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# Culturally Responsive Leadership for Newcomer Students: A Case Study of an Elementary Newcomer Program School Leadership Team

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study focuses on the pivotal role of an urban elementary school leadership team with a newcomer program. It aims to uncover how school leadership decisions, practices, and policies address the diverse needs of newcomer students. Challenges faced by newcomers, including economic and social needs, cultural adjustments, and potential feelings of alienation despite academic success, are explored. The tension between preserving home culture and adapting to a new one adds complexity to newcomer students' identity formation.

This study examines the practices of a newcomer school leader who addresses the diverse needs of vulnerable newcomer students. With schools being the primary point of contact for many newcomers, these leaders are responsible for establishing support systems and providing learning materials, especially for students who missed schooling due to conflicts or displacement. It explores key themes in newcomer education essential for creating an inclusive learning environment. The findings focus on restructuring the newcomer program and implementing innovative strategies to enhance its effectiveness. Additionally, it highlights the impact of leadership on educational outcomes, emphasizing the importance of a diverse leadership team in shaping an engaging school climate within newcomer schools.

This study's significance lies in its exploration of leadership's critical role in school reform, particularly in empowering newcomer school leaders through effective professional development. It addresses unique challenges in teaching and learning, proposing tailored programs for educators in the newcomer education sector. This comprehensive exploration not only contributes valuable insights to the discourse on newcomer education but also offers actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders committed to fostering an inclusive and empowering educational environment for all students. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can actively work towards addressing the unique challenges faced by newcomer students and promoting their academic success and well-being. Furthermore, the findings from this study serve as a foundation for further research and dialogue in the field of newcomer education, encouraging ongoing collaboration and innovation to better support the needs of this diverse student population.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The history of humanity and the development of human society is characterized by migration (Philips, 2011). While migration refers to the movement from one region to another, either within a country or across national borders, immigration refers to relocation to a new country (Bende & Kanitkar, 2006). Political instability, insecurity, economic stressors, religious practices, natural disasters, and climate change are a few of the catalysts that force people to migrate from their homelands. Migration of people across administrative/political jurisdictions has been a crucial factor in changes in societies. For a better understanding of migration, it is necessary to classify migration according to its types.

There are two major types of migration: (a) internal migration, which takes place within a country; and (b) international migration, which takes place across international boundaries (Bhende & Kanitkar, 2006). The processes, causes, and consequences of internal migration are very different from those of international migration. Internal migration as defined by Kuhn (2015) refers to a change of residence within national boundaries, such as between states, provinces, cities, or municipalities. He further suggests that an internal migrant is someone who moves to a different administrative territory. On the contrary, the United Nations (2012) defines international migration as a change of residence over national boundaries. An international migrant is someone who moves to a different country. International migrants are further classified as legal

immigrants, illegal immigrants, and refugees. Legal immigrants are those who moved with the legal permission of the receiver nation, illegal immigrants are those who moved without legal permission, and refugees are those who crossed an international boundary to escape persecution (Lucas, 2015). Educational attainment is one way for migrants to be acquainted with new countries (Molina, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education, all children in the United States are entitled to a basic public elementary and secondary education regardless of their actual or perceived race, color, national origin, citizenship, immigration status, or the status of their parents/guardians (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2012). Therefore, the focus of this study is on newcomers, regardless of their immigration status in US schools.

Schools play a significant role in the settlement of young refugees and immigrants facilitating their transitions to a new country and helping them develop a sense of belonging (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Molina, 2019). As Arellano (2009) noted, "New arrivals . . . present a challenge that many educational campuses are not ready for today. These students need special attention, so their needs are met in the areas of language acquisition, cultural experience, and academic instruction" (p. viii). It is up to the schools and their districts to provide essential resources to ensure the smooth and successful integration of these students into the new school system.

Russell and Mantilla-Blanco (2022) suggest that newcomers, or those who have arrived in the United States within the past four years, come from diverse countries and represent a range of religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. The authors further reveal that these students represent varied immigration experiences and include "resettled refugees, economic migrants, asylum seekers, undocumented students, and

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unaccompanied minors" (Russel & Mantilla-Blanco, 2022, p. 618). In this study, I will first provide a brief overview of newcomer immigrants who are being served through newcomer programs. Throughout this study, all international migrants (refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers) will be referred to as newcomers.

**Refugee Students**

Refugees come from different countries and various socioeconomic, political, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. Many families waited for lengthy periods in refugee camps, with limited access to education. Dryden-Peterson (2015) asserts that while the reasons for resettlement are diverse, their journeys are unique; however, most refugees report extended stays in refugee camps or urban areas within the countries of first asylum. Faltis and Valdés (2010) defined refugee students as children under the age of 18 who are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. These individuals are unable or unwilling to return to their country of national origin because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, or subscription to a particular social group or political opinion. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) estimated that more than half of the refugee population are children. Children experience numerous traumatic situations when their lives are disrupted by the refugee experience. Some suffer from family separation as they flee persecution alone or become separated from their families during flight (Boyden & Feeny, 2008; Hart, 2002). Refugee children are at high risk for rape, abduction, and trafficking (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2018). Some have been forced to become child soldiers; some girls become child brides (McBrien, 2005).

