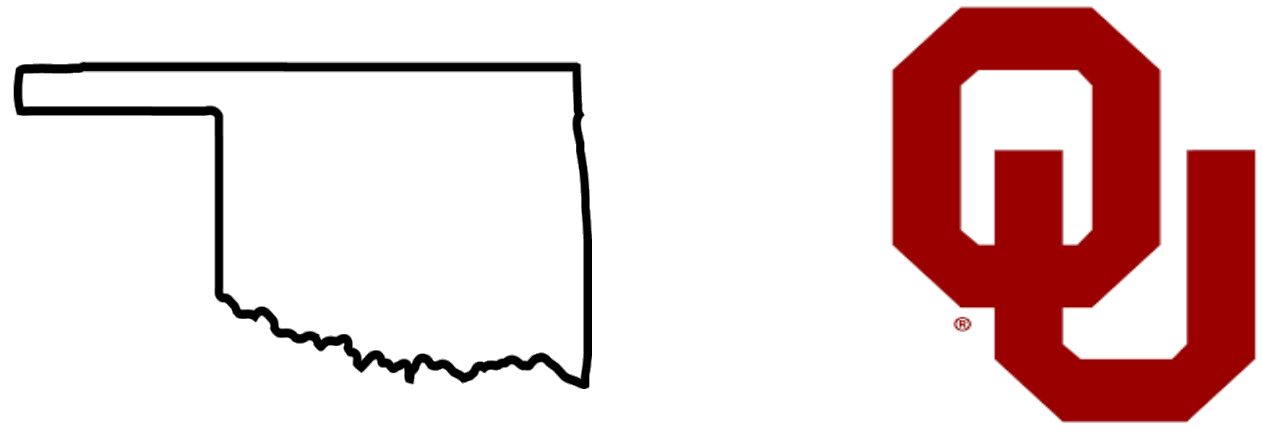


UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WORKING WITH AFGHAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN OKLAHOMA

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

- The number of people who are forcefully displaced worldwide is increasing rapidly (United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees, 2023).
- Refugee children and their families may have experienced various degrees of physical and emotional challenges that may affect the resettlement process, and as a result, these populations may arrive with undesirable emotional and psychological conditions for learning (Hamilton & Moore, 2004).
- It is crucial to provide appropriate learning opportunities and support for refugee children who may have suffered from various health and psychological issues as they transitioned to a new host country (Betancourt et al., 2015).
- As teachers and education play an important role in refugee children's adjustment, understanding and learning teachers' experiences is vital as their insights can provide valuable information in fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.
- However, most of the studies related to teachers' experiences with refugee children focus on the primary and secondary levels (Barrett & Berger, 2021). There are insufficient studies on teachers working with younger children, especially Afghan refugee children in early childhood settings (Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2017).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- The present study aims to learn how early childhood teachers are responding, supporting, and interacting with Afghan refugee children and families in Oklahoma.



METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- Ten early childhood teachers (90% Female; 80% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, 10% Asian; ages ranging between 23-54) working with Afghan refugee children ages 0 to 8 in early childhood settings (80% public school, 20% non-profit organization) participated in the study.

PROCEDURES



- The semi-structured interview on Zoom or in person for 40 to 60 minutes.
- Interview about the teacher's personal experience, support and resources, experience working with refugee children and families, and teaching strategies and practices
- Thematic analysis through coding and finding similar themes and concepts across participants to uncover their experiences and perceptions of working with Afghan refugee children and families.

RESULTS

Understanding the Uncertainty of Afghan Families' Situations	Lucy: "There are so many things that Afghan neighbors need to be successful in Oklahoma, you know, to feel a part of the community in Oklahoma, but they don't even have the guarantee that they will be able to stay here right now. So just like thinking of that mental load, and that stress and emotional load, parents are stressed to the max." Kate: "There's just a lot of cultural things that prevent a woman from becoming fully a part of the community and American community. Most of the women do not work and stay in their homes with the littles with the preschool-aged kids."
Understanding the Characteristics and Development of Afghan Children	Peter: "Willingness to learn and try new things. very enthusiastic, not shy. They want to connect with us. And then I think just school-aged kids in general, they are pretty resilient and can learn quickly." Karen: "One of the main strengths, I would say is just the idea of community. They are a tight-knit community. They rely on one another they support one another. They have a pretty strong community and pride in their identity as Afghans." Jillian: "They are actually doing surprisingly well. I thought they would have a hard time. Like they would cry more, you know, Miss kind of everything that they had. But now they are. Now they're actually adjusting really well. And they're learning fast. They have picked up those sounds so fast."
Learning the Gap Between the Two Cultures	Victoria: "We don't want to take away their culture, but we also want them to function in school. And if you're constantly pushing or touching, other kids won't like it. In the U.S. there's this personal space bubble that we have and you have to be invited into that bubble." Peter: "In the beginning, it was very hard, very, very hard. there was one student who wanted to run home every day. He didn't want to be at school, he had very bad experiences in Afghanistan, he didn't want to stay, and we couldn't easily talk to him about it. Childhood is much freer in Afghanistan. Kids run and play. And there's not the pressure of academics."
Facing Challenges in Communication	Victoria: "Sometimes the parents are not literate, so they can't sign any forms or anything like that. So like when field trip, permission slips, and enrollment papers and that kind of thing goes home, they don't understand what it is." Mary: "It was very difficult to communicate. Especially like, because their parents, you know, are connected on the same apps that we use with other parents and they work different hours. And so, you know, it's been difficult to communicate with families, which is a big part of being a teacher is communicating with the families. So that's been difficult, especially when they don't have like transportation and can't like come to parent-teacher conferences or can't go meet the teacher."
Supporting Through Employing Culturally Responsive Strategies	Karen: "These kids are adapting to American culture, but at home, they're very much in Afghan culture. And their parents are. So having an understanding of Afghan culture, Muslim culture is going to be key to any teacher understanding and being able to, you know, actually meet their kiddos, where they're at." Kate: "The more that we can just include examples of their culture and books of students. The more they can see examples of themselves, the more they buy into." Miranda: "Recalling when I first learned how to translate English into Thai was to kind of keep in mind. So I didn't want them to completely lose their Pashto. Because I know that's the key component for them to understand the commands and things I'm trying to teach them in English. So I really wanted them to utilize both, because I know that really helps as far as translating in your mind."

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATION

- The current study may contribute to the knowledge base on teachers' experiences, perceptions, and needs and inform the community, policymakers, researchers, and administrators on increasing tailored resources and support for these children, families, and teachers.
- With the influx in the number of refugee children and the lack of training for teachers in addressing the needs of these populations, there is a need for professional development for teachers working with refugee children.
- Considering the unique background of these children, teachers may need training and resources for culturally, linguistically, and trauma-responsive practices to better support refugee children and families.