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School Experiences of Immigrant and Refugee Students from Kurdistan:

Implications for School-Based Professionals

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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Abstract

The present study investigates the educational experiences of immigrants from Kurdistan, including any successes, difficulties, and adjustments to school in the United States. Information was collected from two informants, who reflected on their time in American schools. The study provides teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and other school personnel food for thought when working with specific populations of students.

The goal of this study is not to provide a comprehensive look at experiences of Kurdish youth and young adults. Instead, this study shares the unique stories of participants and highlights a few common experiences that indicate potential barriers to equitable educational experiences of Kurdish students, and other immigrant students in general.

Introduction

Historically, the United States has opened its doors to many waves of immigrants and refugees, with many fleeing their home countries due to religious or political persecution, famine, and war. In fact, the U.S. has resettled more refugees than any other country, although the country's resettlement program has not kept up with the increasing number of displaced persons (Cepla, 2019). According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the UN refugee agency, over half of all refugees are under the age of 18 ("UNHCR Figures at a Glance," 2018). Children who are refugees share many experiences with those immigrating to the U.S.; however, they also have the added stress of living through dangerous situations, being unable to return to their country of origin, and being resettled in a country in which they perhaps have little knowledge of or desire to live in.

The current study will be focusing on the school experiences of immigrant and refugee children in the United States. Specifically, this study will examine barriers to equitable educational opportunities for children who have been displaced from their home country. This study will take an in-depth look at school experiences of Kurdish students; a group that came to America seeking refuge from ongoing conflicts, and who has a long history of oppression by many different groups. Understanding the unique perspectives of different groups of immigrants is important for school-based professionals such as teachers, administrators, school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists. Highlighting common school experiences of immigrant and refugee children, particularly within one cultural group, may provide school professionals

context for providing supports that promote increased academic and social-emotional outcomes.

Background

Historical Perspectives

In 1845, a large number of immigrants from Europe came to the United States due to events like the Irish Potato Famine. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, people from Mexico came to the U.S. to escape war and political oppression following the Mexican Revolution (Weddle, 2018). In the late Twentieth Century and early Twenty-First Century, many people fled the Saddam Hussein's regime and were resettled in the United States; among this group were refugees from Kurdistan. In 2015, a quarter of America's refugee population came from areas in the Middle East, with a large number from Syria (Zong & Batalova, 2017). In 2018, refugees came from areas such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, Ukraine, Bhutan, and Eritrea (Cepla, 2019). Many of these areas have experienced brutal civil wars, terrorist regimes, and political and religious persecution (Weddle, 2018).

In June of 2018, there were 68.5 million people worldwide who were forced to leave their communities due to violence and/or civil unrest. This represents the largest number of people displaced in recent history. Since 1975, approximately 3 million refugees have resettled in the United States ("UNHCR Figures at a Glance," 2018). In 2010, it was estimated that 40% of refugees admitted to the U.S. were children (Betancourt et al., 2012). Resettled refugees have found homes in all fifty states in the U.S. Given the large number of child refugees settling in all corners of the United States, our schools must be equipped to meet the educational needs of these students.

Defining Immigrants and Refugees

While an in-depth analysis of the differences between terms such as refugee, immigrant, asylum-seeker, and displaced person are not within the scope of this study; some discussion of the terminology is needed to understand hardships faced by persons who undergo the migration and resettlement process. That being said, the differences in terminology, and how a person chooses to define themselves, are complex and are dependent on a number of factors (McBrien, 2005). Importantly, there may be negative connotations around the label of “refugee” and this label only represents one chapter in a person’s life (Shapiro, 2018). Therefore, students and families from refugee backgrounds may no longer consider themselves refugees after their resettlement supports stop.

In general, a refugee is a type of immigrant who is seeking refuge from their home country. They may be unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin due to persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group membership (Cepla, 2019). Under section 101(a) (42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) refugees are defined as:

[A]ny person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion...

In order to be considered a refugee within the legal sense, a person must apply for refugee status with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (“UNHCR FAQs,” 2016). After the applicant is screened by UNHCR and recommended for placement within the U.S., additional screening measures are conducted by the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). A person who is awaiting approval of the request is called an asylum-seeker (“UNHCR FAQs,” 2016). Asylum-seekers are persons currently residing in the United States who meet the legal definition of refugee, but are awaiting approval for refugee status (“Refugees & Asylum”). Importantly, students defined as refugees are offered specific protections not otherwise granted to immigrants or asylum-seekers. Not all people who are forcibly displaced will receive refugee status in the new country; however, many of these people will share similar experiences of migration, loss, and exposure to traumatic events.

Persons defined as refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner are protected under international law (“UNHCR FAQs,” 2016). These people are granted support from different states, UNHCR, and other aid organizations (“UNHCR FAQs,” 2016). People who apply for refugee status through the United Nations High Commission on Refugees process are relocated based on which countries are willing to take in refugees. It goes without saying that most refugees do not get to pick the country they will be resettled in. This creates unique challenges that are not otherwise experienced by immigrant families.

Another unique aspect of refugees resettled in the United States, is the type of support they receive upon arrival and thereafter. Refugees are provided a loan for travel expenses and a one-time payment to help with the purchase of food, clothing, rent, and

furnishings. After three months, additional services may be given, however, they are orchestrated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and other nonprofit organizations. After a year in the United States, refugees are required to apply for a green card to become a permanent resident (Cepla, 2019). This process is important to highlight, because persons who were considered “refugees,” may not consider themselves so after a year or more in the U.S.

Other terminology has been proposed in the literature surrounding refugee and immigrant plights. A *displaced person* refers to anyone who has been displaced from their homeland due to war, persecution, or a natural disaster regardless of refugee status. The term displaced person covers both refugee and asylum-seekers (NASP, 2019). A displaced person can also include those who have been displaced to other regions within their own country. Another term that is being used is *refugee-background student*. This terminology acknowledges that families that have been resettled in the United States for a long time may no longer identify with the term “refugee” (Shapiro, 2018). For the purposes of this study, the terms immigrant and refugee will primarily be used, as that is what is reflected in the majority of the literature surrounding the topic, but it’s important to discuss the complex issues surrounding these terms.

Overview of School Challenges

American schools are in a unique position to provide refugee and immigrant children with the opportunity to learn the necessary skills to navigate society (Weddle, 2018). Sheikh and Anderson (2018) note that the displacement of refugee persons often results in instances of interrupted schooling and broken family structures. While refugee and immigrant children may share common experiences (Hamilton & Moore, 2003), each

student entering school in the U.S. comes with a unique set of characteristics including language, level of prior education, exposure to traumatic situations, and several other factors (Ruiz, Kabler, & Sugarman, 2011).

