

# **Young Refugee Children: Their Schooling Experiences in the United States and in Countries of First Asylum**



October 27, 2015



# Logistics

- Slides and audio from today's webinar will be available at [www.migrationpolicy.org/events](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/events)
- The reports discussed today are available on our website:
  - *The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children*, by Selcuk R. Sirin and Lauren Rogers-Sirin is available at: <http://bit.ly/fcd-syrian>
  - *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum*, by Sarah Dryden-Peterson is available at: <http://bit.ly/IN2EhBd>
  - *The Academic Engagement of Newly Arriving Somali Bantu Students in a U.S. Elementary School*, by Dina Birman and Nellie Tran is available at: <http://bit.ly/fcd-somali>
- If you have any problems accessing this webinar, contact us at [events@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:events@migrationpolicy.org) or 1-202-266-1929.
- Use Q&A chat function on the right of the screen throughout webinar to write questions. Or write [events@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:events@migrationpolicy.org) with your question.

# Presenters



**Randy Capps**, Director of Research, U.S. Programs



**Selcuk Sirin**, Associate Professor of Applied Psychology, New York University



**Sarah Dryden-Peterson**, Assistant Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education



**Dina Birman**, Associate Professor of Educational and Psychological Studies, University of Miami

# Presenter



**Selcuk Sirin**  
Associate  
Professor of  
Applied  
Psychology,  
New York  
University

Selcuk R. Sirin is an Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Psychology in New York University's Steinhardt School. Dr. Sirin's research focuses on the lives of immigrant and minority children and their families and ways to increase professionals' ability to better serve them. Dr. Sirin conducted a major meta-analytical review of research on socioeconomic status and he co-produced the Racial and Ethical Sensitivity Test (REST) and accompanying training program for school professionals. He served as the Research Coordinator for the Partnership for Teacher Excellence project at NYU in collaboration with New York City School of Education.

Dr. Sirin is the recipient of Teaching Excellence Award from Boston College, Young Scholar Award from the Foundation for Child Development for his project on immigrant children, and Review of Research Award from the American Educational Research Association (AERA) given in recognition of an outstanding article published in education. Dr. Sirin's work has been published in several scholarly journals including *Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Review of Educational Research*, and *Youth & Society*. He recently co-edited, with Aida Balsano, a special issue of *Applied Developmental Science* focusing on immigrant Muslim youth in the West.

# The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children

**Selcuk R. Sirin, Ph.D.**

New York University

**Lauren Rogers-Sirin, Ph.D.**

College of Staten Island, CUNY

# Syrian Refugee Crisis

- The war in Syria has displaced nearly 12 million people, with 4.2 million registered Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries:
  - 2.1 million in Turkey
  - 1.1 million in Lebanon
  - 600,000 in Jordan
- Half of these refugees are children.
  - 40 percent are under age 12.

# Syrian Refugees in the U.S.

- As of Oct. 20, the U.S. had resettled 1,972 Syrian refugees.
  - UNHCR has referred 19,646 Syrian refugees to the United States for resettlement consideration (as of Oct. 7).
- The U.S. has faced criticism for the slow response.
  - The vetting process takes 18 to 24 months.
  - Syrian refugee applications are being reviewed case-by-case, leading to approval of some cases that previously would have been routinely rejected.
- The U.S. plans to admit 10,000 more Syrians in FY 2016
  - Overall refugee ceiling to be raised from 70,000 to 85,000.

# Few Children in School Now

- Syria was a success story in the Middle East with near universal enrollment in elementary and secondary schools.
  - But the U.N. estimates 51% of Syrian refugee children were not enrolled in 2014-15 school year.
- Net enrollment of school-age Syrian children:
  - 20% in Lebanon, 30% in Turkey, 68% in Jordan.
- Enrollment varies by setting and by gender:
  - In 2013 in Turkey, 83% percent of children ages 6-11 in refugee camps attended school, versus 15% outside of camps.
  - Girls were far less likely to attend school than boys.
- Syrian refugee children more likely to drop out than peers.

