

## Spanning Boundaries by Building Relationships

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### Abstract

An estimated 1.2 million refugee students attend schools across the United States (U.S.). They represent between 35-40% of the total number of refugees in the U.S. Yet, we know little about how school districts work with refugee students, most of whom have had significant gaps in their formal education and for whom English is not their first language. Drawing on data collected during a three-year ethnography of refugee networks in Arizona, which included a case study of one school district's refugee support department, we examine how the influx of refugee students alters the discourses and practices traditionally associated with school-family-community relationships. Framing refugee mentors who work in the school district and their community-based counterparts as “boundary spanners” Tushman (1977), we demonstrate how the mentors aim to bridge the boundaries between refugees' homes and communities and their new U.S. schools. Highlighting the complexity of the varied, and often contentious, interactions between the policies of the school, the practices the community-based organizations, and the understandings of the refugee parents, we point to the precariousness of the school-family-community interactions and discuss what boundaries are left unbridged. Finally, we offer recommendations for the further development of policies made to influence the formal education of refugees attending U.S schools.

### Keywords

refugee students, refugee education policy, school-family relations, boundary spanners

### Introduction

Refugees—defined as those who have been forced to flee their countries of nationality due to persecution or fear of persecution based on race, religion, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group—confront, and cross, many boundaries, both literal and symbolic. Several countries grant humanitarian refuge and aid to migrants, but until 2016 the United States (U.S.), “remain[ed] the top resettlement country” (Zong and Batalova, 2017). Once resettled in the U.S., refugees encounter new

boundaries, including the ones between home, community, and schools. We know very little about how they negotiate the boundaries between these contexts or who supports them in crossing these boundaries. As well described by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), boundaries belong

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“to both one world and another” (p. 141), or in other words, they are part of each entity. Many boundaries are fluid, temporal, and emergent. We follow Star (2010) in defining a boundary as not necessarily an edge, but more accurately as space in which a “sense of here and there are confounded” (p. 603). Thus, even as boundaries are constructed and reified through practices and policies within individual entities, there exists a simultaneous need for connections between these particular entities.

Globally, more than one half of the nearly 21.3 million refugees are under the age of 18 (UNHRC, 2015). Of the nearly three million refugees who have been resettled in the U.S. since 1975, 37% are school-aged children between five and eighteen years of age and as reported by Dryden-Peterson (2016), an estimated 1.2 million refugee students attend K-12 schools in the U.S. They are a heterogeneous group with different backgrounds and experiences. Many, though, speak multiple languages, come from families and communities rich in cultural assets and resources (He, Bettez, & Levin, 2015), and are eager to learn once resettled in America (Koyama, 2015). However, many of these students have experienced interrupted formal education and are also designated as English language learners (ELLs), and thus upon resettlement, can face academic challenges (Birman and Tran, 2017; Dooley, 2009). Additionally, after enduring protracted displacement and often suffering from violence prior to and during their resettlement process, refugee youth have been shown to suffer from poor mental and physical health that can affect their academic engagement (McBrien, 2005; Patel, Staudenmeyer, Wickham; Firmender, Fields, & Miller, 2017). Providing sufficient educational and psycho-social supports for the refugee students can test school districts, which are already experiencing decreasing budgets and limited resources (Koyama, 2017; Leachman, Masterson & Figueroa, 2017) and community

organizations, which rely on diminishing federal funding.

Across the links between schools, organizations, and agencies, educational programs and policies vary substantially depending on how the refugees, and their families, seeking education are positioned by their resettlement country (Dryden-Peterson, 2016) and their new school districts (Koyama, 2015). In the U.S., refugee children have the legal right to attend public education. According to the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, Public Law 96-212, refugee youth should be enrolled in schools as soon as possible, usually within the first 30 days of their arrival. This requires procuring the necessary documents, including a birth certificate, immunization records, and proof of residency. Yet, once enrolled, refugee students, depending on which schools they attend, may have very disparate academic and emotional supports provided to them (Koyama, 2015, 2017; McBrien, 2005).

In this piece, we examine how the influx of refugee students in a school district brings community-based organizations that provide refugee support services and local affiliations of international refugee resettlement agencies into greater contact with the formal education system. Increasingly, “education policies that promote school-community collaboration...ask school district central offices to help schools collaborate with community-based public, private, and nonprofit organizations” (Honig, 2006, p. 357), and as shown in the work of Winton and Evans (2016), community-based organizations are increasingly influencing education policy and practices. Specifically, in the education of refugees in the U.S., the work of community-based organizations and school districts intersect and overlap. For instance, it is usually a caseworker from a refugee resettlement agency who first contacts the mentors in the school district to enroll a newly arrived refugee, and a liaison from a support organization that

serves as initial translator for the youth's parents at the school. Boundary spanners—in this study, mentors—employed by the school district also extend their work responsibilities within schools to the refugees' homes and ethnic communities, often meeting with refugee families to talk about their children's schooling.

We pay particular attention to “official” boundary spanners, or those whose job in either a school district or a community-based organization supporting refugee youth requires them to work across at least one school-community organization boundary. We also consider refugee parents as potential boundary spanners. The boundary spanners share a commitment to the well-being of the refugee children, but “legitimizing coexistence is often highly political and sensitive to those involved” (Akkerman & Bakker, p. 143) as the spanners face different accountabilities in different contexts and are often in competition for resources. Drawing on data collected during a three-year ethnography of refugee networks in Arizona, which included a case study of one school district's refugee support department and local refugee agencies, we focus on how the mentors, as well as refugee parents and community workers, aim to bridge the boundaries between refugees' homes and communities and their new U.S. schools. Highlighting the complexity of the varied, and often contentious, interactions between policies and practices of the school and community-based organizations, we point to the precariousness of the school-family-community interactions and discuss what boundaries are left unbridged. We also interrogate how refugee parents are often not integrated into the school-family-community linkages. Finally, we offer recommendations for the further development of policies and practices made to influence the formal education of refugees attending U.S. schools.