Children identified as refugees are vulnerable because they may be experiencing negative psychological effects resulting from multiple experiences of loss, while simultaneously attempting to adapt to life in the United States and potentially learn a new language (Hamilton & Moore, 2003). Additionally, many refugee children have large gaps in their educational experience due to time spent traveling or in refugee camps. In some cases, refugee children enter the United States without parents and may have to play the role of caretaker for younger siblings. In rare cases, children may have experienced life as a child soldier or child bride (McBrien, 2005). Early experiences of trauma are associated with many risk factors that make school difficult. For example, students with an increased number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were shown to have more difficulty with attention, as well as, internalizing and externalizing behaviors (McKelvey, Edge, Mesman, Whiteside-Mansell, & Bradley, 2018).

Previous research on the experiences of resettled refugee children in schools and communities has been described through various perspectives. Every immigrant, no matter the age or familiarity with the language, will experience stress associated with acculturation and assimilation (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Several studies explore the relationship between schools and the acculturation process for refugee children. Additional research has explored the problems facing students who have missed years of formal schooling and may not be literate or linguistically proficient in their native language (Drake, 2017). Researchers interested in the efficacy of mental health services

with refugee children look at ways to respond to the high levels of psychopathology identified among refugee children (Erucar, Huemer, & Vostanis, 2018). Other considerations include the difficulties experienced during the migration process, English language acquisition, societal attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, and factors contributing to the success and resiliency among refugee students.

Migration

Even for students accustomed to school in the United States, moving to a new community and school can be challenging. Often, these students perform worse academically and socially within the first year after the move (Schwartz, Stiefel, & Cordes, 2015). This is assuming that the students are proficient in English and are familiar with cultural expectations in America. For these “newcomers” (a term used to refer to students who were born in another country and recently arrived in the U.S.), the school, community, language, and culture may be unfamiliar. Along with that, the conditions prior to and during the “move” are often problematic; with many children and families experiencing trauma in their war-ravaged homelands and in the process of fleeing to the new country (Weddle, 2018).

Immigrants and refugees may experience challenges prior to leaving their home country, during the transition to the new country, and after they have been resettled. Prior to the move, refugees may experience violence associated with acts of war and terrorism. Along with violence, they may experience a loss of basic needs- food, clothing, and shelter. Public services, such as schools, may be inaccessible in the community prior to the relocation.

It is also important to note that refugee and immigrant families bring a certain amount of personal resources with them to the new country. These resources may impact how they resettle in the new country. These factors might include the health of family members, social status, and level of flexibility or adaptability (Hamilton & Moore, 2003). The family may also be impacted by the level of social connectedness and their familiarity with the host country's language and customs. It is important to note that some refugees may have some notice before leaving their homeland. These individuals may have time to learn some of the resettled country's language before leaving (McBrien, 2005). Not all displaced persons are afforded this opportunity, however. Some refugee groups are forced to leave their homeland due to unforeseen incidents of extreme violence.

During the migration process, many refugees must spend time in a refugee camp before being resettled. Living conditions in refugee camps can be poor. They may have insufficient food, shelter, and medical care (McBrien, 2005). An account of Kurdish refugees in refugee camps in Greece highlighted less than desirable living conditions; with overflowing septic tanks, a lack of safe drinking water, and wire fences around each of the camps (Smith, 2008). Some refugees may stay up to several years in refugee camps before being relocated (McBrien, 2005).

All immigrants experience the effects of culture shock and difficulties relating to life in their new country (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Being displaced from your homeland presents difficulties as simple as a change in your daily routine. More serious challenges may include a loss of personal belongings and financial stability (Hamilton & Moore, 2003). Often, adults who are highly educated in their home countries are forced

to take jobs that do not match their level of education and experience. A study by Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson (2012), found that resettled Afghan and Kurdish refugees were either unemployed or under-employed. Of those with college degrees, only half were employed; employment areas were typically in unskilled or part-time jobs. As imagined, this creates financial difficulties and often, emotional distress for the family.

Acculturation and Language Acquisition

Both refugee and immigrant students will experience stress related to adapting to the dominant culture in the U.S. They may simultaneously try and maintain their identification with the values of their home country and heritage culture. The change in an individual or group from one culture that results from contact with a different culture is considered acculturation (McBrien, 2005).

In 1980, John W. Berry described four ways of acculturating. These include *assimilation*, which is described as participating and aligning in the norms of the new society but not with the heritage culture. *Separation* is described as maintaining a rich cultural heritage but not participating in the new society. *Marginalization* is a lack of interest of participation in either culture. *Integration*, which is viewed as the psychologically healthy way of being, includes participating in both cultures (Hui, Chen, Leung, & Berry, 2015). Studies have found that while integration is correlated with better psychological well-being, assimilation is associated with isolation and a reportedly lower psychological well-being (El Khoury, 2019). A refugee student's success in school will be impacted by their way of acculturating.

A review of the literature by Sheikh and Anderson (2018) revealed that increased identification with the host culture, whether it be assimilation or acculturation/integration,

was related to increases in education level and positive school outcomes. Also, social relationships were found to be associated with refugee children's level of acculturation (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). This puts school professionals in a unique position to help refugee students by providing positive support and promoting relationship-building.

Expectedly, the relationship between education and acculturation is bi-directional and mutually beneficial. It is often the case that education influences the acculturation process, while the acculturation process also influences educational experiences (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). For example, Sierra Leonean adolescent refugees indicated that school was the most important influence on their adaptation to life in the United States (Davies, 2008). These refugee students felt that fellow students, teachers, and other school staff members assisted them in adjusting to life in the U.S., as well as, supported them when they were learning English. One student explained, "In our school, our teachers pay attention to you as a person. They care about your feelings. They are happy when you are learning. They are patient because they know we do not know English (Davies, 2008, p.370)."

Parental support may also play an important role in a refugee child's adjustment to life and school in the United States. Caregivers' level of language proficiency and acculturation may hinder or bolster a refugee child's adjustment in the resettled country (McBrien, 2005). Also, parental understanding of educational practices in the new country may influence how the child adjusts to school. In some countries, parents are not expected to play an active role in the child's education. In these cases, parents often look to teachers and school personnel as "experts" in their child's education (McBrien, 2005).

Several studies have found that higher levels of language acquisition resulted in better socio-cultural adjustment in the new country (El Khoury, 2019). A case study exploring the experiences of Sierra Leonean refugee students noted that language proficiency was most often the barrier to success in school. Both students and teachers felt frustrated when language barriers kept students from participating in class activities (Davies, 2008). Similarly, other studies have found a correlation between alienation and insufficient English skills. Many refugee families view English acquisition to be important to their success in their new country (McBrien, 2005).

Educational Gaps

Refugee children may have missed up to several years of formal schooling due to time spent traveling, in refugee camps, or living in war-torn areas without proper access to educational opportunities. In many cases, children who are old enough to be in upper-elementary school classrooms have had no prior experience in a classroom (Weddle, 2018). Obviously, this can make the transition to school in the United States very difficult. This limited access to adequate educational opportunities often results in a lack of native language literacy. These students present a number of challenges for school divisions, who have to determine how best to provide intensive literacy instruction along with state-required content (Drake, 2017). And, differences in “educational culture” can create difficulties for immigrant and refugee children (Weddle, 2018). Schooling in their home countries may look very different from schooling in the United States. In many cultures, teachers utilize authoritative styles of instructing and interacting with students. This may be in contrast to the type of teacher-student interactions expected in the United States, where more of an authoritarian style is often used. Not to mention, educational

differences such as length of school day, number of class periods, and number of students in each class.

