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# Credentials, Perpetual "Foreignness", and Feeling out of Place: Three Stories of Resilience from Teachers of Refugee Background

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**Abstract:** This qualitative research project seeks to examine the obstacles faced by educators who come to the U.S. as refugees. The three participants in this study are from Iraq, Sudan, and Turkey. While there are similarities between them, there are also differences in terms of race, sex, and religion. While this work examines practical barriers, such as those related to credentialing, it also considers how these educators negotiate their identity in the workplace. Using labeling theory, the impact of the category of refugee and how that label impacts work life is interrogated. Partially as a result of the labels associated with being a refugee, findings indicate that, for educators from refugee backgrounds, there are significant barriers to credentialing, their knowledge and experience from outside of the U.S. is rarely taken seriously in many workplace environments, and, consequently, a lack of confidence can easily develop. Despite all of this, educators from refugee backgrounds often have extensive experience in education and can more easily connect to diverse student populations and their families. Suggestions for how best to expand the hiring of educators from refugee backgrounds are provided, as well as implications for future research.

**Keywords:** refugee; education; teacher credentialing

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## 1. Introduction

Students from refugee backgrounds are often ensnarled in a web of assumptions related to what they lack rather than what they have to offer. The focus of educators tends to be on "trauma, victimization and limited (or interrupted) education, and preliteracy" (Shapiro and MacDonald 2017, p. 80). DeMartino (2021) refers to the manifestation of these beliefs as "overt (the judgmental eyes) or covert (blatantly ignoring)" (p. 244). Research on students from refugee backgrounds is both timely (given that there are currently 36 million refugees worldwide (United Nations n.d.; Refugee Council of Australia 2024)) and imperative. Yet, the experiences of adults who wish to be educators in the public school system are often overlooked. Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by educators from refugee backgrounds is crucial for promoting inclusive and effective education for refugee students. Furthermore, it is important to understand that the same labels (Becker 1963) that limit students from refugee backgrounds also limit teachers from refugee backgrounds and rob both groups from experiencing a sense of belonging, which is fundamental to overall well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Using labeling theory (Becker 1963), we examine how the labels and categories that are projected onto individuals with refugee status impact their life regarding work.

In the U.S., displaced professionals with higher education, advanced skills, and extensive experience in K-12 education often face similar challenges as those whom they aspire to teach. This paper examines the experiences of three such individuals who came to the U.S. as refugees and their path toward working in the U.S. education system. One participant in this study is from Iraq, one is from Sudan, and the final participant is from

Turkey. While there is some variation in their experiences, most likely related to different aspects of their identity, there are also similarities.

Each participant noted that there are significant barriers to becoming credentialed in the U.S. Credentials earned prior to arrival in the U.S. are not perceived to be taken seriously, and these factors combine to allow for the internalization of deficit thinking about one's own abilities, thus leading to lowered self-confidence. The sense that their credentials are negatively judged or their experience is ignored is reminiscent of DeMartino (2021)'s view of how deficit thinking manifests toward students from refugee backgrounds. These professionals happen to be the exact individuals who, in many cases, can relate best to many of the students and families that U.S. schools serve, particularly those with high numbers of students from refugee backgrounds. They know better than anyone that children who have come to the U.S. as refugees have limitless potential because they have been, or are the parents of, those exact students.

## 2. The Literature Review

The teacher workforce in the U.S. is predominantly made up of White women and is overwhelmingly staffed by those who have been born and reared in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2021a; Gershenson et al. 2022). Conversely, the student population is becoming increasingly more diverse and many students are born outside of the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2021b). Teachers who come from a refugee background or even those who have just immigrated to the U.S. are underrepresented, and most students will rarely be taught by someone of a similar ethnicity or origin (Lindsay et al. 2017). Traditional teacher training programs rarely equip teachers with the strategies needed to best support students from refugee backgrounds (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2024). However, teachers from migrant backgrounds are forced to "bring together experiences in the past and present, as well as those anticipated in the future" (Block 2017, p. 31). This in no way ensures that they are "better" teachers than a U.S. born White woman, but rather their familiarity with the circumstances of certain populations might equip them to serve the multi-faceted needs of students from refugee backgrounds more holistically—given likely similarities between the students and themselves (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2024). However, it is vital that teachers born outside of the U.S., and those from refugee backgrounds in particular, are seen as intellectual equals to colleagues. Exceeding that notion is the hope that they would become co-conspirators in the practice of "epistemic disobedience" or the decolonization of knowledge and thought from Eurocentrism and the dominance of the "West" (Mignolo 2009). However, to reject the idea of universal truth based on Western ideas, one must first take their non-U.S. born colleagues seriously and then also believe that the knowledge of said colleagues is valid.