# Barriers to School Enrollment

- **Financial:** Even when the schools are free, there are small costs for uniforms, books, and transportation.
- **Language:**
  - In Turkey children are not allowed to enroll in school unless they are proficient in Turkish
  - In Lebanon students are instructed in French or English as well as Arabic.
- **Legal:** Some parents fail to demonstrate their refugee status or verify their previous education.
- **Economic:** Refugee families often need their children to work in order to survive.

# Bahcesehir Study of Syrian Refugee Children

- In 2012 we carried out the first field-based study on Syrian refugee children living in Turkish refugee camps.
  - Gathered data from 311 children at a refugee camp located in Turkey about 60 km from Syrian border.
  - Partnered with UNESCO, Save the Children, and Turkish government agencies to publish results, so they could inform policies on refugee children.
- Study goals:
  - Document trauma levels among Syrian refugee children
  - Assess their mental health needs
  - Explore how they express themselves through drawings

# Survey Results: Exposure to Stressful Events and PTSD

- 79% had experienced someone die in their family
- More than 60% had experienced a stressful life event where they thought that someone else was in great danger.
  - 60% had seen someone get kicked, shot at, or physically hurt.
  - 44% had experienced 5 or more of these stressful events.
  - 19% had experienced 7 or more events.
  - Children in Western nations average 3 events on same scale.
- 45% experienced PTSD symptoms
  - More than 10x rate observed among other children worldwide.
  - Comparable to other children experiencing war, e.g., Palestinian and Bosnian refugee children.

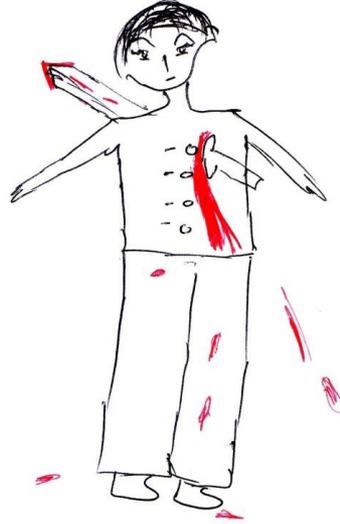
## Children's Drawings

The children were asked to draw a picture of a person, a picture of war, and a picture of peace. The next three slides present examples of each one.



# A drawing of a person

2008  
14 yaş kız  
"bir insan"