A study by Drake (2017) explored the goals of newcomer programs at the Secondary Education level. Newcomers often differ in the amount and type of education they have received in their native country. For example, some refugee and immigrant students have had sufficient schooling in their native language, and may see school in the United States as helping them achieve the goal of going to college. On the other hand, some students come to the U.S. with little formal education and they may need support to help them succeed academically, including intensive English language support. The Drake (2017) study showed that teachers, administrators, and school counselors all recognized that, in some cases, students need to learn enough English in order to work in the U.S., rather than working to gain entry into college. Many students examined in the study needed to help support their families financially (Drake, 2017). Especially within the Secondary Education setting, school personnel should consider the goals of refugee students and how the school plays a role in prepared these students for “life after school.”

Mental Health Perspective

In general, children exposed to traumatic experiences are at an increased risk to develop significant behavior problems and have difficulty with academic functioning. And, children who are displaced persons are more likely to have experienced trauma (Betancourt et al.,2012). They may have experienced violence in their home country, during the migration process, while in a refugee camp, or even upon arriving in the new country (Seddio, 2017). A study by Betancourt et al. (2012), found that almost all refugees that participated in their study had multiple exposures to differing traumatic

events. Common experiences included loss of a loved one and community and/or domestic violence (Betancourt et al., 2012). Exposure to trauma during different stages of childhood and adolescence may impact development and alter the trajectory of behavioral, social-emotional, or cognitive functioning.

Weddle (2018) noted that schools who serve refugee children need to have an awareness of the trauma-based challenges these students face including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Various studies investigating the experiences of refugee children and adolescents indicate that high levels of psychopathology exist, with PTSD being the most predominant. And while every refugee or displaced person does not develop mental health problems, these students may benefit from school-based supports that promote social-emotional wellbeing (Eruya, Huemer, & Vostanis, 2018).

Eruyar, Huemer, & Vostanis, 2018 proposed a hierarchical approach to looking at psychological wellness among refugee children. This psychosocial model of resilience-building starts with physical safety and continues with nurturing experiences with family or other adults, resilience-building through positive school and community experiences, therapeutic approaches, psychological interventions, and access to mental health services.

Attitudes towards Refugees and Immigrants

It's important to consider all the ways immigrant or refugee students are influenced by their immediate and broader surroundings. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), an individual is considered within the context of their relationships with family and peers, community, and society, and the relationships

between these entities. On top of that, students are also impacted by societal attitudes and beliefs.

Currently, a large number of the world's displaced persons are from countries where the majority of citizens are Muslim. In 2017, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to suspend entry into the United States for persons from Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen (Seddio, 2017). While the order was revised, its impact was felt by those from Muslim-majority countries, many of whom were forcibly displaced from their homes due to violence and persecution. In many places in the United States, Muslim children and families are experiencing discrimination. Unfortunately, U.S. citizens may associate the Muslim faith with terrorism as a result of political events and media coverage (McBrien, 2005). In school, students identifying with the Muslim faith may experience name-calling, threats, and physical assaults (McBrien, 2005). School policies and personal beliefs of school personnel may shape how schools welcome refugee and immigrant children, especially those from Muslim-majority countries.

Educational Practices for Supporting Students who are Immigrants and Refugees

Research indicates that schools can be a source of security for refugee students when teachers and staff are willing and able to address their needs (McBrien, 2005). Educational practices for supporting refugee and forcibly displaced children and youth start with creating a welcoming environment. Along with an environment of warmth and acceptance, special considerations for culturally relevant teaching practices, awareness of student needs, and some knowledge relating to the child's migration experiences, will help create a school community that supports refugee students (Weddle, 2018).

Creating a welcoming environment involves creating a physical space that is safe and representative of students from all backgrounds. For example, a school building may want to post signs in the refugee families' native language (NASP, 2019). A school can also begin to create a positive relationship with parents by providing interpreters and documents in their native language (NASP, 2019). As mentioned previously, not all refugee children and families will be literate in their native language. Pictures and illustrations can also be posted to welcome newcomer students and their families; these may also help facilitate communication (NASP, 2019). McBrien (2005) noted that even creating a small welcoming space, such as an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, can help students adjust to life in the new school.

Along with creating a welcoming physical space, schools must also create a welcoming social environment. When refugee children receive negative and harmful messages from classmates, integration with peers and engagement with class content becomes difficult (Weddle, 2018). The National Association of School Psychologists (2019) asserts that schools should prevent and intervene in instances of bullying, especially those based on culture and immigration status. They also note that having explicit policies regarding bullying based on culture and immigration status, among other diversity characteristics, may be helpful in countering bullying and unwelcoming practices among students and teachers.

Recognizing and respecting cultural differences is important to refugee students' academic success (McBrien, 2005). Respect for the culture of refugee students must be expressed by teachers and administrators (Weddle, 2018). In the classroom, curricula and educational décor should celebrate diversity and multiculturalism (NASP, 2019). Refugee

children are often more successful when the classroom encourages and respects the culture of their parents (Weddle, 2018). Creating space for the children's home culture, and experiencing aspects of the new culture can support a child's acculturation and integration into school.

As explored by Drake (2017), refugee and immigrant students and their families may identify different purposes for education than is adopted by most school districts. For example, a school district may emphasize college readiness, when refugee adolescents are seeking job opportunities. An understanding of refugee and immigrant student needs and exploring additional diplomas and courses of study may increase the success of these students (Drake, 2017).

Immigrants and Refugees from Kurdistan

Overview

The Kurds have a complex history. They number around 25 million and are one of the largest ethnic groups that do not have an independent state (Crowley, 2014). The Kurds occupy parts of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq; and in Northern Iraq they control an autonomous region led by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Importantly, Kurdish areas of the Middle East have experienced continued violence due to the presence of many different ethnic groups attempting to lay claim to the land ("The Kurdish Project"). As a result, the Kurds have fought for independence many times and have aligned themselves with and revolted against many groups throughout the years, including the Persians, Turks, and Arabs ("The Kurdish Project"). The Kurds have suffered much discrimination in their countries of birth (Sulaiman-Hill&

Thompson, 2012), due to differences in ethnic origins, religious ideology, and other cultural factors.

The Kurds are described as non-Arab, with a majority of them identifying as Sunni Muslims (Crowley, 2014). Unlike many other ethnic groups in the area, Kurds are historically from the Medes people; a group that predates Christianity (“The Kurdish Project”). A small number of Kurds identify as practicing Christianity, Judaism, and the Shiite branch of Islam. An important aspect of the Kurdish Muslim community is that they are recognized as practicing “religious tolerance.” In fact, schools falling under the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraqi Kurdistan are required to be religiously neutral.