Labeling theory (Becker 1963) maintains that labels lead to the establishment of insider and outsider groups and can prevent a sense of belonging for those on the outside. Migrant teachers suffer from a lack of recognition for their previously earned qualifications and experience, regardless of how long they have been in the profession outside of the U.S. (e.g., Beynon et al. 2004; Marom 2019). Rebuilding their educator identity as a teacher in the U.S. is particularly challenging, especially when it is under question by U.S. born colleagues (e.g., Beynon et al. 2004; Marom 2019). In the workplace, even if credentials are acknowledged, colleagues may not deem their input as valuable as the input of U.S. born co-workers. Research by Keser Ozmantar et al. (2023) found that in Turkey, teachers from Syria "feel that their teacher status is not recognized due to being labeled "refugees" and not being seen as professionals" (p. 338). Rather than being seen as a teacher, they are labeled as a "refugee teacher" (Keser Ozmantar et al. 2023, p. 337). While the U.S. context and Turkey are quite different in many ways, in this particular way, similarities abound. Even U.S. born teachers of color have issues with their credentials not being taken seriously—no doubt at least partially related to internalized anti-Blackness and the belief that Black people are intellectually inferior to White people (Dumas 2016; Milner 2006; Price 1999; Coles and Stanley 2021).

There are disparities in both hiring and placement, issues with standardized testing, a lack of mentoring, and silencing of the voices of many of the educators of color in the public school system (Quiocho and Rios 2000). Furthermore, for teachers from refugee backgrounds, there are also issues around official certification. Some migrant teachers struggle with re-certification of degrees and passing required tests (e.g., Beynon et al. 2004; Marom 2019). Language proficiency tests are also a frequent part of the hiring process and they do not account for cultural differences in communication styles (Beynon et al. 2004). All of these issues can compound to reduce the confidence of teachers in both the classroom and in the profession overall (Ennser-Kananen and Wang 2016). It can result in these professionals leaving the field of education. Yet, with rising numbers of students from refugee backgrounds immigrating into the U.S., these educators are needed more than ever, given the amount of research that emphasizes the positive impact that can be observed when students have teachers with backgrounds similar to their own (Lindsay and Hart 2017; Maylor 2009; Navarro et al. 2019; Boser 2011, 2014; Ingersoll and May 2011; Cherng and Halpin 2016). Teachers who want to build a relationship with families from refugee backgrounds find it challenging as a result of language barriers, cultural differences, and other institutional related factors (Haines and Reyes 2023). Many parents who come to the U.S. as refugees feel uncomfortable to be active in their children's school(s) (Cureton and Aguinaldo 2023). However, shared racial–ethnic identity assists in making parents feel more comfortable with school staff (Cureton and Aguinaldo 2023; Dee 2004; Egalite et al. 2015; Kleen et al. 2019). Additionally, research has shown that teachers from migrant backgrounds tend to have similar teaching styles, expectations, and practices as the educators that many students from refugee backgrounds are accustomed to expect (Dee and Penner 2017). The solution to these and other dilemmas is not to fetishize educators from refugee backgrounds the way that Black men in education often are (Singh 2018). However, further problems arise when potential members of the educational work force are credentialed out, ignored out, or convinced out instead of being empowered to resurrect their identity as an educator on equal terms with their U.S. born colleagues (Carter Andrews et al. 2019; Carrillo 2010).

The research findings laid out in this paper demonstrate how three educators from refugee backgrounds have dealt with, or are currently navigating, the challenges of credentialing, the need to justify their knowledge and experience as educators, and the confidence issues that are associated with these and other concerns. Furthermore, the experiences of these educators as bridges between diverse student populations and the school setting will be examined. Finally, a gap in the literature around the intersections of aspects of the identity of teachers from refugee backgrounds and their refugee status exists. This paper is meant to partially address that gap by presenting the experiences of three educators from refugee backgrounds with different aspects of their identity that significantly impact how they move through the world and the U.S. in particular.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Methods

This qualitative research project was conducted with three participants who came to the U.S. as refugees. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. However, Muhammad and Gül were known by the primary researcher. Youra was found through snowball sampling through the connection with Muhammad. We sought participants with roots in the MENA region or Central Asia. We chose those specific areas because each of us is either from one of those regions or familiar with those regions. We also sought out participants that had a minimum of 3 years teaching experience and were currently employed in the education sector, preferably in a public district or charter school in our state, which is located in the southwestern portion of the U.S. However, even if they were not in a school per se, we were open to interviewing those who had experience working in schools and were involved in education in some form or another at the time of the interview.