## **Literature Review: Refugee Students, Their Families, and U.S. Schooling**

There exists disparate bodies of literature on the education of refugee youth. Much of what is available centers on schooling and educational programs provided by international organizations, often in refugee resettlement camps (Healey & DeStefano, 1997; Mendenhall, 2012). What is known about such education is often presented in reports by the international organizations providing the education, including UNESCO (2011) and World Bank (2005). Essentially, this literature points to the need for more funding and greater coordination among agencies, and also to the challenges to sustaining educational programs as the numbers of internally displaced people and refugees rise. According to Chapman and Nkansa (2006), local support and ownership is essential to the sustainability of any education program initiated by international agencies.

A handful of other studies (Betancourt, Newnham, Layne, Kim, Steinberg, Ellis & Birman, 2012; Halcón, Robertson, Savik, Johnson, Spring, Butcher, Westermeyer, & Jaranson, 2004; Hyman, Vu & Beiser, 2000) investigate how refugees attending educational programs/schools in North America experience post-migration stress and trauma—and how that interacts with their schooling. Some refugees, like the 338 eighteen to twenty-five year old Somali and Oromo refugees in Halcón et al.'s (2004) survey-based study, continue to suffer after resettlement in the U.S. from issues associated with violence and war, while others are adapting more easily to education, and to their lives in America. Based on interviews with sixteen participants and three focus groups conducted with Southeast Asian refugees in Canada, Hyman et al. (2000) find that these youth, including the children of refugee parents, are often challenged by the stressor of school,

among other stressors. Most of the refugees reported that the lack of English fluency and familiarity with cultural values demonstrated in Canadian schooling felt stressful and intimidating. In their quantitative study of 184 newcomer immigrant and refugee youth, however, Patel et al. (2017) find that the youth who were exposed to war experienced greater self-reported anxiety, behavior issues and lower academic achievement in schools than those who were not exposed. Based on the survey findings, the exposure to the trauma may have mediated the traumatized youth's ability to navigate acculturative stressors.

An emerging, but small, recent body of literature addresses how American schools can create safe learning environments, supportive curriculum, and culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership. Much of this research (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Bartlett, Mendenhall, & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; McBrien, Dooley & Birtman, 2017; Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018) draws needed attention to how international schools in New York City and Oakland educate refugee youth and other newcomers. This scholarship calls for curricular, pedagogical, and assessment approaches that avoid tracking and segregating refugee students, and that also utilize the students' experiences and language as resources that can be integrated throughout the school day, and in related out of school learning. Bajaj and Suresh (2018), for instance, demonstrate how Oakland International High School excels at leveraging community collaborations, creating meaningful family engagement, and enacting flexible curriculum to meet the refugee students' and their families' needs. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) also argue that refugee students benefit from a critical transnational curriculum and note that afterschool and extracurricular programs provide important academic, language, and social supports to refugee youth. Similarly, in their qualitative study examining

the needs of refugee students in NYC, Bartlett et al. (2017) find that the 23 students, 18 of whom attended one of two international high schools, expressed that, in their schools, "diversity is valued, teachers demonstrate support, and many peers establish encouraging relationships" (pp. 117-118). The schools, the authors note, are effective in meeting the students' needs in part because they use asset-based pedagogy and curriculum centered on heterogeneous student groups. Informed by their findings, Bartlett et al. recommend that schools should adopt a more fluid understanding of "culture" to avoid the inaccurate and often damaging discourse that refugees' home and school cultures are at odds.

How refugee parents and schools interact has also been shown to be uneven (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017; Matthiesen, 2015). While little literature exists on refugee parent involvement in schools, we know from studies conducted on immigrant parents, that the presence of these parents is often undervalued even though they can be important boundary spanners between the youth's homes and schools (Carreón, Drake, and Barton, 2005). Koyama and Bakuza (2017), however, draw on more than two years of ethnographic data on refugees in a Northeastern U.S. city, to document how parents, when invited to join with others in schools and community organizations, can advocate for their children and navigate uncertain and unfamiliar education spaces. In contrast, much of the literature shows that the involvement of immigrant parents in their children's schools is lessened due to the cultural and linguistic differences perceived by both the schools and the parents. Researchers (Doucet, 2011; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) have demonstrated that linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse (LCSD) families are persistently positioned as needing "help" and "encouragement" from schools to become involved in their children's schooling. Doucet, in her study of fifty-four 1.5 and second-generation

Haitian immigrant parents in the Boston area, argues that parental involvement is part of a ritual system in which immigrant parents are subsumed “into a dominant, mainstream model of involvement within an inequitable educational project” (p. 404). Their involvement is thus defined not only by race, class, and linguistic differences, but also by broader differentials of power between schools and homes.

In their study of a twelve-week parent leadership program for Latinx parents, Bolívar and Crispeels (2011) document how opportunities for these parents are usually limited in both quantity and benefit. “Furthermore,” they argue, “low-income and non-English-speaking parents seem to benefit little from conventional parent-teacher associations, which seem unable to effectively channel parent power for meaningful participation...” (p. 6). Some parents, like the twenty-one Chinese immigrant parents living in Canada interviewed in Dyson’s (2001) study receive superficial and general communications about their children’s progress from the school. Further, the conventional avenues that are available to parents, such as parent-teacher meetings, were of little benefit to immigrant parents as communication in these meetings position teachers as the experts and parents as subordinates. For example, in her investigation of silencing in parent-teacher conferences in Danish public schools, Matthiesen (2015) points out that Somali parents are not silent because they respect the teachers, but instead are silenced in the process of the meetings, in which teachers unilaterally inform parents how their child is performing. The mothers in the four families that were followed for 1.5 years in Matthiesen’s study saw themselves as advocates for their children, but also wanted to be seen as non-confrontational partners with the schools and teachers.

