuses more on early childhood, we are disappointed not to discover more exciting research about younger children's agentive experience. This points out a gap in the research about young refugee children. Given the importance of early childhood experiences, we cannot emphasize enough that more research in this age group is needed.

Finally, we have noticed the perpetuating dichotomy in research on refugee populations, including voiceless vs. voiced (If we were to listen, what kinds of voices/perspectives should we listen to and take into account?), narrative of trauma and needs vs. narrative of agency and resilience (How can we meet the unique challenges and needs of refugee children while seeing them as agentive, resilient, and complex beings?), and assimilation vs. plurality (How can we foster shared democratic value while honoring and respecting cultural differences?). Although this volume has started to grapple with these questions, we are still a long way away from resolving these tensions and finding satisfying solutions. We hope other researchers can build on our efforts and continue to seek solutions.

## Notes

1. Although we and some authors in the issue use the term *refugee children* due to its conventional usage and grammatical necessity in places, we refute *refugee* as one overriding and defining experience of these children.
2. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## ORCID

Hyonsuk Cho  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2706-9393>

## References

- Arzubia, A. E., Noguerón, S. C., & Sullivan, A. L. (2009). The education of children in im/migrant families. *Review of Research in Education*, 33(1), 246–271. doi:10.3102/0091732X08328243
- Migration Policy Institute Europe. (2018, March). *Get better at sharing expertise or face failure on refugees, new report warns EU states*. Press release. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news>
- Refugee Processing Center. (2018, August). *Summary of refugee admissions*. Retrieved from <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>
- Ryu, M., & Tuvilla, M. R. S. (2018). Resettled refugee youths' stories of migration, schooling, and future: Challenging dominant narratives about refugees. *The Urban Review*, 50(4), 1–20.
- Strekalova-Hughes, E. S., & Wang, X. C. (2017). Intercultural experiential continuum: A case study of early childhood teachers working with refugee children. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 6(1), 61–88.
- Szente, J., & Wang, X. C. (2009). Helping children cope with the impact of war, terrorism, and disaster: An introduction. *Childhood Education*, 85(6), 340–341. doi:10.1080/00094056.2009.10521397
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2017). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5b27be547/unhcr-global-trends-2017.html>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018). *The global compact on refugees: Final draft*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org>