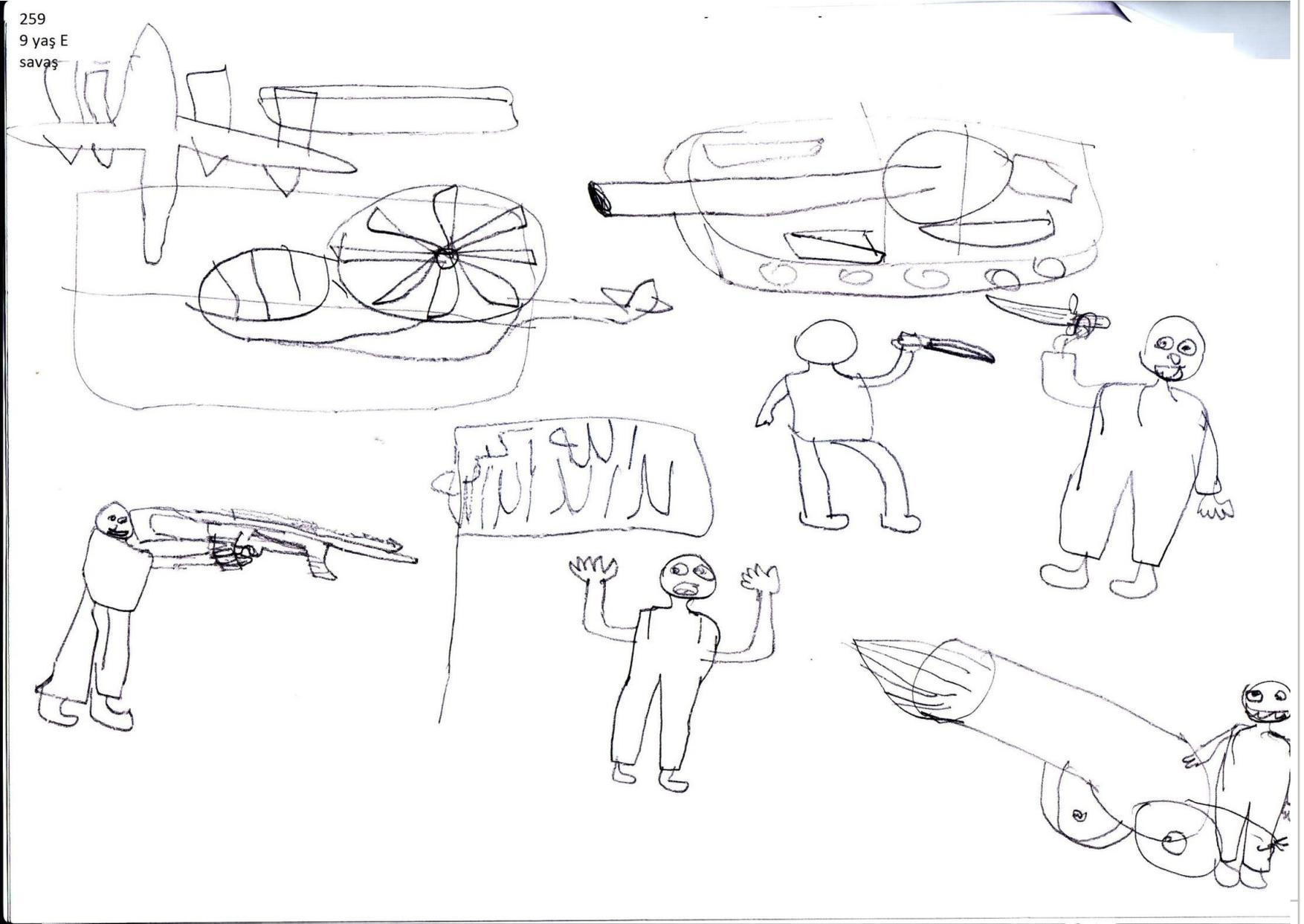


# A drawing of war

259

9 yaş E

savaş



# A drawing of peace

2009  
15 yaş K  
barış



# Conclusions

- Providing refugees with food and shelter is not enough:
  - Access to high-quality education , mental health care is vital.
- Practitioners in resettlement countries can take several steps to help Syrian refugee children integrate, including:
  - Help bridge language and skills gaps
  - Train educators to recognize the signs of trauma
  - Help Syrian refugee families access mental health services in a variety of contexts

# Presenter



**Sarah Dryden-Peterson**  
Assistant Professor,  
Harvard Graduate  
School of Education

Sarah Dryden-Peterson is an Assistant Professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Dr. Dryden-Peterson leads a research program that focuses on the connections between education and community development, specifically the role that education plays in building peaceful and participatory societies. Her work is situated in conflict and post-conflict settings in sub-Saharan Africa and with African Diaspora communities in the United States and Canada.

She is concerned with the interplay between local experiences of children, families, and teachers and the development and implementation of national and international policy. Her research reflects connections between practice, policy, and scholarship and is strengthened through long-term collaborations with UN agencies, NGOs, and communities. Dr. Dryden-Peterson previously taught middle school in Boston and founded non-profits in Uganda and South Africa.



Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda, (Photo: Dryden-Peterson)

# Education of Refugees in Countries of First Asylum: What U.S. Teachers Need to Know

**Sarah Dryden-Peterson**  
Harvard Graduate School of  
Education

# Worldwide Refugee Crisis

32 armed conflicts in 26 countries

86% hosted in neighboring countries

Average length of exile 17 years

19.2 million refugees

Camp, rural, and urban residence

# Children's Access to Primary and Secondary Schooling in Countries of First Asylum

Signatory states “shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education... [and] treatment as favorable as possible... with respect to education other than elementary education.” (1951 Refugee Convention)