While Kurds pride themselves on being tolerant of other groups, other religious groups in the area do not share this idea. The Yazidi people are a religious minority in Northern Iraq, an area mainly controlled by the Kurds. On August 3rd 2014, an unfathomable event occurred. ISIS invaded Sinjar, the homeland of the Yazidi people, and killed 3,000-5,000 people and left 6,000 to be sold into slavery (Taylor, 2019). To this day, the Yazidi people still face persecution in the area. The Yazidi Genocide left a dark stain on the collective history of the area.

Historical Events

Kurdish migration to the United States began during World War I and has continued for several decades, with the largest waves coming during Saddam Hussein’s regime and following the chemical warfare in Halabja, Iraq (de Rouen, 2015). In the 1970s and 1980s many Kurds were forcibly displaced from their homes near Kirkuk, the cultural home of the Kurdish, by the Iraqi government. Since then, many Kurds have

sought to regain control of Kirkuk and claim independence for Kurdistan. Importantly, large oil fields are located in the region surrounding Kirkuk. This has made it difficult for the Iraqi government to agree to the annexing of Kirkuk to the Kurdistan Region, sometimes referred to as Iraqi Kurdistan (Zangler, 2002).

The Kurds have also experienced violence in south-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq (de Rouen, 2015). In the 1970s, the Kurdish population in Iran was suppressed following the Iranian Revolution (“The Kurdish Project”). In the 1988, the Kurds experienced a chemical weapons attack in Halabja, Iraq. It is estimated that 3,000-5,000 civilian Kurds were killed and over 10,000 were injured. A majority of those killed in the attack were women and children (“The Kurdish Project”). In the 2000s, war in Iraq caused many Kurdish refugees to flee their homeland. Over the years, the United States has taken in a number of Kurdish refugees (Lynch, 2017).

In the midst of these difficulties, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formed in 1992. It was the first democratically elected parliament in Kurdistan and in Iraq (“Representation in the United States,” 2018). Unfortunately, agreements between the KRG and another governing body in the area, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) fell apart leading to a civil war. In 1998, the civil war ended and shortly after Kurdistan’s official armed forces, the Peshmerga, helped to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein’s rule (“Representation in the United States,” 2018).

Refugees fleeing Kurdistan have often experienced violence in their communities. Exposure to bombings and landmine explosions were common (Smith, 2008). For many, the migration process came with numerous traumatic experiences. Some Kurds fled to the mountains and others attempted to cross into Turkey. Others have experiences of being

confronted by the Turkish Army or Iraqi Border Patrol (Smith, 2008). Children and their families may become separated as they try to make their way to a safe space. Along with difficult living situations, many experienced economic hardships in Kurdistan before coming to the U.S. (de Rouen, 2015). Additionally, many Kurds spent time in refugee camps in places such as Turkey, Greece, and Iran before making their way to parts of Europe or the United States (de Rouen, 2015; Smith, 2008).

Current Events

In, 2014 U.S. President Barack Obama provided military support to the Kurds in order to fend off a gruesome attack by ISIS (Crowley, 2014). The movement to support the Kurds was mutually beneficial, providing a place for the U.S. to lead a counter attack on ISIS. In 2017, a referendum calling for Kurdistan's independence had an impact on Kurds living within the U.S. At that time, the KRG sought to begin negotiations with Iraq that would potentially lead them to self-government. Iraq and several neighboring countries did not support the referendum, and neither did the United States. This left the Kurds resettled in the U.S. exasperated and unsupported by the country that took them in.

Cultural Factors

Around 70,000 Iraqi Kurds live in the United States (de Rouen, 2015). Many resettled Kurds find it important to preserve their cultural heritage. One of the ways they continue to identify with their homeland is by living among other Kurds. They attempt to establish communities that value the Kurdish language, culture, and dress (de Rouen, 2015). The Kurdish culture has a rich oral tradition, with popular epic poems and folk songs. It should be noted that the Kurdish make up a heterogeneous ethnic group and they

may share cultural ideas with other groups such as Iranian, Azerbaijani, Turkic, and Arabic (“The Kurdish Project”).

A study investigating literacy experiences of refugee youth identified several factors that impacted the educational experiences of a Kurdish refugee attending school in the United States (Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007). These factors included his experiences with war and survival, his responsibilities at home, and his low socio-economic status that drove him to seek employment. Additionally, a cultural value of masculinity contributed to how he experienced school in the U.S. (Sarroub et al., 2007). This is aligned with the idea that the Kurdish have a patriarchal family structure and seek to maintain traditional family roles (de Rouen, 2015).

A study by de Rouen (2015), which investigated the Kurdish community in Binghamton, New York, found that many resettled Kurds identified a theme of “togetherness,” as being central to their identity as Kurds. They stressed the importance of supporting each other, both within their families and within the Kurdish community. Kurds keep close community ties and seek to promote their cultural heritage. Preserving Kurdish culture is also important due to historical experiences of cultural repression. In the past, the Kurds have been banned from speaking Kurdish in public. Kurdish books, music, and clothing have been considered contraband (“The Kurdish Project”).

Kurdish Schools

Schools in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are run by the Kurdish Ministry of Education and the Kurdish Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (“Education in Iraq”). In the Kurdistan Region, schools operate similarly to schools in

other parts of Iraq, with a few key differences. First, classes are primarily taught in Kurdish, as opposed to Arabic. And, students are required to attend school until ninth grade. In other parts of Iraq, compulsory education only extends until sixth grade (“Education in Iraq”). Schools in the Kurdistan Region share some of the same principles as those in the rest of Iraq. For instance, in Iraq, the grading system is numeric, where students who earn a grade of 80-100 have done a very good job, and those scoring below 49 have failed (“Education in Iraq”). In general, schools in Iraq have faced a lot of challenges in recent years. For example, many schools have been damaged due to ongoing conflicts. This results in schools that do not meet safety standards and that are poorly maintained. Drop-out rates are high and it is not uncommon for students to repeat grades (“Education in Iraq”).

For Kurdish students attending school Turkey, Syria, or Iran, education may be completely different. For example, for Kurdish regions of Syria, providing instruction in Kurdish has been a battle (Ibrahim, 2019). In 2012, it was determined that Kurdish would be taught in schools. But, opposing groups wanted to shut these schools down. In 2015, complicated negotiations ended with groups agreeing that Arab students should learn Arabic, while Kurdish students should learn Kurdish. The Kurdish governing body, the Rojava, mandated that these changes be made starting with primary schools. Many refused to adopt this new curriculum (Ibrahim, 2019).

Method

Purpose of the Current Study

It is important to know about the students who spend their days in our classrooms; what languages they speak, what experiences they've had, and what cultural knowledge they bring with them. While research surrounding refugee and immigrant learners exists, little is known about our students that come from the Middle East, and particularly the Kurds.

The focus of this study is to gain insight into the school experiences of immigrant and refugee students from Kurdistan. Taking a phenomenological approach, the present study seeks to describe the subjective experiences of Kurdish youth in schools. As noted by the National Association of School Psychologists, displaced persons may have similar experiences and needs, but it is important to avoid overgeneralizing and making assumptions about a particular group (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019).