All human subject requirements were met prior to interviewing the participants. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and took between 1 and 2 h. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai.

While the research team utilized grounded theory to conduct the research and did not hypothesize what the findings might be prior to interviewing participants, the available literature in combination with interview data provided evidence of labeling as a major hurdle to refugees who wish to enter the teaching workforce. Open, axial, and selective coding was utilized to analyze data. During the first stage, codes such as "economic bargain", "teaching", and "ambition" emerged. During axial coding, the codes were broadened into categories such as "financial challenges", "professional identity", and "furtherance of education". The final round of coding further broadened the categories into themes. The four themes that emerged were (1) significant barriers to success, (2) non-U.S. attained skills and knowledge not taken seriously, (3) impact on educator confidence, and (4) ability to connect to diverse student populations.

Prior to conducting interviews, the research team all agreed that the label of "refugee" is problematic, largely because of the stereotypes associated with what it means to be a refugee. Stereotyping can be a particular issue when individuals are entering the workforce and looking to have their credentials taken seriously. The labeling of teachers who are also refugees can limit their ability to progress in the workforce, prevent them from having a sense of belonging, and lead to them feeling as if they are an outsider. Therefore, labeling is the primary cause of the three themes that emerged related to barriers to success, the minimization of knowledge gained outside of the U.S., and reduced confidence of teachers who are also refugees.

It should also be noted that, although not a formal theme, the differences in aspects of participant identity came up in the interviews when they were compared. This is a realm of research that should be further investigated. It is important to understand how and why educators from refugee backgrounds continue their work in the U.S. However, who is *allowed* (encouraged and welcomed) to do so—in terms of race, gender, and other factors—should also be thoroughly examined.

## 4. Data Collection and Analysis

### *4.1. Narrative Profiles*

We have chosen to present as much expected information as possible regarding the background of participants. We have also presented information regarding their phenotypes, which is probably less expected, because we wish to allow readers to examine the differences in their identities and how the way that they present to the world may have impacted the experiences that they discuss in their interviews.

### *4.2. Youra*

Youra is from Iraq and is a member of a Christian minority group. His first language is Aramaic but he also speaks Arabic and English. He is middle-aged and phenotypically, he is White; one could easily mistake him for a White American. He went to college for fine arts in Iraq and he worked in the education sector in Iraq for 10 years before coming to the U.S. He recently completed his MA degree in Education from a U.S. institution of higher education and he plans to pursue a doctoral degree in education. He became a teacher in the U.S. by teaching Arabic and art at a local district school. He is now an instructional coach for innovative learning and trains teachers.

### *4.3. Muhammad*

Muhammad is from Sudan and is a practicing Sunni Muslim man. His first language is Arabic but he also speaks English. He is middle-aged and phenotypically he is Black. He went to school at a large state university in the U.S. for a BA in linguistics. He then received a master's degree in special education from the same university. He is currently completing his PhD in teaching, learning, and sociocultural studies. In terms of his background in

education, he worked for four years in Cairo for the UNHCR as a teacher. Since coming to the U.S. 15 years ago, he has worked as a teacher and administrator in a private school. He also worked for the local school district as an English language development teacher in a public middle school. He also worked at the district level in a program intended to assist students with special needs in transitioning to the community after high school. At the time of this interview, he was the educational coordinator for a refugee resettlement agency.

### *4.4. Gül*

Gül is originally from Turkey and is a practicing Sunni Muslim woman. Her first language is Turkish but she also speaks English. She is middle-aged and phenotypically presents as a person of color, but, even if she did not, she wears a hijab and, since Islam is racialized in the U.S., Muslims of all races and phenotypes are similarly racialized (Selod 2015; Selod and Embrick 2013). Gül received a degree in history from Istanbul University in 2001 and she has been teaching since 2002. She has taught in Tanzania, Pakistan, and Columbia. She currently teaches Turkish at a K-12 school in the U.S.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Findings indicate that credentialing is a struggle for those who have come to the U.S. as refugees. However, in addition to that, there is a major issue with the devaluation of credentials earned outside of the U.S. In many cases, the interview participants had more education or experience than their peers but found that there was a lack of respect for the education and experience that they brought into the classroom. This resulted in a lack of confidence, despite the fact that they were qualified and, in many cases, had a better understanding of many of the students, particularly those from marginalized communities or immigrant backgrounds.