## Theory: Boundary Spanners and Boundary Objects

Boundaries offer a way to consider the distinction between one entity or organization and another (Whitenack & Swanson, 2013). When a school district is one of the entities, there are multiple people, including district and school administrators, as well as teachers, in boundary roles that extend outside of the district. They communicate with others in out-of-school organizations and they create, process, and circulate information across these organizations (Honig, 2006; Stevens, 1999). Many of them serve as boundary spanners either consistently as part of their responsibilities or as a result of temporal inter-entity interactions.

People who are considered to be “boundary spanners” (Tushman, 1977) have been idealistically “characterized by their ability to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies” (Williams, 2002, p. 110). They are optimistically described as creative catalysts and innovators (deLeon, 1996); networkers (Many, Fisher, Ogletree & Taylor, 2012; Webb, 1991), and cultural brokers (Trevillion, 1991). We recognize that boundary spanners, who work back and forth across and between groups, organizations, institutions, and societal structures, are quite diverse in their aims, resources, and positionalities. They operate in what can be considered a recognized “shared problem space” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011)—a context where problems are addressed collaboratively, although those attending to them may not share exact aims or accountabilities.

Honig (2006), in her study of school district administrators as boundary spanners, notes, however:

[B]oundary spanners’ *positions on the organizational margins* may be a help or a hindrance. Such positions may increase their communication and relationships with

people outside their organizations...; on the other hand, such marginal positions often limit their communication and relationships with people within their organization... (p. 362).

They often lack authority in their own organizations and yet are expected to create and improve connections to other organizations. Some have been assigned to do the work of boundary spanning as part of their official responsibilities; others, adept at creating and extending connections, bridge boundaries as part of their daily work.

An interesting subset of the literature (e.g. Postlethwaite, 2007) on boundary spanning centers on what happens in the boundary space when certain people interact. As described by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), in their comprehensive review of scholarship on boundary spanners and objects:

Given a certain problem space, practices that are able to cross their boundaries engage in a creative process in which something hybrid—that is, as new cultural form—emerges. In [this] hybridization, ingredients from different contexts are combined into something new and familiar.... The hybrid result can also take the shape of a completely new practice that stands between established practices... (p.148).

One example of such hybridization can be seen through the case study of Hmong refugees enrolled in an urban elementary school, in which school-community collaborations lead to the development of academic programs for these students and their parents (Rah, 2013). In this example, Rah highlights the importance of recruiting Hmong American staff and leaders from the local Hmong community in assisting with lesson plans, after-school programs and building relations with these students' parents. We also find some evidence of such

hybridization in this study, especially in the mentors' practices centering on the repurposing of boundary objects, such as learning aides, and on documenting the completion of tasks and student contact hours.

Boundary objects, which are common to, and used between, groups or organizations “through flexibility and shared structure—they are the stuff of action” (Star, 2010, p. 603). As originally conceived by Star and Griesemer (1989), boundary objects have three characterizing dimensions: interpretive flexibility, material/organizational structure, and scale/granularity. Interpretive flexibility, inherent to all objects, centers on the ways in which different individuals and groups of individuals understand, make sense of, and utilize the objects. The materiality aspect of boundary objects draws attention to their non-arbitrary form; they emerge according to the “‘information and work requirements’ as perceived locally and by groups who wish to cooperate” (Star, 2010, p. 602). When objects are scaled up, they change into infrastructure or standards through institutionalized practices and processes. Lampland and Star (2009) demonstrate how standards and boundary objects become inextricably linked over time in particular organizations.

## **Methods: Gathering and Analyzing Data**

Data in this paper were collected in an ethnography of refugee networks in Arizona conducted between December 2013 and January 2016 by the two authors. Within that larger ethnography, the authors, along with two other researchers, conducted an 18-month case study of one school districts that we refer to as Desert Unified School District (DUSD). During the study, the first author also volunteered as an ESL tutor at two different refugee support organizations; served on advisory council for the

Hub, a refugee tutoring center; and participated on the strategic planning board for refugee education in Arizona. Both authors attended staff meetings and events held by the Refugee Support Department in DUSD.

### **Refugee Students in DUSD**

On average during the study, 900 refugees were resettled annually in the study region. Fifty percent of those resettled were under the age of twenty-four, and approximately 350 became students each year in DUSD. During the study, there were between 771 and 1104 refugee students enrolled in DUSD, a large district in Arizona with approximately 48,000 students, 62% of whom were identified as “Hispanic”. The refugee students came from 52 different countries, with the majority hailing from either Bhutan, Somalia, or Iraq. Of the 89 schools in the district, all but 10 had at least one refugee student. Two high schools had the greatest percentage of refugee students; 22% of the total refugee students attended one and 10% attended the other. At the time the study began, 38 percent of the total population of refugees had been attending a school in DUSD for three years or less. Smaller districts adjacent to DUSD, private schools, and some charter schools, in the aggregate, enrolled nearly 200 refugee students annually, as well. Most of the refugee students had experienced limited, interrupted formal educations, or had even had no formal education prior to being enrolled in schools in these Arizona districts. All but a handful were enrolled in English Language Development (ELD) courses. DUSD’s Refugee Services Department aim was to integrate refugee youth into schools and help refugee families’ transition to living in Arizona.

### **Participants**

During the study, the Department was comprised of a director, ten full-time student-family mentors (referred to as mentors in this

paper) and one part-time administrator. Together, they provided a range of educational and social supports. The educational services, such as assistance with school registration, tutoring, and language support were geared to counteracting refugee youth’s initial limited English language ability and intermittent schooling. Social supports included, but were not limited to, translating school information for parents, transporting family members to medical appointments, securing mental health services for youth, and providing programs in citizenship and adult English as a Second Language (ESL). These bridged the voids created by disrupted family networks, poor mental and physical health services in resettlement camps, and ethnic-cultural neighborhood segregation.