Research Design

The present study aims to document and describe aspects of school experiences, with special attention given to how past experiences and cultural identity have shaped their experience in school. Research questions center around successes, difficulties, and adjustments to school in the United States. *What about American schools was difficult for you? What was most surprising about school in the U.S.? Who helped you adjust to school in the U.S.?* Studying this group may give insight into school experiences of refugee students in general, along with the specific considerations for Kurdish students in the United States.

First, Kurdish community members were contacted by connecting with the local school district and other groups within the community. Information regarding the study was shared with those identified as community contacts; agency leaders in turn shared this information with potential participants. Then, individuals willing to participate in the study contacted the researcher directly. Prior to conducting the interview, IRB (Institutional Review Board) consent was collected from the participants.

Study participants were either interviewed in their home or over the phone. Informants were asked a series of open-ended questions with a few follow-up questions, to gain the most insight into their experiences. Interview questions were developed around themes expressed in the current literature surrounding school experiences for refugee and immigrant students. Interviews lasted approximately an hour. Interviews with informants were audio recorded and notes were taken during the session. After each interview was completed, the audio recording was transcribed. Both audio recordings and notes were saved and encrypted with a password.

After the interviews were completed, the transcribed data was reviewed and a thematic analysis was conducted. That is, ideas shared by multiple informants were identified. Informants' unique stories were color coded according to several major themes. All information was compiled into the following themes: Adjusting to Life in the U.S., The First Week of School in the U.S., Educational Differences, Language Challenges, Kurdish Culture and Community, Refugee Students, and Counselor-Student Relationships.

Informants

Zilan (pseudonym) grew up in Erbil, Iraq, a city of almost 900,000 and the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. She and her family immigrated to the United States when she was in high school. On the other hand, Nadia (pseudonym) came to the United States right before she turned 6 years-old. She came from a small village, where both of her parents were teachers. It is important to note that both Nadia and Zilan's families chose to immigrate to the United States; which is why I will be using the term *immigrant* rather than *refugee* when indicating information that was discussed by informants. That being said, both families experienced hardships in their homeland that caused them to leave.

In addition, information from an initial interview with Muhammad Kareem, Kurdish Liaison for Harrisonburg City Public Schools, has also been included. He has worked with Kurdish students and families for many years; offering interpreting services and supports for students as they navigate school.

Results

Adjusting to Life in the United States

“Students have one thing in their mind about what the U.S. is like, and when they get here they are shocked,” explains Mr. Kareem. Families come with preconceived ideas of what the U.S. is like, along with certain social and tangible resources (e.g. money, physical belongings, physical and emotional health). The migration process and adjustment to life in the United States is different for each and every immigrant and displaced person. And, these experiences may impact what a child may bring with them into the school building.

Zilan shared a story about her family's misconceptions of life in the U.S. She explained that they experienced quite a shock when relocating. Zilan's family came from a large city and were surprised to find out that not all areas in the U.S. are like New York City or Los Angeles. When flying into the airport, Zilan's mother was concerned that they were in the wrong place. She exclaimed, "What are these cows and animals? Is this America or are we in the wrong place?" Many ideas about what America is like come from television shows and news programs, and those ideas may not be representative of the country as a whole.

While many humorous anecdotes exist, not all experiences for new arrivals are pleasant. Zilan's younger sister was only 5 years-old when they arrived. When they went to enroll her for Kindergarten, she placed hands over her ears and said, "Don't let them speak to me in English. I don't like it." Early on, Zilan's family constantly talked of returning to Kurdistan. Her parents were frustrated when they were required to take jobs that were less prestigious and lucrative than their jobs in Kurdistan.

Nadia's first months in the U.S. were difficult. But, she also felt that, "back then the US was very helpful to immigrants." When they arrived, Nadia's family was given an apartment, furniture, and food stamps. Her parents enrolled in English classes and someone would come to check on them once a week. The people who came to check on her family would take her mother to the store and show the family how to use the bus system.

Nadia's family relocated to a large city in the U.S. While she was familiar with larger cities in Kurdistan, her experience in this American city was different. There was gun violence in her neighborhood, and her parents worried about safety. Things came to a

head when a man followed her mother home from the store one day. Nadia said, “That was crazy, because in the Middle East or in Kurdistan at least, she wasn’t used to that. That wouldn’t happen in Kurdistan.” Nadia’s father could see the man through the peephole and knew that he had a gun. The family called their representative; they were going to file the paperwork to return to Kurdistan.

In the meantime, Nadia’s family received a call from a representative from a small town with a blossoming Kurdish community, asking if they would be willing to move. Six months after arriving in the U.S., they settled into a new town and began the process of adjusting to life in the U.S. once more.

First Week of School in the United States

Simple differences, such as the architectural differences between Kurdish and American schools, can be difficult for newcomer students (students who arrive in the United States from other countries) to navigate. Zilan explained that schools in Kurdistan were much smaller and many have the same layout. Typically, schools in Kurdistan are rectangular with a large courtyard in the center.

“I got lost on the first day,” Zilan explains as she notes that her new school was hard to navigate. Despite being given verbal directions (in Kurdish), Zilan had no idea where to go, because the school was so large. She felt very embarrassed as she walked around in circles. Thankfully, a teacher found her and helped her find her new class.

After Zilan found her classroom, she quickly realized she had another problem. She didn’t know how to take notes. She wasn’t even sure where to start; “Back home we didn’t take notes, we just listened.” Not to mention, in both Kurdish and Arabic, writing

is from right to left. Zilan wasn't even sure where to put the date on her paper. Along with figuring out note-taking, Zilan wasn't accustomed to having a free lunch period. Zilan was happy to find a Kurdish acquaintance in the class that could tell her where to go. For Zilan, having other Kurdish students in her classes helped her adjust. She also felt that her teachers, especially the ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, helped her acclimate to school here. Zilan explained that teachers had a good understanding of the Kurds, because there were many Kurdish students at the school.

Nadia's first week at school was challenging for several reasons, including the language barrier and the school's lack of resources. She explained, "...my first week at school was kind of scary." She remembers crying a lot and noted, "school was hard for me, I was excited to get picked up [at the end of the day]." Because Nadia was young, some of what she knows about her early school experiences are stories from her mother.

First, the school she attended had few resources and did not have a separate classroom for newcomer students. Instead, Nadia was placed in a class for students with lower reading and math levels. There, Nadia's teachers were kind and helpful, but were overwhelmed by behavioral challenges in the classroom. She also noted that the school was overcrowded. On top of that, she was the only student in the class that was considered an English Language Learning (ELL) student.

Nadia spoke virtually no English when entering school in the United States, and that made things difficult. She and her family spoke Kurdish. Also, during her time in Kurdish schools, all instruction was in Kurdish. Early on, a lot of Nadia's struggles came from a lack of English language proficiency and a discussion of language difficulties will be discussed in subsequent segments of this document.

Nadia went on to say that she made some friends, but because she spoke little English, she had a hard time determining if students were being friendly or unfriendly. She felt that the language barrier made her a “pretty big target.” She went on to say, “I was kind of a cry baby, I didn’t know what people were saying to me. They could have said something nice and I would have been upset.” On a final note, she added, “[sometimes] I could tell based on their body language.” Essentially, Nadia felt that students may have been picking on her, but she wasn’t sure due to the language barrier.