Many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after enduring rape or torture and witnessing killings, often including the brutal murders of family members (Ehntholt, 2006; Hones & Cha, 1999; Oikonomidoy et al., 2019; Tollefson, 1989). From 2005 to 2020, more than 266,000 grave violations (rape, abduction, and trafficking) were verified against refugee children, committed by parties to conflict in more than 30 conflict situations in different countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The actual number is undoubtedly far higher as access and security constraints, as well as the shame, pain, and fear that survivors suffer, often hamper the reporting, documentation, and verification of these violations (UNICEF, 2022). UNHCR (2021) adds that the refugees moved because they were in danger as a result of war, violence, or persecution, and some refugees are forcibly displaced. This means they had no choice but to leave; otherwise, they would continue to be exposed to danger (UNHCR, 2021). For instance, refugees from Afghanistan fled their country in August 2021 due to US withdrawal and the Taliban taking over the country. Most of these refugees were airlifted and fled for their lives.

**Education Issues for Refugees**

Schooling disruption can happen for numerous reasons and during different stages of migration. Dryden-Peterson (2015) indicates that children often live in acute conflict settings before becoming refugees, when their access to education often becomes limited or nonexistent. The US educational system is difficult for refugee families to navigate, especially refugees for whom English is a second language (McBrien, 2005). Although some of these refugees have had formal schooling, others may have never attended any

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kind of formal school and therefore may have differing levels of first language proficiency as well as English language literacy (Straley, 2016).

For many refugees who received a formal education in their native country, the US educational system often diverges significantly from those to which refugees were accustomed. For instance, for recent Afghan refugees, the long American school days (8am to 3pm) are a challenge since many were used to going to school for just half a day (8am–12pm). In addition, for many refugees, everything may be new: from the demands placed on students, parents, and instructors to the curricula, school buildings, books, and computers, and from school bells and fire alarms to schedule adjustments and cafeterias. It can be difficult for refugees to adapt to such changes in their environment.

The trauma experienced by refugee children can impede their ability to learn (Sinclair, 2001). Koyama and Bakuza (2017) suggest that parental involvement in their children's education is frequently cited as a major factor in student success. Data from the Children of Immigrants Studies (Koyama & Bakuza 2017; Feuerstein, 2000; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) indicate that refugee and immigrant students are positively affected by parental support and interest in their children's education, even though that support does not necessarily manifest in typically American ways, such as parental involvement in schools. This is a big challenge for many refugee families. For instance, in Afghanistan, parental involvement in children's education differs from the collaborative role they play with US schools. Refugee teachers navigate complex global and national structures influenced by migration policies, funding sources, local economies, and national education systems (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Dryden-Peterson adds that the trajectories of refugees do not fit neatly into the established American policy categories of return, local

integration, and resettlement. Instead, they are non-linear and complex permutations of migration, exile, and consistently re-imagined futures.

**Immigrant Students**

UNHCR (2021) defines immigrants as people who are outside of their own country and people who have crossed at least one international border. To be classified as immigrants as opposed to refugees, these individuals must have relocated for reasons other than war, violence, or persecution (UNHCR, Global Monitoring Report, 2021). This is one of the fundamental differences between refugees and migrants. As explained further by UNHCR, immigrants leave their countries for reasons such as searching for better economic opportunities or relocating from drought-stricken areas in search of better circumstances.

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines an immigrant as, "Any person lawfully in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or person admitted under a nonimmigrant category as defined by the INA Section 101(a)(15)" (DHS, 2022). According to the National Center for Homeless Education (2021), an immigrant student is one who was not born in the United States and has not been attending school in the United States for more than three full academic years. Students in K–12 who are either immigrant students themselves or the children of immigrant parents make up a large percentage of the education system in the United States. According to the US Department of Education (2022), there are more than 840,000 immigrant students enrolled in US schools. Immigrant children and youth may need additional services to help offset the unique social and emotional challenges and barriers they encounter as they attend and seek to succeed in school.

According to a research study by Passel and Cohn (2020), 10.5 million K–12 students in public and private schools were children of unauthorized immigrants including 4.9 million Mexicans in 2017. These students make up nearly 8% of the US school population and have been increasing at a steady rate. Perez (2019) states that of three million high school graduates, 65,000 of them are undocumented students. These students stress over their own immigration status or the immigration status of their family. They fear deportation and separation, which interferes with their ability to focus in school. The deportation and detention of immigrant family members contribute to high stress levels and interfere with immigrant children's education. Undocumented students are at risk of deportation or facing time in detention. These huge obstacles affect children's well-being, including their educational success (Lopez, 2021).

**Similarities of Refugee and Immigrant Students**

The United States is a nation of migrants and continues to receive an influx of families, including school-age children. According to Brown and Chu (2012), one in four children in the United States are from a migrant family. The nation's public schools have felt the effect of the influx of immigrants and refugees, not only because of increased enrollment but also because of the responsibility that is placed upon the school to ensure the success of all students enrolled, including newcomers (Saucedo, 2019). Many of the students are not familiar with the educational system, the language, and the school district's customs and traditions.

Some research has grouped refugees together with immigrants (Cheng, 1998; Cowart & Cowart, 2002; Huisken et al., 2021; Hones & Cha, 1999; Lopez, 2021; Pryor, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In their research on refugee and immigrant students in

Turkey, Çelik & İçduygu (2019) suggested that refugees and immigrants have similar motivations and characteristics. Both groups must deal with the disruption of migrating to a new country and adjusting to a different culture and lifestyle. For students, this may include struggling in school while trying to learn the language of instruction.