### *5.1. Barriers to Credentialing: "I Was so Stressed by the Work. I Don't Know the System. I Don't Know What's Happening."*

#### 5.1.1. Youra

When Youra first came to the U.S., he was employed in a number of entry level positions that do not require a college degree. He worked at a resort as a pool attendant, a clerk at a convenience store, and a shuttle driver. However, he always wanted to use his degree. He applied and was hired for a position as a teaching assistant for Arabic at a local high school. On his first day, he was asked to give a lesson and his co-teacher noticed his astute ability to teach.

> When we were done, she was like "Your English is better than mine and you should become a teacher."
>
> I was like "You know what?"
>
> She was like "What?"
>
> I was like "This is my plan, but I don't have the tools yet to become a teacher."
>
> Then, she said, "I will help you." So, she started communicating with [the local] community college.

His co-worker also connected him with another school that had a full-time Arabic teaching position for the next year. The behavior of his co-worker is significant as she (1) recognized his skills and abilities and (2) demonstrated a collaborative spirit that is not often seen in the educational work setting and rarely the focus of teacher training programs (Urbani et al. 2017; Shidler 2024).

The position he applied for the following year required U.S. teaching credentials. Consequently, Youra enrolled in community college, received his teaching credentials, and was hired as a full-time teacher of Arabic. In his second year, he taught both Arabic and art. Yet, in a short period of time, he realized that he needed to get his credentials to teach art and this was partially because he desired acknowledgement of his skills.

> After I was done for my teaching credential, this idea of "okay, everybody have Masters, everybody I'm sitting with here, they have masters and I know, I have the knowledge. Sometimes, I have more knowledge than them. Why don't I have a master's degree?" So this idea was kept standing on my head until one day I decided, "okay, I'm gonna go get my master's degree."

Youra was well aware of his own capabilities and education but he also knew that he would have to prove his abilities by getting his master's degree in the U.S, despite the sacrifices he had to make to achieve that goal.

> So nobody helped me financially. I had to pay out of pocket. I didn't know [if] there was any scholarships or anything but I asked and they said no. So I assumed that there are no scholarships. I did my master's in art education and I just graduated.

The lack of support for his goals is indicative of one of the many barriers that teachers face. Further, he was very open about his struggles with learning the expectations of teachers in the U.S., particularly around resources for educators teaching subjects that are not "core" subjects.

> There is a lot of requirements here from the teacher, teachers are required to do a lot of things. They need to plan before they come to class,. You need to prepare all these worksheets. I know some teachers, they have these websites, like if you're a social studies teacher, science teacher, ELA, teacher, ELD teacher, math teacher—you have this curriculum made by the government or the state and all you have to do is just follow it. There's a lot of resources for it. But let's talk about art and let's talk about foreign language. Arabic had no resources whatsoever and art has very minimum resources.

When he finally did decide to get his master's degree, he addressed the need for resources for art teachers.

> I created my own curriculum, because I started my master's degree later in art education here in the United States. And then one of the classes was curriculum development, and I developed my own curriculum map, and all the topics, it was like very detailed. I started sharing my stuff with any art teacher I find that need help. A lot of people helped me when I was a new teacher, helped me with strategies, classroom management, how to manage this, how to do this, you know, I was asking a lot of questions. But nobody helped me with the curriculum, I had to do with myself. And I learned the hard way.

The experiences of Youra point to the necessity and benefits of collaboration, such as the knowledge about how to attain teaching credentials and classroom management strategies. It also highlights the difficulties one encounters when collaboration is lacking. The lack of willingness to share curricular resources led to him being forced to struggle with planning and lesson implementation. It also speaks to a greater need for resources that are outside of core subjects and for art in general (Dunstan 2016), which has been proven to favorably impact student learning outcome (Gratto 2002). Furthermore, for some prospective educators from migrant backgrounds, the lack of a clear status can prevent them from getting to the point of seeking credentials. This was the case for Gül.

#### 5.1.2. Gül

Gül left Turkey in 2002 and taught in a number of different countries. However, she was an asylum seeker at the time of her interview for this research. As a result, her job options were quite limited. Prior to working at the charter school where she currently works, she had found a different teaching position but was unable to remain in it because they wanted someone with a clearer immigration status. She made her goals clear: "I am a teacher. I want to teach." However, that position let her go.