Educational Differences

Of course, Kurdish schools are different from American schools. They differ in physical structure and appearance, but they also differ in *what* academic material is taught and *how* it is taught. Not to mention, teaching style and discipline practices also vary. But, like in the U.S., there are regional differences as well. Rural village schools may be smaller and have fewer resources than schools in larger areas.

When asked about what school was like prior to coming to the U.S., Zilan had a lot to say. In elementary school, girls and boys went to school together. After sixth grade, she attended an all-girl school before coming to the United States. Schools were located within the community, with most students walking to and from school. Forty to forty-five students were in each class, with one teacher for the duration of the school day. And throughout the day, students had five to six classes with five minutes between each subject.

Starting in Kindergarten, all classes are taught in Kurdish. Then, from Zilan’s experience, students begin learning Arabic as a second language starting in fourth grade.

This class was taught four times a week, and it was required. In fifth grade, students are allowed to choose an additional language to study. Most of the time students choose to study English.

Starting in ninth grade, students choose from two educational paths. Thus, classes are structured so that you focus on math and science or language and history. Zilan had dreams of becoming a dentist, so she decided to focus on math and science. In her classes, particularly biology and chemistry, students were required to memorize information from a textbook before coming to class. She explained that teachers would call on students to see if they knew the material. Unsurprisingly, teachers would call on students who they thought may not have learned the material. Zilan briefly noted that all textbooks were received from the government. She reflected on this, suggesting she wasn't sure how much content is censored or controlled by the government.

Nadia attended a small, village school in Kurdistan and acknowledged that village schools are often different from city schools. She explained that her mother used to teach in a larger city, so she was aware of the differences. Namely, they have fewer resources and smaller class sizes. Class sizes there were comparable to class sizes in the U.S., with around fifteen to twenty students in each class. Like Zilan, Nadia shared that they had one teacher who taught them all subjects.

One of the biggest differences Nadia noted was the appearance of the school. In Kurdistan, schools are neat and orderly, with white walls and few decorations. Nadia explained that schools in Kurdistan were not colorful like schools in the United States, where posters and student work cover the walls. Similarly, Nadia was surprised how “playful” school in the U.S. was. Schools in the U.S. feature more crafts and time to

socialize with friends. She found that schools in Kurdistan were more “serious.” And while teachers in Kurdistan jump right into reading, writing, and math, teachers in the U.S. may allow more time for play.

Also, Nadia found that schools in Kurdistan had a larger focus on cultural “stuff.” Students learned about their heritage and were taught skills such as breadmaking. Nadia explained that breadmaking is like an ancient art. They learned how to make flour from grain and would go watch bread being made. Aside from breadmaking, Nadia learned about ancient Kurdish culture and Kurdish music and art.

When coming to school here, Nadia liked how warm teachers were. “My teachers were more motherly here than in Kurdistan. And I liked that, it was comforting.” By contrast, Zilan had a difficult time adjusting to the more relaxed or authoritative style of teaching in the U.S. Here, she felt that teachers were begging students to do their homework, but in Kurdistan that wouldn’t be the norm. She felt that American students weren’t respectful towards their teachers, and that was frustrating. Zilan explained, “I was raised that your teachers are like your parents.” In Kurdistan, teachers were respected like a parent and often disciplined students. Similarly, Mr. Kareem noted that, “respect is important in school,” and respecting teachers and adults is important in Kurdish culture.

Both Zilan and Nadia found that schools in Kurdistan were strict. Zilan shared that every student had to be on time in the morning for the national anthem. And during class time, students were not allowed to have food or snacks. Nadia explained that all public schools in her area required uniforms. On the first day of each week all of the students had to line up for an inspection by the headmaster. The headmaster would walk down the line and inspect each students’ uniform, hair, nails, and general appearance. As

Nadia shared, “You couldn’t have dirt under your nails or dirty hands. You would get sent home.” Nadia and Zilan both experienced corporeal punishment in schools. Since then, a law passed that outlawed corporeal punishment in Kurdish schools. Nadia explained that when students misbehaved, they would get slapped on the hand with a ruler. The following quote by Nadia exemplifies how both Nadia and Zilan feel about punishment in Kurdish schools: “It wasn’t scary or crazy, but it was more embarrassing. It sucked.”

Zilan shared about a time when she was in second grade and she received a slap on the hand for being late to school. She explained that she was only a few minutes late, and she thought she wouldn’t get in trouble because the principal was her neighbor. Zilan laughed, “She knew I was a top student.” Despite this, the principal asked Zilan to put out her hands and remove the mittens that she had conveniently *forgotten* to take off.

Language Challenges

All three informants shared that limited English proficiency was the most substantial barrier to success in school. When asked about difficulties students face when coming to school in the U.S., Mr. Kareem noted, “Many students have difficult experiences in school here because they come with limited English.” For Zilan, English was a struggle despite several years of formal English language instruction in Kurdistan. Previously, her English classes focused on grammar and writing, rather than speaking. She explained, “I knew how to read and write but I was not comfortable speaking.” Additionally, it was difficult to learn English because there was not a native English speaker to model correct pronunciations.

Notably, Nadia and Zilan had very different experiences learning English. Nadia knew virtually no English before coming to the U.S. As she was young, her parents were focused on her learning Kurdish. Nadia's mother introduced flashcards with English words and phrases right before her family immigrated. When she arrived in the U.S., Nadia picked up the language quickly. She explained that by the time she was seven-years-old, she had exited from ESL services. After a year and half of school in the U.S., Nadia had a good grasp of the language. English language instruction was not the only thing that helped—Nadia learned a lot by talking with friends and watching television and movies in English. Also, Nadia's mother was an essential part in her learning English. "My mom would read to us, she bought a bunch of English books. I still have one of the books. It's a Cinderella book, it has her writing all in it, where she translated it."

Through schooling, Zilan had a basic understanding of English, but when she arrived she struggled to converse with native English speakers. She learned a lot in her E class, where they started by speaking in basic sentences and phrases. While this class was helpful, Zilan felt frustrated by her English 11 class. The class she was placed into upon entering the U.S. While she was learning English in her ESL class, in her English 11 class, "all we did was sit in the class and read a book." Zilan was still required to take the end-of-year assessment for that course, which she found very difficult. She explained, "I'm translating every word when I'm reading, what else do you want me to do?"

Both Nadia and Zilan shared frustrations about a lack of consideration for multilingual students in school. Zilan speaks Kurdish, Arabic, and English. She explained

that because her mother is from Kirkuk, an area where Kurds, Turks, and Arabs coexist, her family knows both Kurdish and Arabic. When entering school in the U.S., Zilan was placed in a lower level math class (Algebra I), due to her poor English language proficiency. But, Zilan had almost completed Algebra II in Kurdistan. She was irritated by this, because she found that math in both countries was relatively the same.