### **Refugee Support Organizations and Agencies**

There were approximately seventy different agencies, organizations, and groups that offer services to refugees in Arizona. Some of these have international ties and receive federal funding, such as refugee resettlement agencies, and others are small, often temporal, such as church groups and school-sponsored initiatives. In this piece, we include people in boundary spanning positions affiliated with either one of the three refugee resettlement agencies or organizations that receive state or federal funding. Because of their accountability to the state, these entities have policies and procedures that help define and guide the official work of the boundary spanners. However, as demonstrated in this study, boundary spanners, can, and often do, selectively follow the regulations and policies of their organizations in order to get work done. Aiming for confidentiality, we choose to use generic names, such as Refugee Resettlement Agency and Refugee Support Organization, to refer to the community-based and government-funded organizations and titles, such as Director or

Coordinator, for those working in these organizations. We include them in the findings only to illuminate the interactions with DUSD refugee mentors, whose boundary spanning work is the focus of this paper.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

All of the 10 mentors and director of the DUSD Refugee Services Department completed a survey, participated in semi-structured interviews, and were observed across 10 different schools. In total, nearly 50 pages of observational fieldnotes were collected in DUSD. Five teachers and five principals who worked directly with refugee students in their schools and ten refugee parents whose children attended these same schools were also interviewed. Additional interviews in the ethnography include: 15 staff members of organizations and agencies that provide services to refugee youth and their families in Arizona; 12 staff members of three refugee resettlement agencies in Arizona, 7 administrators directing state refugee programs, and 5 Arizona community activists. All of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

Data for the case study were managed, coded, and analyzed primarily by the two authors; The second author served as the project manager for the case study. First-level *a priori* coding was done according to a set of codes developed by the authors. These etic codes were developed from the initial survey data and emic codes were added after the first few interviews were transcribed. Codes were also made to denote descriptive identifying information, such as demographic information, policy, names of documents, and agency information. Secondary and tertiary inductive coding were created as needed. The authors reached an 80% intercoder reliability. However, because the two authors spent a great deal of time with the mentors in DUSD, we relied on the other research team members, who had spent substantially less time

with the mentors, to provide feedback on the analytic codes and confirm the patterns in the data identified by the two authors.

### **Findings: Support, Communication, and Interactions**

The DUSD Department of Refugee Services provided academic support and services to the students throughout the day and afterschool. According to Tam, the director of the department, there existed two simultaneous goals for the department: Supporting refugees academically through high school graduation and helping them, and their families, navigate the formal education system. Both of these, she stated, depend on building relationships with the students, their families, and also the schools. The mentors in the department approached these goals by providing academic supports that bridge classes and tutoring; interacting with school personnel to span language and cultural differences; and communicating with refugee families to link schools and homes. Mentors also supported entire families in participating in American culture. Amy, one of the most senior mentors, noted how while the mentors “number one thing” was “settling and adjusting” students to the new school environment, they also made “sure that they were fed, whatever they need—clothing, food. Those basic needs” (Interview, May 5, 2015). Here, we examine the work of the mentors by focusing on the interactions between schools, refugee families, and community organizations and agencies. We present our findings in two interrelated themes, which emerged in our analysis of data. They are: providing academic support and tutoring and interacting with parents and the community.

#### **Providing Academic Support and Tutoring**

The mentors in DUSD, from our observations, spent much of the school day with the students.



Leonidis and Amy, for instance, arrived early daily prior to the start of classes to assist students who did not finish their homework. Leonidis explained: "I'm here at 7:30 so if they have problems with their homework they will find me in the morning or after their lunch, so we work together" (Interview, March 30, 2015). He also spoke at length about how he would divide his time between being with students in their classes, and then pulling them out for individualized tutoring. Leonidis assured us that this was only done at the request of teachers and even principals. This was confirmed in our observations. Often, we saw teachers and administrators asking that the mentors work with students, one on one, during class time.

Working with students individually within classes, the mentors negotiated the boundaries of class instruction and tutoring, as well as those between teacher and student. However, the mentors were, in these classroom situations, often treated like "translators" or "teacher assistants" which denied their expertise. Several mentors spoke about how they were often placed in situations by school administrators and teachers in which they were expected to serve as translators. Most would translate if asked, but they pointed out that it felt belittling to them. Jan explained: "I'm not here just to translate, to be a go between...I'm not at their disposal whenever they need translating...I'm here for the kids" (personal communication, January 11, 2016). Tam, the director, acknowledged that "sometimes I get calls when they[schools] need an interpreter. Well my staff are not interpreters.... There is a whole other department that does interpreting...But they kind of aren't sure what the role [of a mentor] is..." (Interview, May 4, 2015). The mentors' seeming resistance to serving as an interpreter or translator for school personnel was part, we learned, of a larger ongoing battle in the district to be recognized for their expertise as mentors

and to be differentiated from the interpreters employed in the district.

Still, as the mentors worked only in select schools that the refugees attended and had their offices in a transitional building at one of the high schools, they were at the margins of the district. They were less visible than translators, who attended many events, who were housed at the main district office, and whose responsibilities were well-defined. The mentors were, however, responsible in schools for "help[ing] other organizational members" utilize information generated by students, families, refugee agencies, and even their own department "by translating that information into forms that the other decision makers may consider accessible and useable" (Honig, 2016, p. 361). Although not necessarily recognized by teachers and administrators for their exact roles, the mentors were expected to bridge not only linguistic, but also informational boundaries. On several occasions, we observed mentors explaining a refugee resettlement report to a school administrator. Conversely, we also documented the mentors summarizing school assessments and education plans of refugee students to caseworkers and parents. They often served as information managers.