> I'm [an] asylum seeker, but I'm not yet a citizen or green card holder. That's why I faced a lot of difficulties. I found a job but I couldn't keep it because I'm not a citizen or green card holder. Wherever I found a position, I just try to make it my own job. [For] maybe more than two years, I was [a] substitute teacher, but now I'm teaching in [local charter school].

For Gül, credentialing was not even a problem she could get close enough to surmount as she first needed to see some clarification related to her status. While waiting, she was forced to take any job she could find in order to survive, despite her degree in history education and lengthy employment history.

> The concerns related to credentialing that were discussed by Youra and Gül were not as big an issue for Muhammad. He came to the U.S. in his youth and was always engaged in educational programs. However, being taken seriously as a professional was very much a concern for him.

### *5.2. Devaluation of Knowledge from Outside of the U.S.: "They Think That I, Like, I Didn't Even Live in House...The Picture They Have, It Resembles the Expectations They Have."*

#### 5.2.1. Muhammad

Being from the African continent comes with a unique set of challenges for Muhammad. Indeed, it is no secret that many "Western" nations consider themselves to be "civilized" through the creation of a false narrative about the "other" and their lack of civility (Pickering 2001). Despite the legacy of colonialism and the pervasiveness of its "art" through such works as Joseph Conrad's (2007) *Heart of Darkness*, as the definition of primitive is subjective, no "primitive" society has actually ever existed, African or otherwise (Pickering 2001). Yet stereotypes remain, particularly about skin color, clothing, and geographic features of the continent (Kárman 2021; Randolph and DeMulder 2008). In Muhammad's opinion, these stereotypes and the labels associated with them also lead to the development of low expectations of individuals from that part of the world. He gave an example from a teaching coach who was giving feedback to teachers on their lessons. He was teaching the water cycle.

> Students were engaged and at the end of the class she apologized to me actually. I think the expectation most of those people have is I'm from Africa, I'm refugee. They think that I, like, I didn't even live in house. You know what I mean? Like I live in, in like, under a tree or on a tree and drink from a well. You know, something like that. That's the picture they have. Yeah, so picture they have then resembles the expectations they have.

For Muhammad, the experiences of colleagues having low expectations of him go back to his youth as a teacher for UNHCR. He was told that he would be a teaching assistant and asked to observe the headteacher, who was from Canada, while she was teaching English in order to learn from her.

> She was trying to explain it [a grammatical concept] and trying to get them to practice and she was failing to do that. I could do this. I could do it. She saw me and she said, "I want you want to try," and I said, "yeah, of course," and then I got up, I explained it, and basically what she was failing to do was to get them engaged in the class. She wasn't able to do that.
>
> I respected that woman a lot because she went immediately to the director and because we had a session, I told her I taught for several years in Sudan was an ESL [teacher] with a diploma in TOEFL. She went to the director and said to her, "I suggest, I will be the co-teacher and Muhammad [pseudonym] will be the main teacher." Then I started [as the main teacher] and she started like, watching me. So it works after they start with this low expectation but then when they discover that they're wrong, they give you the respect, they give you the place you deserve.

Muhammad's experiences speak to the issue of needing to prove oneself or work harder than others in order to achieve the same earned merit that others achieve without having to first provide initial proof. He spoke about an incident in college while studying in the U.S. As a result of limited time and effort, he did not do well on an assignment. The instructor suggested he go to the writing center since he is a non-native English speaker.

> I didn't do this well, because I actually didn't care enough. I didn't preview the reading and I was mad that she didn't, you know, think that, oh, it could be like, some other thing, not just because I'm not a native speaker of English or because you are, you know, [a] poor person who needs help. This, the school environment, you know, [and] the work environment is similar or in organizations. Until you prove [yourself], you need to really work hard, and to show it, you know, and before that, you can be misjudged because of who you are.

In the work environment in the U.S., the situation has been similar for Muhammad. Within the workforce, he feels that he toes the line between colleagues and supervisors respecting him and so giving him advanced responsibilities but also failing to acknowledge his work in terms of promotion or title. As he said, "I will give you the principal's work, but will never give you the position you deserve." Though he said he was happy in his current position, primarily because he has the opportunity to work directly with youth from refugee backgrounds, even there, he has seen advanced positions go to outside hires with less education than he has. His belief is that to be a Black Muslim man from the African continent and someone who came as a refugee to the U.S. means that he has to work harder for everything that his education and qualifications should allow him to attain.