Nadia knows both English and Kurdish, but she has forgotten a lot of her Kurdish. While she speaks the language with her mother and sister, she doesn't know how to read and write in Kurdish using an Arabic script. However, Nadia can write in Kurdish with a Latin script. Interestingly, she expanded upon this idea by sharing that traditionally, Kurdish was written in a Latin script. And, many people are now moving towards learning the original writing style.

Looking back, Nadia wishes that teachers and school staff placed more emphasis on bilingual students—celebrating the added benefit of knowing more than one language. She noted that there were a few times when a teacher asked her to use English, but she felt that this happened to her Spanish speaking friends more often. In general, she felt that bilingual students were not speaking in their native language to be rude, but because they were not yet able to communicate in English.

Kurdish Culture and Community

The three informants all shared about the strength and support of their Kurdish communities. Mr. Kareem spoke of the benefit of having a good support network among friends, family, and other Kurds and how community support helped them find success in school.

He feels that Kurdish students do well because they have tight knit families and communities; “This keeps them from being a small fish in an ocean.” Mr. Kareem expressed being tremendously proud of his son, who achieved academic success in high school and college and went on to become a dentist. His father views him as a symbol for the Kurdish community—if you work hard, you can be successful in the U.S.

Zilan explained the need for tight knit communities and living in close proximity to extended family members. She explained, "In my culture we don't spread out, families live in the same area." She explained that families help take care of one another, for example, older siblings help raise younger siblings. Nadia confirmed that close family ties are important, explaining that keeping up with extended family members is essential. In fact, Nadia and Mr. Kareem both shared how proud they are of their family members. Nadia exclaimed, "I'm really proud of them, everyone is super accomplished. And doing well all over the world. I love being able to keep in touch with everyone. We've all been through so much, but we are doing a great job."

Both Nadia and Zilan used the idea of "roots" to emphasize a close connection to their family, their Kurdish community, and their ancestors. Nadia expressed how important it is for her to learn about Kurdish heritage. She appreciated that Kurdish schools spent time discussing their ancient culture, including the Persian Empire and the Zoastrians. In fact, she wishes that teachers in the U.S. would have spent more time discussing and asking questions about her background. “[I wish they would have] asked questions about where I’m from, had more interest in that.” She is proud that the Kurdish culture is “very beautiful and old.” Nadia feels that many people have a lot of misconceptions about the Kurds, including that they are from Arab descent, when they

are actually from an ancient group that predates Christianity. The Kurds were colonized by the Arabs, and some people assume that the Kurds are either Arabic or Turkish, but as Nadia explains, “We are completely ourselves.”

For Nadia, retaining her Kurdish culture is important. She feels that continuing to learn about the Kurd’s rich history and culture, including poetry and visual art, is imperative. She expressed, “I’m always trying to learn more. I am taking classes now to learn more dialects. Really the culture is the biggest thing for me, just being Kurdish.” Nadia spends time sharing about Kurdish culture on social media, and feels that even if one person learns something new, that is worth the time. She posts facts about Kurdistan and information related to the Kurdish plight.

Refugee Students

Neither Zilan nor Nadia identified as refugees. That being said, both informants left their homes in Kurdistan due to undesirable political situations and/or potential violence in the area; and therefore, may be considered refugees within the broader sense of the word—to leave one’s home seeking refuge. Both informants experienced loss and hardship. And in Nadia’s case, her family experienced stress from being relocated to a place they did not chose. Informants were specifically asked what they would want school staff to know about those who are from a refugee background. Nadia expressed, “my family did not have refugee status, but I had many friends that were. I was close enough to the experience, that I can relate to it.” Zilan shared powerful words regarding the trials of refugee and immigrant students:

It's really hard to leave everything behind. I left friends, friends I had from third grade to eleventh grade...If you have a good home, a good political system, and a stable life, why would you go to another country? I wish people knew it's not because we don't appreciate what we have. It's because of political situations, that mostly the western countries caused.

Zilan expressed that she feels lucky that she did not have to go through what other refugees might experience. Her family only moved once and her neighbors and teachers were kind and generous. Also, Zilan explained that many people spend several years in Syria before being resettled somewhere else. She noted that Syria is a country with few resources and that conditions in refugee camps are often poor.

Nadia felt that teachers and school staff should be sensitive to the needs of refugee-background students. "They are in a harder place than others, and may be distracted for those reasons." Not only are these students struggling due to the language barrier, but on top of that they may be dealing with trauma and loss. Nadia reflected that it is easy for those students to fall behind.

When asked about difficulties that refugee-background students may face, Mr. Kareem finds that some families have difficulties due to the long hours that parents must work in order to support their families. This may cause school-aged students to have less supervision. Not to mention, students may receive less help with homework. He also notes that transportation is especially difficult for some families, and having a supportive community often helps.

Student-Counselor Relationships

Informants were asked about how students from Kurdistan may feel about talking with an adult one-on-one about personal information. Zilan and Nadia shared different views on this topic. Zilan emphasized that she did not want to speak for the Kurdish community as a whole, but shared how she and others may feel about student-counselor relationship. She explained, “In general, we are a close community and we don’t want others to know what problems we go through, besides our family.” Zilan feels that some Kurdish students may not feel comfortable discussing personal struggles with someone outside of their family or culture. That being said, she also noted that counseling is helpful for some people that are going through difficult times. And, she shared that it might be particularly helpful in situations of parent separation or domestic violence.

Nadia shared a different sentiment than Zilan, saying, “I think it would be good, as long as there isn’t a language barrier. As long as that comfort was there. At the end of the day, it’s that counselor-student relationship. Most students can sense that. They can choose whether or not they want to be vulnerable. I don’t see a problem with that, in high school my school counselor was the biggest mentor honestly.”

Discussion

Implications for School Personnel

Schools are in a unique position to assist students who are immigrants or refugees acclimate to life in the U.S. and provide positive learning experiences. Information collected from the informants in this study point to both areas of strength and need in supporting some of our most vulnerable learners. While information collected from informants does not reflect all school experiences for Kurdish students, or immigrant or refugee students in general, many of their experiences bear consideration.

According to study informants, teachers and school staff do a good job when it comes to welcoming newcomer students. They are warm and helpful. As Zilan and Nadia described, teachers, counselors, and other school staff helped make them feel comfortable. That being said, both informants noted that importance of having a community of other Kurdish students welcome them. Schools may want to consider how to provide peer support for students who are adjusting to school in the U.S.

On the most basic level, students need assistance orienting to their new school. While this seems wildly obvious, this is an area where some schools miss the mark. School staff members tasked with introducing the student to their new learning environment need to be aware of just *how different* school is in other countries. In fact, it may be important to explain even the basic structure of the school day and what the student should expect in each class. School staff should consider all the school norms and expectations that may not be explicit. These may include navigating class changes, lunch periods, and/or recess. Depending on the student's prior experience, teaching the basics of note taking and how to open a locker may be important.

Importantly, all three informants found that the most salient factor in their school experience was language. For school staff, this emphasizes what we already know; students must be able to communicate to be a functioning member of a school community. It is essential that school personnel adopt effective models of language instruction, and consider how to support students as they are learning English. There are many different models for language instruction, varying from providing native language support to being fully immersed in English. And while programs that utilize native

language instruction seem to be most effective, it may be unrealistic to assume that schools have the resources to provide native language instruction in Kurdish.