Laws

Policies

Practices



76%  
primary  
enrollment

Ranges from:  
40% ↔ 100%

36%  
secondary  
enrollment

Ranges from:  
1% ↔ 57%

# Children Resettled in the United States

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Some refugee children are resettled to the United States where they then pursue their education



(Photo: Save the Children)

154,680 school-aged children

113 countries of origin

Educated in multiple countries of exile

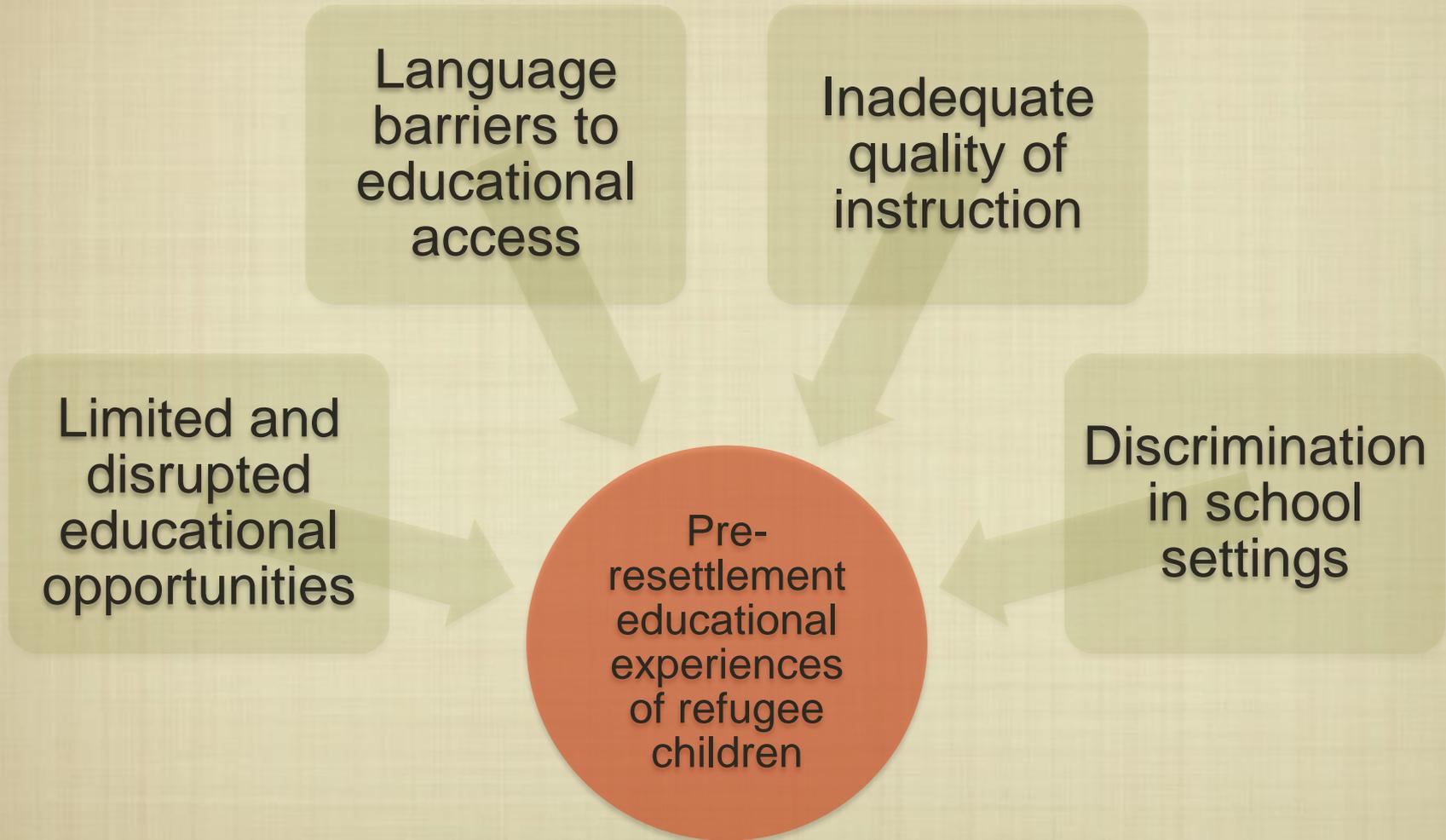
# Methodology

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- Enrollment data from U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees
- Semi-structured interviews with educators in first-asylum countries
- Field-based case studies of refugee children:
  - From Democratic Republic of Congo in Uganda and Burundi
  - From Somalia in Kenya
  - From Myanmar (Rohingya) in Bangladesh and Malaysia
  - From Syria in Egypt