In their 2009 research, DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang indicated that both refugees and immigrants function at least two years below their peers in reading and mathematics. Although some of these refugees have had formal schooling, others may have never attended any kind of formal school before and therefore may have differing levels of first language proficiency as well as English language literacy (Straley, 2016). Because of their race, ethnicity, religion, or cultural differences, many immigrants and refugees encounter discrimination and racism (Asali, 2003; Mishori et al., 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). In addition, both immigrant and refugee teens are faced with a crisis of identity as they try to meet the cultural demands of their parents and of their new peers (Eckstein, 2011; Mishori et al., 2017; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2000), although Berry et al. (1987) found that acculturation stress is considerably higher among refugees.

Historically, most English Language Learners (ELL) immigrant and refugee students enroll in urban, overcrowded schools in poor minority areas (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005; Fry, 2008). In urban schools, ELL immigrant and refugee students also attend school with peers who are economically disadvantaged, are learning English, and are often taught by un- or under-qualified teachers (Gándara et al., 2003). In addition to school factors, individual difficulties faced outside of school often increase the dropout risk for ELL immigrant and refugee students.

These two groups often have similar experiences and stories, but refugees are eligible to receive additional resources from the US government based on their status in the country (Goodman, et al., 2017). While it is true that recipients receive some monetary support along with access to language classes, help finding housing, and other basic resettlement services, assistance is limited. Individuals and families must apply for any aid after they enter the country, requiring them to navigate US government websites and bureaucracy (De Feyter & Winsler, 2009; Colorado Refugee Services Program, 2022; Mosselson, 2006). Many of the resources are only available for the first six months of resettlement and vary by location. According to US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (2022), different agencies and charitable organizations exist in cities and states across the United States to help recent arrivals. In Colorado, there are many core programs; among them is the Newcomer Program, which is offered in six schools across one public school district in a large urban city.

Research emphasizes that schools play a key role in the socialization and incorporation of newcomer (refugee and immigrant) students (Bajaj et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008) and in the construction of who belongs and does not belong to the nation state (Abu El-Haj, 2007). Schools must be prepared to provide the resources necessary as children begin to adapt to their new experience.

**Who are Newcomers?**

For the context of this study, both refugees and immigrants are referred to as newcomers. Newcomers are defined as multilingual learners who are new to the country and identified as having limited or interrupted education, as well as minimal literacy skills in both their native language and English (Newcomer's Handbook, 2021). The U.S.

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Department of Education states that "Newcomer" is an umbrella term that includes various categories of immigrants who are born outside of the United States." (U.S. Department of Education 2016, p.3).

"Newcomer" is an umbrella term that includes various categories of immigrants who are born outside of the United States. For example, not all immigrants are necessarily ELLs, as some are fluent in English while others speak little or no English. Students identified as ELLs require assistance with language acquisition (though more than 40 percent of identified ELs are born in the United States across all districts). Some ELLs may need help integrating into US culture. Depending on the school district, newcomers may be placed in a newcomer program or mainstreamed (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, n.d.).

**Table 1**

*Table 1: Terms Used by Various Entities to Describe Newcomer Populations*

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Asylees** | Asylees are individuals who, on their own, travel to the United States and subsequently apply for or receive a grant of asylum. Asylees do not enter the United States as refugees. They may enter as students, tourists, or businessmen, or with "undocumented" status (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). |

| | |
|---|---|
| **English Learner (ELL)** | An individual (A) who is aged 3 through 21; (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school; (C)(i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; (ii)(I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is not English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and (D) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English may be sufficient to deny the individual (i) the ability to meet the challenging state academic standards; (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society (ESEA, as amended by ESSA, Section 8101[20]). |
| **Foreign born** | People who are not U.S. citizens at birth (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). |
| **Immigrant children and youth (Title III)** | Immigrant children and youth are those who (A) are aged 3 through 21; (B) were not born in any state; and (C) have not been attending one or more schools in any one or more states for more than 3 full academic years (ESEA, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), Section 3301[6])). |
| **New American** | An all-encompassing term that includes foreign-born individuals (and their children and families) who seek to become fully integrated into their new community in the United States (White House Task Force on New Americans, 2015). |
| **Refugee** | A refugee is a person who has fled his or her country of origin because of past persecution or a fear of future persecution based upon race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015). |
| **Student with interrupted formal education (SIFE)** | Students in grades four through 12 who have experienced disruptions in their education in their native countries and/or the United States, and/or are unfamiliar with the culture of schooling (Calderón, 2008). |

| **Unaccompanied youth** | Children who come into the United States from other countries without an adult guardian (HHS, n.d.). |

*Note.* Reprinted from U.S. Department of Education Newcomer Toolkit (2016).

Newcomer programs serve students generally for one or two semesters to prepare them for participation in a Multilingual Education/English Language Arts (MLE/ELA) Program. Newcomers are multilingual learners who are new to the country and identified as having limited or interrupted education, as well as minimal literacy skills in both their native language and English. Newcomer Centers serve students generally for one or two semesters to prepare them for participation in an MLE/ELA Program.