It is also important to keep in mind that students who lack English language proficiency still bring knowledge with them into the classroom. This was evident in Zilan's case. Despite having nearly completed Algebra II in Erbil, Zilan was placed in an Algebra I class when arriving in the U.S. due to her limited English language skills. This was a major source of frustration for her, as she found that she was much older than other students in the classroom. Not to mention, mathematics instruction is relatively the same in both countries.

In an article by Barbara Nykiel-Herbert (2010) on Iraqi refugee students, she notes that it is important for teachers to capitalize upon a student's home culture as a background for learning. She explains that celebrating students' cultural backgrounds one or two days out of the year is insufficient. Students have the most success when their culture is embedded in authentic learning experiences. Nadia emphasized this when she wished school personnel would have shown more interest in her culture. She wanted her teachers and peers to interact and ask questions about the Kurdish culture. Today, many teachers try to highlight culture in the classroom, but some are more successful than others. The most effective models for this type of integration include culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000).

Kurdish culture emphasizes collectivism and Kurdish students value close family and community bonds. In Mr. Kareem's experience, Kurdish students are typically successful in school because they have support from family members. For school staff, this means

effectively communicating with families and ensuring that they are stakeholders in their child's educational process.

Also, Kurdish culture features rich oral traditions, such as epic poems passed down through generations. Nadia noted being proud of these traditions and seeking to learn more about Kurdish art and music. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) notes that oral language skills in general are important for the Kurds, including the ability to tell a story or tell a joke. Thus, it may be worth bringing these oral traditions into the classroom, including incorporating developing and reciting a story into the writing curriculum.

Implications for School Psychologists

The role of a school psychologist is vast, and often varies from district to district and school to school. For the purposes of this study, considerations related to conducting psychological evaluations and providing individual counseling are included.

When completing a psychological evaluation, school psychologists are required to think about how a student's background and previous educational experiences impact their functioning. In the case of Kurdish students, it's important to consider their early history. For some, early experiences of trauma and loss may be impacting how they interact with their learning environment. For Kurdish students born in the United States, it's worth considering that previous generations of Kurds have experienced oppression by many groups. And, there was a time in Iraq when the Kurdish language was prohibited from being spoken and taught.

Along with a child's background, a psychologist must consider what language(s) the child speaks and what their level of proficiency is. Kurds primarily speak Kurdish, which

has three distinct dialects spoken in different regions. And depending on where a Kurdish student is from, it is possible that they speak several languages. The second most common language is Arabic, but Kurds also speak Turkish, or languages associated with surrounding countries. In Zilan's case, she was proficient in both Kurdish and Arabic, and had taken English classes before coming to the U.S. This information is important for all school staff, and school psychologists who are considering culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment measures.

In terms of counseling, there are two oppositional ideas to consider: higher-than-normal levels of psychological disorders among refugee students and a student's cultural norms in regards to sharing personal information. A study by Betancourt et al. (2012) suggest that refugee students, who have experienced trauma, often present PTSD symptoms, along with those associated with anxiety and depression. It should also be noted that despite a higher-than-normal level of psychological disorders, a large portion of refugee children do not develop mental health problems, but may benefit from school-based supports to nurture social-emotional wellbeing (Eruiyar, Huemer, & Vostanis, 2018).

That being said, Kurdish students may prefer to keep personal information within their family or community. Participants in this study highlighted this contrast well. Zilan explained that for some members of her community, sharing information with a counselor may not be a viable option. Despite this, she mentioned that there are some situations that immigrant and refugee students go through that are particularly traumatic, and for those students an effort to provide counseling services may be warranted. For Nadia, her openness to counseling was dependent upon the counseling relationship. She

felt that as long as English wasn't a barrier (which is another consideration within itself), a student can choose whether or not to be vulnerable with the counselor.

Final Thoughts, Study Limitations, and Further Research

This study, investigating the experiences of Kurdish students, along with several studies investigating the needs of students who are refugees or immigrants, suggest that language difficulties are often the most significant barrier to success in school. Language development is a substantial concern for immigrant and refugee students, no matter their country of origin. For school staff, this should raise several questions. First, what are we doing to ensure that students are acquiring English language proficiency? Are we using research-based methods for teaching English to our newcomer and English Language Learning students (ELLs)? We must also consider how to support a child's native language, along with their class communication and participation while they are developing language skills. As educators, we must reflect on our current practices and consider whether they are meeting the needs of our immigrant and refugee students.

As mentioned previously, schools in Kurdistan are considerably different than schools in the U.S. This is not only true for schools in Kurdistan, but for schools around the globe. For all of our refugee and immigrant students, we need to bear in mind their unique educational journeys. As teachers, school counselors and school psychologists, we need to be asking, "What has school been like for you?" We need to consider that even the most basic aspects of school in the U.S., like taking notes and eating lunch, may be new for them. This idea should impact the way we teach and engage with students.

Despite the rich data, this study has several limitations. The most obvious limitation of this study was sample size. A more comprehensive sample, including more informants from a variety of backgrounds, would provide more data to consider. Including students who immigrated during different ages, students of different genders, and students with different “stories” would be ideal. Also, there are a few areas pertinent to school personnel and the practice of school psychology that were not addressed in this study. These include grading practices and end of course (or grade) tests. In addition, more information regarding special education practices in Kurdistan may be particularly interesting for school psychologists and special educators.

The goal of this study was to provide insight into the experiences of immigrant and refugee students, and of those, students from lesser-known backgrounds, such as the Kurds. Currently, there is limited research on the learning characteristics and school experiences of students immigrating from the Middle East, including Kurdistan. And, Kurdish students in particular, have cultural backgrounds and histories of oppression, that make their experiences unique. Further research, including larger studies investigating the best methods of supporting refugee and immigrant learners from Kurdistan, and other areas in the Middle East, will be important for understanding how teachers might support these students in their classrooms.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about what school was like for you before coming to the U.S.
2. Explain what your first week at school in the United States was like.
3. What was most surprising about school in the U.S.?
Did anything else surprise you?
4. What is one thing you wish teachers knew about you?
About people from Kurdistan?
5. What is one thing you liked about going to school in the United States?
What was the most difficult part of going to school in the United States?
6. Tell me what learning English was like for you.
How many languages do you speak?
What language do you speak with your family? With your friends?
7. What about being Kurdish is important to you?
In what ways do you learn about Kurdish culture?
8. Who helped you adjust to school in the United States?
Did teachers help you?
Did your parents or other family members help?
9. I'm training to be a school psychologist. School psychologists often work one-on-one with students to figure out how they learn best and support them if they are having emotional problems. How do you think that students from Kurdistan would feel comfortable talking with someone about their personal information? Or working with an adult one-on-one?
10. In the United States, we refer to people who are living outside of their home country, who are unable to return to their home country due to violence or persecution due to race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion, as refugees. What would you want people at school to know about being a refugee?

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