# What Do U.S. Teachers Need to Know about Refugee Children?

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# Limited and Disrupted Educational Opportunities

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- Refugee children often miss out on school and never catch up due to:
  - Acute conflict
  - Legal restrictions
  - Ongoing migration
- Younger children may never have been enrolled in primary school.
  - It is highly likely that older children would never have been in secondary school.
- Even for those refugee children who enroll in school, disruptions to their schooling are common.

# Language Barriers to Educational Access

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- Refugee children experience multiple languages of instruction
  - Shifting language policies
  - Variable quality of English instruction
- Resettled refugee children often have exposure to multiple languages and academic mastery of none

# Inadequate Quality of Instruction

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- Refugee children access education of low and uneven quality
  - Limited resources for teaching
  - Teacher-, not student-centered instruction
  - Low literacy, perceived skills development
  - Dropping out / absenteeism
- Even children with schooling in first-asylum countries have skills and knowledge below grade level, and little experience with expectations for participation in classroom settings

# Discrimination in School Settings

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- Schooling in first-asylum countries can promote or exacerbate tensions
  - Content of the curriculum
  - Bullying by teachers and peers
  - Political environment vis-à-vis refugees
- Prior experiences with discrimination influence refugee children's perceptions of school and peer/teacher relationships after U.S. resettlement.

# Lessons for Educators in U.S.

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- Skill and knowledge gaps result from disrupted schooling, language confusion, and limited exposure to content, not lack of aptitude.
- English language instruction does not guarantee English proficiency.
- First-asylum country schools had different expectations for classroom behavior, participation.
- Students may be reluctant to invest in school relationships because they experienced schooling as temporary and faced discrimination.



Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda, (Photo: Dryden-Peterson)

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# Presenter



**Dina Birman**  
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Dina Birman is Associate Professor of Educational and Psychological Studies, and Director of the Ph.D. Program in Community Well-Being at the University of Miami, School of Education and Human Development. She has conducted research and written extensively about adaptation of adolescent, adult, and elderly refugees and immigrants, including those from the former Soviet Union, Central America, Somalia, and Vietnam. Based on studies conducted in Washington DC, Maryland, Chicago, and New Jersey, she has published on school and psychological adjustment of refugee adolescents, the role of parental involvement, differences in acculturation between adolescents and their parents, and effectiveness of community and school-based mental health interventions. As a community psychologist, she explores these topics from an ecological perspective, studying the impact of characteristics of the schools and receiving communities. Dr. Birman is a Fellow of the Society of Community Research and Action (Division 27 of the American Psychological Association), and the International Academy for Intercultural Research. She has served on editorial boards of journals in the fields of cultural and community psychology and is currently Editor-in Chief of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

As a refugee from the former Soviet Union herself, Dr. Birman has always been interested in understanding the ways that culture shapes human behavior. She received her B.S. in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, and her Ph.D. in Clinical/Community Psychology from the University of Maryland, College Park, focusing on immigrant acculturation and adaptation. Previously, she worked as a program officer in the Refugee Mental Health Program at the National Institute of Mental Health and SAMHSA, providing consultation and technical assistance to the national refugee resettlement program administered by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Dr. Birman was also on the faculty in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago from 2003–2013.