The majority of sociology literature on immigration in the US context has focused on the experiences of different immigrant groups assimilating into society (Alba & Nee, 2003; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 2012; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Waters & Jiménez, 2005) and on academic outcomes and achievement in schools (Kao & Tienda, 2012, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut 2001, 2014). There is less attention to understanding notions of belonging among newcomer youth (Gonzales, 2016; Youkhana, 2015) or in the context of school (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018).

**Challenges of Newcomer Students**

Immigration to the United States presents both challenges and opportunities that affect students' academic achievement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Newly arriving migrants are an ongoing reality that schools must confront, and they do not want to be devious or use politics as cover. Published academic discourse on newcomers' barriers is not always based on empirical data (Schoorman & Jean-Jacques, 2003). Nevertheless, studies with empirical data reveal numerous obstacles that impede newcomer students'

integration experiences. These obstacles include family and community-based challenges, alienating structures within schools, and psychological pressures (Oikonomidoy et al., 2019). The scholars further illustrate that family dynamics can erect barriers to newcomer integration. Life complexities and family relationships can present integration challenges before newcomer students enter a school environment. For instance, various studies indicate that for some newcomers, attending school is a luxury (Allard, 2015; Jefferies, 2014). While schooling may be a priority for some, this is not universally held. Some newcomers face structural barriers that prevent them from engaging with school. For others, work may be their priority, not school (Sarroub et al., 2007).

Schools and local communities are mostly the pragmatic actors when there is an influx of newcomer unaccompanied migrants. However, challenges remain in this effort to provide a space where newcomers can belong (Rodriguez, 2019). It is important to consider the trauma that immigrant children experienced when they left their home countries. One can also consider that immigrant children in the United States left their lives back in their home country, including their friends and their own cultural and social practices. Even though the United States is becoming more socially and culturally diverse, the social and cultural environment is still different, and moving to the United States is often a significant cultural shock to newcomer students.

Some school districts have developed programs (often known as newcomer programs) that are intended to help newcomer students succeed. Even though these programs vary in structure, for many, their ultimate goal is English language acquisition, the foundation of academic success. In general, newcomer programs are "special schools or programs designed to meet the specific language, academic, and social needs of recent

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immigrant students" (Hersi & Watkinson, 2009, p. 99). According to Hersi and Watkinson, most of the programs are located in urban communities that have received the greatest influx of immigrant families. For this study, many changes took place at the newcomer program site I studied that helped many of the newcomer students adjust to not only the academics but also the cultural and societal aspects of the US as well.

**Newcomer Programs**

Across the United States, students from non-speaking English backgrounds have become one of the fastest growing segments of the K–12 population. In American schools with a large influx of refugees and immigrants, newcomer programs are designed for recent immigrants at different K–12 schools. The programs shelter the "newcomer English Learners (ELs)" for a specified period so they can develop English and academic language. Newcomers are "foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p. 1). A newcomer is defined as a student who is within one year of arriving in the United States and previously had limited knowledge of the culture and the English language (Short & Boyson, 2012).

One way the US educational system has attempted to respond to the educational and emotional support immigrant and refugee students require is through the creation of newcomer programs. These programs generally develop at the local, school, and district levels and vary greatly in their approaches (Waterhouse, 2021; Custodio, 2011; Feinberg, 2000; Hersi & Watkinson, 2012; Short & Boyson, 2000). The US educational system was designed to produce citizens that would enter the workforce and contribute to the economic growth of the country (Giroux, 1992). This aspect is relevant for newcomer

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students as well as families, as they navigate the educational landscape while also adapting to a new cultural and societal environment. Newcomer programs can have the purpose of acclimating students into the school and general education classrooms, isolating minority students from the larger population of students, or helping assimilate immigrant populations into the culture of the United States (Feinberg, 2000; Hersi & Watkinson, 2012). People who work with newcomer programs have different goals for students. The linguistic and cultural ideologies of different staff members in programs can greatly influence student outcomes and desired results (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Programming decisions often reflect the underlying goals of educators (Marler, personal communication, Sep. 24, 2022). Hos (2019) stated that "K-12 schools in the United States do not often address or support the building of newcomer students' social and cultural capital as a critical part of their transition to a new country and system" (p. 101). Social and cultural capital refer broadly to one's accumulated networks, relationships, knowledge, and skills (Solorzano, 2022; Yosso & Solorzano, 2005); they are invaluable resources for navigating success in educational and societal systems and are the basis upon which economic capital (financial gain) is ultimately acquired (Kenna & Russell, 2018).

To establish a newcomer program is a complex process. School leadership is a key factor in clearly outlining the vision and structure of the program (Marler, 2022). The design is crucial to and must meet the actual needs of learners (Al-Nawafah et al., 2022). The program should make use of the primary languages used by the group of students to be served. Issues such as learners' developmental levels, instructional materials, curricular design, assessment, schedules, and courses offered to them are necessary

components of the program that must be carefully considered. The key personnel necessary for newcomer programs include teachers, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, translators and interpreters, native language speakers, community members (family members and parent volunteers), and the principal (Colorín Colorado, 2015). Contemporarily in the United States, newcomer programs offer another opportunity for immigrant students to have their linguistic, social, and cultural needs met since, in some cases, traditional English as a second language and bilingual programs are not designed to address most of those needs. The research site that is the focus of this study underwent restructuring for its newcomer program to better align it with cultural responsiveness and address the needs of newcomers. Additionally, the school leadership team made academic adjustments, introducing multi-grade classes specifically tailored for newcomer students.