#### 5.2.2. Youra

Like Muhammad, Youra had a wealth of knowledge and training related to education and teaching and desperately wanted to be in the field in which he was trained.

> So I was a teacher and I had a bachelor's degree, I had 10 years of experience in teaching, so I couldn't see myself working [in] something else. But then when I came here, I was shocked. Because here, if you go apply for a job, they're going to ask you for history. I mean, when you go to another country, you're completely starting over.

Despite his lengthy time in the field of education, his lack of work experience in a U.S. based school or program prevented him from being able to get a position in his field. Based on his interview, he seems to have fared better once getting a position, particularly since he had supportive co-workers, but it appears that, initially, the problem was that he could not get hired since his education and work experience was from Iraq and not the U.S.

#### 5.2.3. Gül

For Gül, her accent and the fact that she wears a hijab both impact the way that she has been treated in the workforce and the value that is placed on her credentials. Furthermore, she is often made to feel as if she has no credentials at all or that her presence is not welcome.

> They can understand I'm not American, I'm an immigrant. That's why I face some difficulties. When I was a substitute teacher, even some schools didn't want to work with me when they see me. They said we have our own substitutes or you can go [to] another school.

Regarding school staff, she was often mistaken for a parent or visitor, rather than a teacher.

> [At] one of the schools, even with ID, one of the teachers said, "Why you are here? We don't accept parents." I said, "Look at my ID. I'm a teacher." So sometimes because of my appearance, some obstacles come.

We probed deeper about that experience in order to try and learn about her feelings regarding the level to which she was taken seriously as a teacher.

> Interviewer: Do you feel like, by people who are born here and raised here, okay, I'm gonna say American, but, you know, that means a lot of things, Do you feel like you are taken seriously as a teacher? Like when you said that to that teacher? Like, look at my ID, I'm a teacher too. Do you think you were taken seriously?
>
> Gül: I'm not very sure because some of them said, "What are you teaching?" I said, "I studied history and teach Turkish language." [They replied] "It makes sense." But what is that? "It makes sense." It means I'm a teacher, I am in education. I'm not very sure what is [meant by] that. Maybe they are thinking, "Yeah, you can teach but you are just a foreign language teacher."

Much of what Gül describes is certainly tied to the forever foreign status of Muslims in the U.S. (Gotanda 2011). Whether she was born and reared in the U.S. or not, the fact that she wears a hijab would have likely led those around her to assume that she is "foreign".

Although a graduate of Istanbul University, a top university in Turkey, Gül's teaching experience was always outside of Turkey. Given that, she was used to having a professional status, but that changed once she moved to the U.S.

> When I was in Turkey, I was a student. I was always out of Turkey, a teacher. My identity kind of disappeared or my stage [status] became lower. It wasn't like before but still I'm thankful I'm here. We are safe, but nothing like before.

The sense of one's life accomplishments not being enough or not being taken seriously can have a detrimental psychological impact. One's confidence can certainly be impacted and can even determine whether or not someone decides to continue to work within their profession and it certainly impacts their professional identity.

### *5.3. A Lack of Confidence: "I Feel Like When I Was in Another Country, I Was in [the] First Position. For Example, Here [I Am in the] Second or Third Position...I Lost My Power."*

#### 5.3.1. Youra

When discussing internal difficulties and conflicts related to whether or not to continue as an educator, Youra said the following:

> So there were two things that stressed me, one was language and the other one was knowing the system. With language, I was comforting myself, "I know most people here, they either know one language or two languages but I already came knowing two languages and then I was learning English."

His first language is Aramaic, second language is Arabic, and third language is English. Therefore, he compared himself to his co-workers and, in order to boost his own confidence, he used his knowledge of three languages as leverage against others. He said, "I tell myself, "Okay, I'm not worse. I'm good, but in a different way. So I bring something to the table." So I would just comfort myself by saying that." This was a means by which Youra could elevate himself above others because he felt inferior to them. Despite his many accomplishments, both in Iraq and the U.S., he still does this, although to a lesser extent. "I just come back and say, "Okay, I'm good. I'm doing good. Right now, after my master's degree, after the two years of teaching, the teacher credential, my English has progressed a lot and right now I can write so well, academically, I can speak better." Yet, his sense of inferiority still causes him to pause and question his own abilities.