Because of their many roles, mentors were flexible in their daily work, and we observed them working differently with different students each day. As Amy, a mentor, explained: "Each student's needs are different" (Interview, May 5, 2015) and the mentors differentiated their instruction to students working in small groups and individually. Much of the instruction and support, however, centered on developing basic math skills and developing English grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Several of the tutors, including Jan and Amy, created additional study guides and resources for the students to use at home. Amy spoke about the depth of her efforts:

I myself go out to the book store or used book store and buy the study guides and sometimes I laminate it. It may be about history of American. It may be hard for newcomers. Of course, I am not that subject teacher, but I wouldn't have the in-depth knowledge myself, but I am willing to sit down and provide those study guides.... I [even] got an algebra book because from the library but it has been so long that I forgot! I want to go through the entire book because I want to help my students. (Interview, May 5, 2015)

Amy, as shown in this example, took her responsibility of academically supporting the refugee students seriously and we often observed her bringing new resources to the tutoring sessions. When asked about her efforts, Amy explained that the refugee families didn't know where to get the additional materials, but that when she could she would take the parents to second hand stores to show them where she got the math books. That, she noted, helped better integrate the families, as well as garner additional academic resources for the students. Spanning the boundary between home and school mentors engaged, throughout the study, in actions similar to those described by Amy.

Jan also created study guides and recycled old math workbooks to use when working with the refugees, but her efforts were not always welcomed. One teacher was adamant that the mentors were "teaching the kids the old way of doing math that just messes them up when I teach them another way in class...it just confuses them" (Fieldnotes, June 23, 2015). He asked the mentors to use only classroom materials. This tension between teachers and mentors happened infrequently, but they existed nonetheless, and we observed a jostling for authority in academic matters. While the teachers would defer to the mentors in communications with families and also with socio-behavioral support, a handful

were adamant that they, the teachers, should control the content of instruction, as well as the teaching style of the mentors.

Tam confirmed that there had been some complaints about the mentors' teachings from a couple of administrators and teachers, but she defended the mentors' approach, noting that there are many ways to learn math. She also pointed out the precariousness of the mentors' positions in schools; they weren't certified teachers nor were they teachers' assistants, and yet they were "unofficially responsible" for educating the refugees. The mentors, as they aimed to span the classroom and tutoring, were delegitimized as experts. They were often respected and appreciated by teachers for their functional roles, such as sharing information about refugee students' backgrounds, but they were not seen as educators. Providing math supports that were not approved by the teachers were not the "legitimate" or the "right" behaviors for mentors to exhibit. In fact, the mentors were seen as doing something detrimental to the students' learning by a handful of teachers in the study.

Mentors did, though, also offer formal afterschool tutoring throughout the school year and held a six-week summer math tutoring program, called the Math Academy, Mondays through Thursdays, 9am-2pm, at a DUSD school. Forty refugee students enrolled in the 2015 Math Academy. When the mentors were asked why, despite low-enrollments and attendance, they continued the Academy, Leonidis, one of the mentors, stated: "The children need this. They are so far behind...So we do times tables, arithmetic, division over and over again...memorizing" (Fieldnotes, July 23, 2015). Observational field notes confirmed that the mentors used repetitive, didactic, teacher-centered pedagogies and students would often write nothing on their papers. Refugee students often had their heads down on their tables or were staring away from the lesson. Leonidis

reprimanded them and continued his lesson. Another mentor, Jan, explained that the refugees in the summer program were the “newest in the country” and had “the greatest needs” (ibid). “Who?” she asked would help these children. In her mind, they needed the Math Academy, and by association, they needed to be taught/tutored by the mentors.

However, throughout the study, several organizations, including a handful of community groups, and a refugee resettlement agency, offered free tutoring to refugee youth. The Hub, the largest of these tutoring programs, offered by one refugee resettlement agency, was centrally located, became well-established, had regular Monday through Friday evening hours, and offered tutoring and academic support to 40-60 youth per evening. There, middle and high school students received one-on-one or small group tutoring across all subjects, including mathematics, English, the sciences, economics, and history. The majority of students who came for tutoring at the Hub attended schools in a district adjacent to DUSD, the Mountain School District (MSD). Mostly, with a couple of exceptions, the refugee students from DUSD were not among the students utilizing the tutoring center.

According to the Hub tutor coordinator, DUSD unlike MSD, didn’t have a partnership with the Hub, and furthermore, actually discouraged their students from getting support at the Hub. She stated:

It’s sad, really sad. We have all of these good things here for them, for free and we are open every evening just for students...They can get help in any subject and we have computers and resources for them too...We’ve heard that Tam [The DUSD Refugee Support Department Director] and the refugee mentors only want their kids to get help from them. Really limiting. Not right at all. (Interview, February 12, 2015).

Another volunteer concurred stating that his friend, who was a teacher in DUSD, was told not to suggest the refugee students in his mathematics class attend the Hub because the DUSD mentors did not know what kind of academic support the students would receive there.

By positioning themselves as the main providers of academic support and tutoring, the mentors, in essence, created a boundary between the district and community organizations. In turn, they limited the refugee students’ access to valuable resources. While we did not find this to be malicious, we did question the mentors’ actions. According to the DUSD Refugee Services Director, Tam, refugee students wanted to be tutored by the mentors. She explained:

When the staff [the mentors] say [to a refugee student], “I am worried about your grades. I need you to go to tutoring,” the majority of them go or “I need to see you before school, after school,” they’ll go. We’ll have students go to tutoring with our staff before they go to tutoring that’s available at their schools. So, they’ll travel away from their school to wherever our staff member is...And if the staff says, “you know I really want you to do this, and these are the times, I am available,” then the kids go there...because the kids know our staff cares for them. (Interview, May 4, 2015).