**Afghan Newcomers in the US**

In mid-April 2021, President Biden declared that the United States had long ago accomplished its mission of denying terrorists a haven in Afghanistan and announced that all American troops would leave the country by September 11, 2021. He later moved the date up to August 31, 2021. The President said that after nearly 20 years of war, it was clear that the US military could not transform Afghanistan into a modern, stable democracy (The White House, August 16, 2021). Following years of US involvement in Afghanistan and upon their withdrawal, the Afghan Republic government collapsed, and the former president fled the country. These actions created chaos and put the lives of millions of Afghans in danger. Seeking safety, thousands fled out of Afghanistan.

In 2021, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that more than 76,000 Afghans had been brought to the US since the summer of 2021, when they were airlifted from the Kabul Airport during the chaotic final weeks of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Hackman, 2021). They were flown to US military bases around the world, and their names and fingerprints were run through security systems before being sent onto the US. They were temporarily settled on eight military installations in the US, where they waited until refugee resettlement agencies were ready to move them into permanent homes. More than 62,000 have already moved off of US military bases into communities around the country, where refugee resettlement officials are helping them find homes, apply for jobs, and enroll their children in school. Hackman (2022) asserts that many of the Afghans who have family members already living in the US are heading to regions with existing Afghan communities—the Sacramento Bay area, the suburbs of northern Virginia, and Colorado are areas where resettlement agencies have found a place for many of these families to live. One of the responsibilities these resettlement agencies have toward these Afghan newcomers is to enroll their children at schools. However, enrolling these students, particularly the newcomers, at various schools entails different challenges. Most of these students who came in through this influx have faced severe trauma and are in dire need of social emotional support at schools. Many of the schools do not understand the dramatic differences between the educational system in a students' home country compared to that of the US. These differences include the way schools function, how community plays a role, and, more specifically, the way school leadership plays a crucial role in the American education system.

**Statement of Problem**

Numerous groups of newcomers are reshaping the political, economic, and cultural systems of the world (Hatton, 2017; Waite, 2016). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022) reports that 89.3 million people globally have been forced from their homes. This includes individuals displaced abroad, internally displaced, asylum seekers, and refugees under UNHCR mandates. Among them, nearly 27.1 million are refugees, with around half under the age of 18, many of whom are denied access to basic rights such as education. Schools stand as one of the primary institutions addressing the needs of these young people. The roles of school leaders and teachers are crucial, serving as the social actors encountering refugee children early in their school journey (Arar et al., 2020). Despite this, limited research has delved into the role of school leaders in newcomer programs, which provide or alter practices for newcomers to access appropriate educational opportunities (Arar et al., 2019, 2018; Brooks et al., 2017; Norberg & Gross, 2018). One area requiring further research is the practices of school leaders and how their leadership decisions build capacity for newcomer students to achieve optimal educational outcomes. Effective principals actively seek assistance, particularly in adopting appropriate pedagogical approaches to meet the needs of migrant students (Arar et al., 2018).

Several research studies indicate that some newcomers, particularly refugee children and youth, often experience trauma from their pre-migration and resettlement experiences. This trauma encompasses language differences, a lack of understanding of how schools function, uncertainty about where to seek help, limited familiarity with the curriculum and social norms, and challenges in making friends (Suárez-Orozco et al.,

2008). Brown and Scribner (2014) suggest that during forced migration and the search for a safe haven, these refugee students may have encountered violence, combat, malnutrition, detention, and torture. Many have been compelled to leave their country and are unable to safely return home (Gagné et al., 2018; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Some children may have arrived without their parents, unaware of their health or safety status. Psychological stress and traumatic experiences are often inflicted upon these children over months or even years, and many encounter some form of discrimination upon entering US schools (Kugler, 2009).

Research also indicates that newcomers often face significant adjustments to life in their new communities and schools. Some examples include unfamiliarity with lifestyle. For instance, many Muslim girls cannot hide their Muslim affiliation, as their families require them to wear a hijab (a headscarf) and conservative clothing (McBrien, 2005). Others become obvious as they fast for the month of Ramadan or try to find secluded places for ritual prayers during the day. As a result, this part of their identity is conspicuous and may likely lead to rejection and discrimination from many members of the host culture (McBrien, 2005).

Some of the stressors the newcomers face differ from those experienced by their native peers, such as the loss of social support, the need to learn a new language, and navigation of unfamiliar systems to access services (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; O'Toole & Todd, 2018). Some of the newcomers are relocated to communities with an existing population from their home country. Others may be the only people from their country, heightening the sense of isolation (Garrett, 2016). Children frequently adapt culturally and linguistically more quickly than their parents (Larson et al., 2010). For

example, children often take on the responsibility as language translators for their parents. Over time, this can cause conflict when families deviate from tradition and can increase the burden on children as parents rely on them to navigate their new environment.

Considering the research conducted, not all school leaders are aware of the issues a newcomer student might face (Spillane & Lee, 2014). There is a paucity of training on effective practices that will accommodate the unique needs of all newcomer students (Samson & Collins, 2012) —effective, flexible, and versatile practices in place to accommodate their needs. This study will describe the practices of a school leadership team who developed a pathway for newcomer students to be successful socially, emotionally, and educationally. The findings will help to prepare future and current leaders to support the success of newcomer students.