Youra's second concern was related to knowing and understanding the system. He struggled to understand what was initially going on around him but, through collaboration with colleagues, he was able to figure it out. This assisted in building his confidence. In the classroom, he was doing well and positive observations were also helpful. "I got so confident from the observation I got from the principals, from other people who came to observe me. They will just tell me, "You're doing great." So that built my confidence. And I became better and better." Classroom observation and feedback have been shown to have a positive impact on teacher performance (Jogan 2018; Haep et al. 2016; Kane 2012). For Youra, collaborative colleagues and a supportive administration definitely assisted him in professionally growing into his role as an educator in a U.S. based school.

#### 5.3.2. Gül

The transition to the U.S. and to the workforce has been difficult for Gül. She is accustomed to being a teacher and having the respect that comes with it. She is also unfamiliar and uncomfortable with what it means to go to a country as an asylum seeker or refugee.

> My identity and my position was always higher and [of a] good position. But here, I'm in second level. I mean, I'm not citizen, I'm not green cardholder. My education [is] not from here—from Turkey. It was not enough for feeling confident here. I feel like, I'm like, when I was in other country in first position [higher status], for example, here, second or third position. I mean, maybe I feel like this—I lost my power.

Gül's sense of powerlessness is disheartening given all she has been through and how hard she has worked to find employment in her profession. Yet, her sense is that her experience and education do not matter as much in the U.S. because they are not from the U.S. and neither is she.

#### 5.3.3. Muhammad

Muhammad identifies the two biggest challenges when it comes to entering the workforce confidently as those related to language and education. However, he also sees other factors, such as race, immigration status, and region where one is from as all being related to challenges in the workplace too.

> I still see, you know, members of my community who have been living here for 25 years, and they still come to you to read mail for them, for example, or to go with them to an office to interpret or just to explain and sometimes it could be a very simple thing. Just last week, someone called me from Little Caesars. He wanted to order something and he was struggling to place an order. I was lucky enough to not have this rocky kind of experience. My experience has been much better than others. It was easy for me in the beginning to get a job because of my education background, and my language background. It was easy for me to get a job. It wasn't as easy in the job though.

For Muhammad, his experience in various positions have led him to be more resilient in the face of adversity, but he also is forced to deal with the unfairness of the situation. One factor as to why Muhammad continues to work in the education sector has to do with the children, who happen to have a lot in common with him.

### *5.4. Connection: "I've Been in Their Shoes Once and I Know How—What [a] Difference It Makes When You Are Educated and Not Educated."*

Each of the research participants feel connected to their students and while they do not feel that they have better rapport with their students than other teachers, their backgrounds and experiences certainly provide them with an open mind regarding the identities of their students and how to best communicate with them.

Coming from a religious minority group in Iraq, Youra can certainly identify with students from minoritized backgrounds and he takes that into account when he teaches.

> I just take my identity when I, when I'm with students, and I put it away, like to the side, so I can be fair with them. I know the slightest thing you say sometimes there represents your culture or your religion, your personality is going to affect students negatively. Because I experienced it in college. But here, I'm nobody. That's how I, I talked to my students. I'm nobody. I have no background, unless they asked me sometimes where you're from, what is your background? I tell them, but when I'm teaching, when I'm dealing with them, when I'm, when I'm managing the classroom, I'm so fair. I don't put my religion in the middle. I don't put my politics in the middle. I don't put nothing—only the work, the learning.

Gül has similar goals as Youra when she enters the classroom. She is well traveled and extremely open to the cultures and beliefs of others. This no doubt assists her in being able to relate to her students, regardless of their background.

> When I was in high school [and] in university, I was very open minded. I was not putting people in categories. I was approaching them as a human. I graduated in 2001. There was a position for me and my professor said that [I should] stay in university, like do research. But I said, no I will go out of Turkey. I will see other people how they are living, how is their culture. I want to see them. I didn't know where. Then I start from Africa and then I came here from east to west. So it is not only related to education, I think I was always open minded.

For Muhammad, his work with youth who came as refugees is largely influenced by his own experiences arriving as a youth and his transition to the higher education system in the U.S. In his work with the students, he uses an asset-based approach and tries to assist them in examining the type of position they hope to attain in the future. He said, "We try to build the programs for their integration around their interests, their strengths, their family values." He also uses himself as an example for them.

> We try to see what their interests are and familiarize them with, you know, there is [local university] here. You know, this is something you can do. I've been to [local university] and now I'm a student here and we [have] visited different areas at the [local university].