During the study, students did travel by bus or walk from school to school to receive tutoring from the mentors they knew best. We also observed the mentors instructing students not to go to other tutoring programs, at their schools or at the Hub. According to Dante, one of the mentors, the advice was practical, not necessarily proprietary. The mentors knew the students best and the students trusted the mentors because throughout the day, the mentors would travel from school to school (Personal communication, May 29, 2015).

The mentors' territorial claim over, or boundary guarding of, the refugee tutoring can also be partially explained by the intensification of accountability measures and associated required documentation of "contact hours" at DUSD. Eight of the ten mentors mentioned that the logging of "contact hours," especially in the area of "academic support and tutoring" was too time consuming, but necessary to retain their funding and legitimize their work. Sara, one of the mentors explained the stress of the additional documentation:

You know, I used to like this job more...too much paperwork now. It takes too much time [to enter data every day]. Putting contacts in, submitting...too much time. It's not as much fun anymore...Who is this for? The district? The school? For the kids? No... (Fieldnotes, World Refugee Day Celebration, June 16, 2015).

Tam reminded them that they needed to collect data to "show what we do, to prove we are needed" (*ibid*). Sara and Jan noted that documenting contact hours at the end of the day took nearly an hour away from actually working to support the refugee students.

Legitimizing their expertise and position in DUSD, where, as we have shown, their work was sometimes challenged or contested, was ongoing work for the mentors. Tracking what they did, in 15-minute contact units, served to "incorporate that information into organization routines to advance performance goals" (Honig, 2006, p. 360). The logs, themselves, served as boundary objects that not only quantified their daily work with refugees, but also supported DUSD accountability structure. It gave the mentors' work a position in the District and was used to demonstrate that particular goals and responsibilities were being met. As warned by Star (2010), boundary objects can reduce actions, behaviors, and interactions into self-contained, tidy, and transportable units that do

not necessarily reflect what is actually being done. Boundary objects, like the contact logs, became useful to DUSD, but were not at all shared with community collaborators, such as the Hub, where they could have been used to supplement the services which were not being provided by the mentors.

Whether it was to prove their worth or legitimize their positions and expertise with refugee students—or both—the mentors failed to bridge the boundaries between their tutoring program at school and the one offered at Hub. It was the most obvious, and repetitious, example of uncross boundaries in our study. According to the Hub director, the mentors were acting unnecessarily as gatekeepers, and in doing so, were limiting the academic support received by the refugee students. When asked about this, Leonidis responded: "We can't do everything and they [refugee resettlement agencies] can't do everything. We let them do what they do, and they should let us do our own" (Personal communication, March 24, 2015). No mentor suggested that the students could benefit both from receiving tutoring at school and at Hub.

Further, during the study, the mentors extended their tutoring program to include sessions at the large apartment complexes where refugee families lived. When asked about the home-based tutoring program, the director explained the need for the program:

...Part of it is that we need to show the numbers, make the numbers as part of grant tracker, which you know marks how we are increasing graduation rates and academic achievement. We need to show, and we do, that we are meeting our accountability measures in contact hours...especially when it comes to academic supports.... Tutoring is the main way we do this, other than assisting students during the school day. You know we already have tutoring twice weekly afterschool and the summer Math

academy. The tutoring program in the apartment complexes are just one more way to offer academic support, and to connect with the families.... (Email to Author 1, March 28, 2015)

Tutoring programs at apartment complexes were thus convenient and necessary means for the DUSD Refugee Services Department to meet their accountability mandates and log “contact hours” to signal their effectiveness as a department, and importantly, to keep their funding.

On one hand, tutoring in the complexes certainly blurred the boundaries between schools and homes. On the other, it more clearly demarcated and extended the particular boundaries within in which the mentors were the only tutors. It further legitimized their claim for being the most appropriate tutors for the refugee students in their school district and increased their “contact hours.” Tutoring in the apartment complexes also reified their positions as liaisons between schools and families. The tutoring spaces was somewhat ambiguous—an unremarkable and mostly unused community room—except for when the mentors transformed it with teaching materials. Books, whiteboards, rulers, and graph paper, while having a different meaning in the schools, retained enough meaning and “interpretive flexibility” to be useful in this new context.

### **Interacting With Families and Communities**

All of the mentors in the study repeatedly stated that they worked for the refugee students and their families. For example, Bin was adamant that he worked for entire refugee families and communities, not just the students in DUSD. He stated: “I not only help the student...Because if I want to make as strong relation with the family, I have to help even the grandma, the father, the mother, the brother, and the sister, as well”

(Interview, March 26, 2015). Bin’s view of himself as supporting the entire families were echoed by all of the other mentors interviewed. The director, Tam, even explained how the “staff is really good about providing their phone numbers [to parents] and they become their lifelines for the families if they have any kind of questions” (Interview, May 4, 2015). We saw mentors being called throughout the day by parents and extended family members.

Dante stated that parents called him in the evening and at night, as well, if something happened with their children. Often, he said that the parents do not know where their children are. In those cases, Dante says: “At that time, I will call school safety to make sure they know where the student [is]” and provided a detailed account of an instance where a refugee father was adamant that his children were missing after school (Interview, March 25, 2015). Dante explained:

I have two new students who came. They went to [high school name]. They were taking two buses to go to [the school] and it was their first time here in America. When they went there they were lost. And their Dad called me a couple of times. “I don’t know where are my kids?” ...They took the wrong bus. So, they called me and I called the school safety and they found out.... So that is something we do” (ibid).

The story Dante shared was similar to others we documented during the study. The mentors were often the bridges as students navigated the paths between families, communities, and schools.