**Research Question**

The research question guiding this study is as follows: How does a leader of an elementary school with a newcomer program build a school culture that supports the diverse needs of newcomer students? Sub questions include the following: How has the recent influx of Afghan, Ukrainian, and other recent newcomers changed the leader's role and practices?

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the role of an elementary school leadership team, whose school has a newcomer program, related to the success of newcomer students and requisite changes in school practices. This case study will provide an in-depth description of how the leadership team developed school

contexts in which the newcomers succeed as they experience the stressors, for which social support is necessary on several fronts. School leaders and their decisions influence newcomer students and their families. Therefore, it is critical for school leaders, particularly with newcomer programs, to consider the unique implications of immigration and how being a newcomer affects a student. Newcomers often arrive in the host countries facing multiple challenges; for instance, students may be traumatized by the process of running away from poverty, brutal regimes, and corrupt governments (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Fog & Larsen, 2012; McCarthy, 2018). Research studies indicate the newcomer students' mental, psychological, economic, and social needs are varied and often serious (Şirin & Sirin, 2015). In addition, the issue of being a newcomer, particularly a refugee, does not simply end at being a refugee, as there are children who have been separated from their parents. The problems of unaccompanied children are complex in part because of their legal status; issues of human trafficking and sexual abuse may arise as well.

When newcomers arrive in a country where the struggle to educate their children is compounded with the issue of cultural assimilation, it can be overwhelming. Various research studies report that newcomers experience stress from cultural changes (Birman, 2002; Dalgaard et al., 2016; Fazel & Stein, 2003; Leth et al., 2014; O'Toole et al., 2013; O'Toole & Todd, 2018). Other research studies state that despite academic success, newcomer students can feel culturally and socially alienated (Berry & Vedder, 2016). As newcomers adjust to new cultural expectations and customs, often including acquiring literacy in a new language, they may feel pressured to become more "American" without understanding what that means (Birman, 2002; Dalgaard et al., 2016; Dow, 2011; Fazel

& Stein, 2002; Fazel & Stein, 2003; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Leth et al., 2014; O'Toole et al., 2013). In addition, the newcomers may also feel that they must choose between their home culture and the new culture (Berry & Vedder, 2016) while establishing a secure identity amidst competing social pressures (Bal & Perzigian, 2013; Chiu et al., 2012; Rhodes & Milburn, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

This study is important because it focuses on the practices of a newcomer school leader, trying to address the disparate needs of a highly vulnerable group of students in his school: refugee, immigrant, and many other displaced populations. The schools in which newcomer students are resettled and enrolled are faced with the serious responsibilities of finding trained teachers and learning materials for seemingly countless newcomers, many of whom are unexpected when they arrive at the school. For instance, after their long civil war history, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghan newcomer students have missed numerous years of schooling. Hence, schools are the first point of contact for them in saving their lives (Arar et al., 2018; Norberg, 2017).

To establish supports that are appropriate and effective, it is critical for educators to acknowledge newcomers' individual strengths, the resilience they developed through the immigration process, and their rich potential for building on life experiences and prior schooling (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005). Moreover, the leader of the newcomer program must recognize that newcomers have diverse characteristics, including home language, age at entry, family structure, and socioeconomic status. A student's culture may limit interactions with different genders or professions. For example, in Afghanistan, K–12 culture co-education (gender-mixed classes) is available only in the capital, some bigger provinces, and particularly in private schools. Another example could be resolving

conflict within the family or with the help of local leaders rather than consulting mental health professionals or counselors (Kramer et al., 2009). Offering support or services that are not culturally responsive may be unproductive.

**Significance of the Study**

Several research studies claim that leadership is the most important aspect of any school reform. Leithwood et al. (2020) state that "school leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning. While moderate in size, this leadership effect is vital to the success of most school improvement efforts" (p. 7). In addition, Marzano (2003) states, "Leadership could be considered the single most important aspect of effective school reform" (p. 172). To illustrate the importance of a principal's leadership within the school setting, Onorato (2013), in the US Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity, defined the principal as the most influential person in US schools.

> In many ways, the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school. He or she is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. Principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the level of professionalism, and morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become (U.S. Congress, p. 56).

There is an inescapable need for equity in schools—especially with respect to the impact of equity on student achievement. It is important for educational leaders to not only identify issues of teachers' cultural and ethnic biases in the classroom but also for educational leaders to feel comfortable tackling these issues in an effort to move toward a more socially just and student need-based education climate and culture in the school. Further, educational leaders need to embrace a transformative approach (Shields &

Hesbol, 2020; Starkey, 2021) to school leadership. Data from this study seeks to provide a model for doing so.