He also uses theories he has learned in his graduate programs to support student learning that is based on the assets they bring with them into the classroom. He uses the funds of knowledge (FoK) framework in particular (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992). In terms of the program he runs, he uses a translanguaging (Lewis et al. 2012) approach to encourage the use of multiple languages and various art forms to allow students to express themselves. "This basically is a space where they meet and they can utilize the funds of knowledge they come with, and then share their stories, share their talents, you know." He recognizes that his background has led him to do the work that he engages in.

> I always felt I'm more passionate because of my background as a refugee. I've always targeted to be mainly a teacher and a role model for this particular community and even chose to do my research on educational strategies. Because as a teacher, you know, there can be many teachers who can teach just regular subjects, math, science, whatever, English, but, I think my, my role as a teacher and as an education coordinator now or in the education for the refugee students, somehow is, you know, is unique, it's not, not anyone can take my role and do the same thing I'm doing. I have more passion. I understand. I have more understanding for the population and for the effects of education. I've been trying to pass my experience and try to help them avoid any things that I encountered that have affected my mind negatively so I'm trying to reflect on you know, so yeah, so I think my identity as a former refugee affects my role and position as a teacher.

Muhammad's emphasis on their unique identities, family values, cultures, and languages are all appealing to students from minoritized backgrounds. It is students from those backgrounds who tend to be the most marginalized in the public school system. Consequently, Muhammad is an example of someone who can connect with students who might have a difficult time connecting with a White U.S.-born teacher.

Youra, Gül, and Muhammad each bring a unique perspective into their work in education and each have the power to connect with any number of students. However, one of their greatest strengths is likely the ability to reach the students who can be the most difficult to connect with because of their unique experiences. Furthermore, because each of these educators has been a refugee, a student, and a professional, they are best equipped to engage with students who are on a similar path.

## 6. Conclusions

The British Somali poet Warsan Shire (2017) famously wrote "No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land." This line from her poem "Home" reminds readers that fleeing is the only option for those who are forced to become refugees. The interviews provided by Youra, Muhammad, and Gül prove that the boat, though safer, still does not promise an easy journey or a clearly defined destination.

Findings of this research suggest that teaching credentials can be a challenge to attain for some individuals from refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, even when educators come to the U.S. with a college education, decades of experience, and even degrees attained from a U.S. based institution, their credentials are often devalued. This is largely to do with the stigma associated with being labeled as a refugee and the danger of the "single story" that is often told about the experiences of migrants (Adichie 2009). As Adichie (2009) says, "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." The devaluation of credentials can lead to reduced confidence and significantly impact the professional identity of these educators. Finally, while all of the first three findings can be seen as factors that could push teachers from refugee backgrounds out of the field of education, in many cases, the students they serve tend to be what pulls them back in. Teachers with a history and story similar to those who participated in this research are often the best equipped to work with students from minoritized and/or marginalized populations. One might assume that this is at least partially because these educators are themselves, in many ways, also minoritized and/or marginalized.

The U.S. is currently facing a teacher shortage (Nguyen et al. 2022) and research proves that migrant teachers are beneficial to the U.S. education system (Startz 2017). Therefore, it is more important than ever to recognize the value that is brought by those who may have been educated in another place or in another way but are willing to contribute to the U.S. education system, even in spite of being undervalued, for the good of the children in the U.S. Schools should work to implement programs and policies that will encourage and assist migrant teachers to gain the appropriate required credentials for the U.S. education system. Furthermore, there should be greater emphasis on collaboration and the formation of professional learning communities so that colleagues can learn the strengths that one another possesses and share resources. Finally, schools should actively work to recruit teachers who may have commonalities with the student body, including teachers of migrant background, as a means of holistically supporting the needs of the children in their care.

## 7. Implications for Future Research

We began by discussing how deficit thinking as a result of labeling has been found to impact students from refugee backgrounds. While this is an extremely important body of research, we urge researchers to also examine how labeling assists in presenting obstacles that limit educators who have come to the U.S. as refugees and the extent to which they are kept out of the workforce or in occupations that do not allow them to fully utilize their education and experience. Also, more research should be carried to determine methods to assist teachers from refugee backgrounds in obtaining their credentials and gaining and maintaining the confidence to go into classrooms and stay there for the length of their careers. Furthermore, our hope is that this paper will elicit readers to question the labels associated with refugees and how classrooms and the overall education system might be positively impacted by hiring educators who can more easily relate to migrant students.

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