All 10 mentors also talked about making home visits. Those who worked with elementary students often met the parents when they dropped their children off at school in the morning, but mentors working across the high schools often met parents at home. Sometimes, the home visits were to talk to parents about

particular issues, but other times they were made to see how the families were adjusting, and if there were any problems that might be affecting the children's schooling. Of these visits, Dante noted that the parents trusted him. He explained:

They know who I am because the first time you go there you register the kids you, you take them to the clothing [bank], then you bring them back and they think oh, this is a good person. They know when you go to school you help them also at school and also the students will tell the parents how we help them (Interview, March 25, 2015)

Throughout the study, we saw mentors easily transitioning between the schools and the students' homes. The boundaries between the schools and the homes were frequently crossed, even blurred, by the work of the mentors. During the home visits, the practices and the trust developed in the schools became hybridized into new practices in the homes—ones that included the mentors looking after the wellbeing of the parents and families. The education of the refugee students often morphed into educating the parents.

Many home visits were centered on educating the parents about daily life in America and providing them with information and resources. Bin explained the importance of attending to the family:

Mostly impact the student right here, you know, is because the family is the base, the root of everything in Vietnamese family. So, it's not good, like you have a loosened root plant, you know what I mean. So, and everything change when a Vietnamese family come here...Everything change because in our society we have one person in charge for the household. It's mostly the father. They take care of everything... [Here, the father's income is] not enough to

support the whole family. The wife have to go to work to make money too... (Interview, March 26, 2015).

Such changes challenge family structures and organization and can have significant impact on the students' lives and education. Mai also emphasized the importance of communication, not just translating information into the parents' languages, but sharing with them, in multiple conversations, how to negotiate their lives in America, about how to adjust to a new language, and culture.

Mai said her main role as a mentor was, however, to "ease the students' lives in the United States," to help them make the transition to America. She explained:

When a new family [arrives] in the country, the resettlement agencies fax us the information and I get to go to the house to do a home visit to do the registration paperwork, to assist the family...After doing the registrations, [I] take them to the clothing bank so that they can be ready for schooling. And the next day, they can start school. So, I transport them from the home to the clothing bank and back. And the, the next day pick them up [and] bring them to school, show them around, tell them this is the teachers, introduce the teachers to them and the class as well, show them the playground, and where they need to be going over to use the bathroom... (Interview, April 8, 2015)

As described by Mai, the mentors served as the main connection not only to schooling, but to American life, for the first few days of the refugee students' schooling.

Nam spoke more about the practical things he did to help integrate the students, and their families, to their new home in America. He recounted:

Not to all, but to many of the students, I took them to the library. And I helped them to make library cards and I told them to go to the library at least once in a week [and] be with other people who come there. If you want to talk, they can talk to them without disturbing the environment there. Read, that is one thing. Another thing I tell students and also families [is] to go to the park, talk with other people, and find out about this place from them because they are from here. There [are] many people who come to the park...If I have to go to the store, I say come with me... And I also show them places like downtown, hospital, post office and different shopping complexes. (Interview, March 25, 2015).

For Nam, supporting the refugee students and their families adjust to life in the U.S. was an important part of his job, even if his actions often extended beyond his actual work hours. This was also true for other mentors, who noted that integrating the refugee students and their families ultimately helped the students feel a greater sense of belonging in schools that would lead to more academic engagement. For instance, Jan and Sara accompanied refugee students and their families on several trips in the city during the study. They went to libraries, parks and free concerts. They took families to the food and clothing banks and rummage sales. Jan said that the refugee agencies were supposed “do these things, but don’t do them very well” and so the mentors did them (Fieldnotes, June 12, 2015). In these examples, we see the mentors literally spanning the boundaries of the school, home, and local communities—creating bridges between the families and their new home city and lifeways. The mentors’ work highlights the uncertainty of the boundaries between schools, families, and communities.

Additionally, the work of the mentors also calls our attention to broader notions of education and social integration. The mentors accepted their “legitimizing coexistence” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 143) in and out of schools. They were able to coordinate attending to the refugees’ needs in various contexts, such as food banks and libraries, even in their DUSD roles. Their ability to work across the boundaries was, as described by the mentors, part of the “routinization” (ibid) of boundary spanners. Of course, there were also tensions, and even some contestations over their boundary crossing actions.

Ryan, a caseworker at a refugee resettlement agency, confirmed that caseworkers and volunteers at the three resettlement agencies also took refugee families, “on public transportation,” to the library, food bank, clothing bank, and parks. He knew that the mentors were also taking families. Of this he said:

I think it’s a great thing. The more exposure they [the families] get, the better. I just wish they [the mentors] would coordinate with us. Our time and resources are so limited that if we knew they were taking a particular family, we wouldn’t rush to do it...The other day, I went to take a man for a haircut and when I got there, I saw he had already gotten one. Sara had taken him...Wasted trip (Interview, April 4, 2016).

Ryan’s experience represents one of the tensions between the resettlement agencies and the mentors: the lack of clear boundaries, or perhaps, more precisely, the lack of communication around boundary crossing. This example reflects what Boland and Tenkasi (1995) refer to as “perspective making” or the making clear and explicit one’s knowledge and understanding of an issue, event, or activity by various boundary spanners. The mentors, according to Ryan, could let him know when

they are taking refugee families for services. The caseworkers, according to the mentors, should be checking more closely with refugee families, and if they were, they would know when things had been “taken care of” by the mentors.

When asked about the overlapping roles of the caseworkers and the mentors, Tam said that there was just no way the caseworkers could do all the work they needed to do with their large caseloads and that she felt the mentors were helping the agencies by working so closely with the refugee families. Leonidis added: “As a refugee, I appreciate what the [resettlement] agencies are doing. There are things they can do better...They can be limited (Fieldnotes, Refugee Agency Quarterly Meeting, March 24, 2015). The agencies, according to the Hub director, felt like the mentors often overstepped their authority and provided refugee families with incorrect information that undermined the agencies’ work.