Thus, this study will carefully examine the strategies used by the school leader in a newcomer school. Such strategies may or may not be linked to other policies, practices, and purposeful training in leadership preparation programs and how they are interconnected in the existing instructional delivery system. Rather than listing individual commendable or exemplary programs or abstract characteristics of effective services for newcomers, which are often found in the literature concerning newcomers and may mislead readers to "miss the forest for the trees," this study attempts to help readers have an "inside look" at the interventions for newcomers from a more intentional and systematic viewpoint.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Newcomer students are those who have newly arrived in the United States and are in the process of adapting to a new culture and a new educational system. These students face a range of challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with academic expectations (Oikonomidoy et al., 2019). In recent years, there has been growing interest in understanding how best to support newcomer students in US schools to ensure that they have equitable access to educational opportunities and can succeed academically. Schools where the numbers of immigrant and refugee students are increasing dramatically need a systematic approach to ensure newcomer students with different backgrounds, languages, identities, frameworks of standards, previous educational experiences, skills, interests, and beliefs have equal access to opportunities to participate and succeed in schools (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

The term "newcomers" refers to any foreign-born students and their families who have recently arrived in the United States (Oikonomidoy et al., 2019). Throughout the history of this country, people from around the world have immigrated to the United States to start a new life, bringing their customs, religions, and languages with them. The United States is, to a great extent, a nation of immigrants (Waters & Pineau, 2016). Newcomers play an important role in weaving our nation's social and economic fabric, and US schools play an important role in helping newcomers adapt and contribute as they integrate into American society (U.S. Department of Education 2016, p. 4).

In recent decades, increasing numbers of people are relocating across national and international borders. In response, a growing body of research has focused on identifying how best to support the children of recent immigrants, often referred to as "newcomers." A review of relevant literature reveals a great degree of variability in the length of time associated with the term "newcomers." The chronological time frame ranges from 1 year to 10 years (Kreuzer, 2016; Li, 2010; Strickland, 2012). In some cases, the length of stay in the receiving country is explicitly discussed by the authors (Strickland, 2012), while in others, it is implied (such as in the case of refugees, who tend to be newcomers by default). This paper defines "newcomers*" as those students who have been in the US as students irrelevant of the length of stay and includes refugees, immigrants, and undocumented immigrants.

School leaders mediate school culture development (Deal et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008). The school principal also plays a critical role in fostering a school culture of high expectations, a growth mindset, and a nurturing teaching and learning environment for students, teachers, and parents. However, extant research indicates that educators and administrators continue to hold deficit beliefs regarding students and families from diverse backgrounds (Nelson et al., 2014). Moreover, although virtually every school in the US has the phrase "all children can learn" in their mission statement, school and district leaders continue to implement structures, programs, and practices embedded with a "pervasive deficit approach" (Skrla et al., 2001, p. 236). With the continuing cultural diversification of the school, it is imperative that school leaders reassess their policies and practices to ensure they align with the inclusive ethos of "all children can learn." This

requires adopting culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge and leverage the

diverse strengths and backgrounds of students.

Education research, as a lens to understanding life in schools, is positioned in the

middle of the larger sociopolitical context and the specific day-to-day practices in

schools. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) defines education

research as:

> The scientific field of study that examines education and learning processes
> and the human attributes, interactions, organizations, and institutions that
> shape educational outcomes. Scholarship in the field seeks to describe,
> understand, and explain how learning takes place throughout a person's life
> and how formal and informal contexts of education affect all forms of
> learning. (AERA, n.d.)

This literature review focuses on collective and individual barriers and sources

thought to either hamper or support newcomers' social and academic integration and

psychological well-being in their K–12 school environments and communities. I have

observed that although the term "newcomer" may be seen in somewhat "neutral" ways,

the groups that are "hidden" behind it are highly politicized (Oikonomidoy et al., 2019).

The terms "immigrant," "refugee," and "undocumented," all falling under the umbrella of

newcomers, carry with them a heavy negative semantic stigma in societies around the

world.

Through the literature reviewed here, I will examine the following research

question: How does a leadership team of an elementary school with a newcomer program

build a school culture that supports the diverse needs of newcomer students? Therefore, I

look at literature that informs this study about the role of a newcomer school leader and

their relationship to newcomer students. In addition, I review studies about how leaders

advocate for students and community engagement, transformative leadership (Shields & Hesbol, 2020), and community cultural wealth.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of inclusive education, examine the influence of diverse cultures on American K–12 education, and critique the current state of educational inequity. I then delve into the challenges faced by newcomer students and their parents, emphasizing the need for school leaders to prepare to effectively welcome and support newcomers on their path to success. The subsequent sections explore literature on the paradox of immigration and community engagement, shedding light on how collective voices of school leaders, students, and parents can generate relational and unique power within their communities. A focal point of this literature is transformative leadership and the practices employed by transformative leaders. To conclude, this chapter discusses emerging literature and identifies existing gaps regarding the practices of newcomer school leaders in addressing the needs of newcomer students to achieve success in their educational pursuits.

There is a research gap concerning the transformative processes school leaders utilize to integrate an additive view of diversity and "even fewer empirically supported guidelines for what works" (Garcia et al., 2004, p. 151) when leveraging the cultural assets of immigrants to create an inclusive school environment. There have been numerous studies on culturally responsive or culturally sustaining schooling, teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum (Gambrell, 2017; Gay, 2010; Ndemanu et al., 2018; Paris, 2012). Additionally, there is an increasing amount of empirical research regarding school leadership's culturally responsive approaches (Dugan et al., 2012; Hansuvadha et al., 2012; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Magno et al., 2010; Mugisha, 2013). However,

further research is needed to investigate culturally responsive leadership in the context of immigration, utilizing different research methodologies and settings (DeMatthews et al., 2018). Moreover, further research is needed to understand how principals become culturally responsive instructional leaders for immigrants (Mugisha, 2013) and these school leaders' roles in engaging immigrant parents and their families (Magno et al., 2010).