# **When Worlds Collide: Academic Engagement of Newly Arriving Somali Bantu Students in a U.S. Elementary School**

Dina Birman  
University of Miami

Nellie Tran  
San Diego State University

# Students with Limited Formal Education (LFE)

- Students with LFE have greater difficulties adapting to school and academic material than students with interrupted formal education (SIFE)
- **Somali Bantu:**
  - Originally brought to Somalia in 18th and 19th century from Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi to be sold as slaves
  - Continued to live as an oppressed minority group within Somalia
  - Agrarian background
  - Polygamous families, early marriage
  - Native language (May Maay) has no written form
  - Displaced during the civil war in Somalia (1992)
  - Approximately 12,000-18,000 ended up in refugee camps in Kenya
  - Started to arrive in the United States in 2004

# Impact of Formal Compulsory Schooling

- Transformed adult-child relationships
- Apprentice model:
  - “intent participation” in meaningful activities with adults
- Formal schooling:
  - “assembly-line instruction”
  - decontextualized learning
  - segregated age groups
  - standardized testing

Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

# Research and Methods

## Central research question:

- Understanding the challenges in mutual accommodation between newly arriving refugee students and elementary school staff

## Methods

- Participant Observation (over 600 hours)
  - Authors led team of 18 multicultural students
  - Shadowed specific teachers and students in classrooms and on field trips
- Interviews conducted with school staff and refugee families

# The School

- K-6 School
  - Had a long history of working with refugees and immigrants
  - Faced testing pressures and funding cuts
- Located in a Chicago neighborhood
  - One of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States

# Findings: The Students

## **Behavioral Incidents**

- **Definition:**
  - Situations where the refugee children's behavior created a problem for school staff, either because they distracted staff from attending to regular activities or posed a safety concern
- **Types of behavioral incidents observed:**
  - Minor disruptive behaviors
  - Academic refusals
  - Academic complaining
  - Child distress
  - Not being in the right place
  - Hoarding

# Findings: The Students

## **Example of minor disruptive behavior:**

“Imagine here is a small group sitting together and working. They will get up and walk away, or start talking loudly to each other, they ignore what’s going on, as if the teacher is not there. One of them might get up and walk around. We showed them how to ask permission and go to the bathroom, now some of them want to go all the time”

# Findings: The Students

## **Example of Hoarding**

“One thing he didn’t understand was that when he was playing with things .... I felt like he would hoard things that he would want... he would want to keep crayons and keep school supplies. He would a lot of times sneak foods out of the lunchroom and he would stuff like cookies in his pocket and he would come back to the classroom with 15 cookies in his pockets.”

# Findings: The Students

## Engagement and Disengagement in Learning

- Definition of engagement in learning:
  - Refugee students were observed to understand the academic task and able to communicate about it with a peer, fieldworker, or teacher.
  - The code was applied when a child demonstrated mastery of the activity.
- Disengagement was used when children did not understand the task

## Findings: The Students

### **Example of Disengagement**

“When the test started, I reminded him to fill in the bubble onto the separate answer sheet. My high hopes for him went down when he gave me this sad and confused look when he pointed at the problem for question number 1 and then pointed to the answer sheet. He saw a number ‘4’ in the problem, looked up at me, then looked back down to his answer sheet and filled out a random bubble on the row for question number 4, not question 1. Then he looked up at me again.”

# Findings: The Teachers

- **Attitudes**
  - Assimilationist/Multicultural
  - Flexible/Inflexible
- **Teacher Strategies**
  - Building relationships with students
  - Providing affirmation
  - One-on-one attention
  - Meaningful materials

# Findings: The Teachers

## Example of Affirmation

“One other thing I’m recalling about [child’s name] that whenever I would give them some kind of assignment to draw something, he was very quick to say ‘I can’t do this’...

And then I started to always let him use a chalkboard first...[so] that he knew if he didn’t like it, he could keep trying and trying...

It took awhile to realize that they weren’t just being ‘I don’t want to’...these fears of each small step was an obstacle that had to be overcome in some way.”

# Conclusion/Implications

- These students faced extreme difficulties adjusting to school, but made progress with their teachers' help:
  - Cognitive engagement was challenging, due to lack of basic skills for schooling
  - Behavioral disengagement was not necessarily an act of protest but unfamiliarity with norms
  - Relational engagement helped engage students, contextualize learning, and enabled teachers to adjust school tasks
- Teachers' attitudes toward acculturation may play an important role in helping students succeed



# Questions and Answers

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