Mai noted that while the responsibilities and work of the DUSD mentors and the caseworkers at the three local refugee resettlement agencies overlapped, there were district demarcations. Addressing issues related to formal education for the children were the main responsibility of the mentors, while the education, especially adult English language classes, were the responsibility of the resettlement agencies. Mai stated: “I wish it were all together, the schooling for children and their families when it comes to English. They would do better, but it is divided. Adults go here, and children come to us” (Personal communication, June 12, 2015). She also noted, though, that she and other mentors, including Bin, also volunteered to teach the adults ESL with several community organizations, and when she could, even in her role as mentor, she would try to teach the parents basic English words and phrases. According to Mai, what the agencies could accomplish was restricted by workload and policies.

Other mentors offered more strict critiques of the federal and state policies that directed, and limited, the work of resettlement agencies. Sara was the most outspoken on this topic. When asked what needed to happen at the state and federal levels to support refugees, she responded:

Educate. Educate. Educate the people who’re bringing the refugees. Start with the [refugee] agency. And they need to have, in my opinion, they need to have a plan for them. Money wise, and education for the kids, for them, the parents. (Interview, March 31, 2015).

Sara also acknowledged that refugee resettlement programs were underfunded and were to provide services for only 90 days after the refugees arrive in the U.S. She exclaimed:

Instead of 90 days. What do they learn in 90 days. And then you bring somebody, and you tell them to work, and I mean to eat, we’re going to give you money and you promise them the world and then on 90 days later, you say, okay you’re on your own. (ibid)

Sara later commented that despite the restrictions placed on the resettlement agencies, “they could do better” and she argued that if the agencies recognized the mentors as experts in refugee education and integration, they could work more closely together to better serve refugee students and families (Personal communication, April 4, 2015). The mentors, in their critiques, were reflective about the lack of institution supports for all boundary crossers who work with refugees.

While we saw ways in which the resettlement agencies and the mentors could collaborate more closely, we also documented how, because of their different accountabilities and organizational structures, they were not well aligned. They were, as described by Grosjean,



Grosjean, Rubenson and Fisher (2000), tasked with “building bridges” but being “held differentially accountable” in all the contexts they bridged (p. 463). In particular, the agency was held accountable to the federal Refugee Resettlement Act, which limited the amount of services they could provide, and the time—90 days—in which they could offer the services. The agency was responsible for a myriad of services, including securing housing, medical services, and education. They also were required to provide ESL and employment training so that the adult refugees could become economically independent as soon as possible. The mentors were to focus on the education of the refugee students. While they were bound by federal and state education policy, their primary accountability was to the district. Their “tracking” system, replete with its database of logged contact hours, was not useful to the agencies. It did not serve as a boundary object, just as the caseload reports of the resettlement caseworkers, which were confidential, could not be used by the mentors. Some things just could not be used across boundaries, and this limited the collaboration.

## **Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations**

Schools in the U.S. can play a pivotal role in the lives not only of refugee students, but also their families. In our study, we point to some of the challenges in such collaborations. We also demonstrate the ways in which boundary spanners—in our study, mentors—can, in fact be instrumental in initiating, developing, and expanding the collaborations. The mentors in DUSD extended the districts’ support beyond the schools to educate, nurture and care for students of refugee status. While the focus of the mentors was often on improving the academic engagement and achievement of the refugee students, they were also committed to

supporting the refugee families integrate into the U.S. As the mentors bridged the boundaries, perceived and actual, between the refugees’ homes and their schools, they aimed to undo misunderstandings held by the families and dispel discriminatory perceptions of refugees in the schools. The extent to which they were able to do the latter is unclear, and was not a part of our study. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that several individual teachers and education leaders in the study became more understanding of the refugee students’ needs after interacting with the mentors.

Our study further extends the work of Koyama and Bazuka (2017), who found that when parents of refugee children are involved with decision making at their schools they become better adjusted to navigating the various challenges of an unfamiliar space and become advocates for their children. Through their daily interactions with refugees and their parents, school leaders—such as Tam, the director in this study—together with the mentors, can also advocate for refugees’ rights by connecting them to local community opportunities that provide them with greater resources and social support. Parents of school children are inherently boundary spanners, but their competencies in those roles can be nurtured and supported, as we have documented, by district-level boundary spanners. This is particularly true for parents of refugee and other migrants.

The findings from this study illustrate that more must be done in schools to mediate the lack of federal and state policy aimed at integrating refugees, who often arrive to the U.S. with limited local language knowledge, a lack of social connections, and mental and emotional health challenges (Betancourt et al., 2012; Walick & Sullivan, 2015). Instead of addressing these as a priority, the federal policy, The Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980, requires that they be quickly employed upon arrival to contribute to the local economy and become

independent of the U.S. government (Koyama, 2013). Priorities need to be reordered, and we believe that schools can play an essential role in redefining the measures by which we view and evaluate the resettlement of refugees in the U.S. They can also commit to culturally relevant, newcomer-specific curriculum and pedagogy (Bajaj and Bartlett, 2017).

Finally, in utilizing the theory of boundary spanning we show the value of going beyond the confines of a school to nurture interactions between internal and external spanners to engage in collaborations and build relationships that seek to benefit student refugees and their families. Additionally, we draw attention to the ways in which boundary spanners are marginalized, and even isolated, in their own organizations—and moreover, how boundaries, even in collaborative efforts, cannot be bridged. Yet, we continue to believe that by creating inclusive boundaries within and beyond schools, we will be better attending to the United Nations' forth and tenth goals: 4.) "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning" and 10.) "Reduce inequality within and among countries" (United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, 2017). By expanding boundaries, those working in schools and policy-makers can make a difference in the lives of refugees who have already suffered so much. In this study, the work of the mentors, as boundary spanners, offer tangible ways in which other school districts can support refugee students and their families.

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