**The Legal Context of Educating Immigrants**

In the United States, the legal framework ensures equal access to primary education for all children, irrespective of their actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status, in accordance with federal laws. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education (2015) emphasizes that even recently arrived unaccompanied children, engaged in immigration proceedings while residing with a parent, family member, or other appropriate adult sponsors within local communities, are entitled to equal access to public education. Legal provisions such as the *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) Supreme Court decision affirm the constitutional right of undocumented immigrant children to receive a free public education. *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) established that denying access to public education based on immigration status violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Research has underscored the significance of such legal protections, emphasizing the positive correlation between educational access for immigrant children and broader societal benefits, including enhanced economic contributions and social integration. For instance, Autin et al. (2018) have shown that educational investments in immigrant populations yield long-term positive outcomes, contributing to a more prosperous and

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cohesive society. This legal protection extends to recently arrive unaccompanied children too, ensuring equal access to education while in local communities with a parent, family member, or other appropriate adult sponsor.

**Increasingly Diverse Influences and Cultural Needs in American Schools**

Recognizing the diverse cultural needs of newcomer students is crucial for school leaders to create an inclusive learning environment (Moolenaar et al., 2010; Sparks, 2011). As newcomers strive to adapt to the US education system, it is essential to provide an overview of the American public education system and its historical impact on immigrant students.

From its inception, the American educational system has been significantly influenced by European cultural norms (Urban et al., 2019; Boykin, 1986; Lee, 2005; Woodson, 1933). This cultural foundation has evolved as the United States grapples with the challenge of constructing a national identity within a culturally diverse population (Shujaa, 2003). Culture, being fluid and multifaceted, encompasses human-made products, values, beliefs, norms, and collective consciousness within a society (Doob, 2005; Giroux, 1988; Shades & Edwards, 1987).

In understanding culture, Banks and McGee-Banks (2006) emphasize its role in cultivation, tradition, information dissemination, symbol systems, models for actions and emotions, and the distribution of power within society and local communities of practice. This multifaceted perspective on culture underscores the need for educational leaders to navigate and integrate various cultural elements into the fabric of the educational system to address the unique cultural needs of newcomer students. Research suggests that embracing cultural diversity positively affects educational outcomes, fostering a more

inclusive and equitable learning environment (Urban et al., 2019). Therefore, an exploration of effective strategies and practices for school leaders to engage with diverse cultural backgrounds is warranted to enhance the educational experience for newcomer students.

Principals are central to shaping a positive and professional school culture and climate. Their daily work and value-driven behaviors shape a positive set of underlying norms, values, and beliefs for the school that foster learning (Deal & Peterson, 2011; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Louis & Leithwood et al., 2017). Principals interact with teachers and students as instructional mentors while also making sure that the school is physically and emotionally safe (Moolenaar et al., 2010; Sparks, 2011). Having a process and procedure for creating a positive school climate is a vehicle for principals to motivate teachers and students (Louis & Leithwood, 2010; Nor & Roslan, 2009). Without leadership in this area, cultures can become stagnant and toxic (Deal & Peterson, 2011). In reporting the differences in school culture between successful schools and unsuccessful schools, there is evidence that successful schools have a more positive culture and climate when positively influenced by school leadership (Spicer, 2016; Voight et al., 2013). Principals who can build relationships with teachers and interact with all staff members hold the central elements for creating a positive school climate (DiPaola et al., 2004). Adeogun and Olisaemeka (2011) found that to be influential, "leaders must be consummate relationship builders within groups, especially with people different from themselves. Principals should lead by example and show the same to teachers" (p. 555). When they do lead by example and work to build trust, shared values, and a shared vision, relationships improve and teachers are more satisfied with their jobs

(Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012; Herbert, 2011; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Edgerson et al., 2006).

Schools in the United States are becoming more ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Newcomers in the United States have risen dramatically in the last few decades (Hernandez, 2018). From August 15, 2021, to February 15, 2022, more than 76,000 Afghan newcomers arrived in the US. Although ethnic, religious, and language diversity has many advantages, it has been well-established (Taylor et al., 2016) that this growing diversity presents a unique set of challenges for most educators (Neitzel et al., 2019). Less attention has been given to the challenges that increasing diversity in US schools may pose for newcomers as they establish and maintain important relationships with their peers. Students, teachers, and principals may lack personal exposure to different languages and groups of diversifying people, and it is important to investigate the consequences (if any) there may be to the social development and peer acceptance in school of children from diverse cultural groups (Neitzel et al., 2019).

Differences in children's native cultures and upbringings have been associated with differences in language use and social expression in previous studies (Au, 1980; Chen & Kaspar, 2004; Ellis & Gauvain, 2013; Howes et al., 2008; Jordan, 1995). How often children initiate interactions and their effect and level of engagement during social interactions varies considerably between children from different cultures (Chen & Kaspar, 2004; Ellis & Gauvain, 2013; Howes et al., 2008). Even the way people speak and the social rules governing speech (i.e., what is said, how it is spoken, and how one shows deference or respect) differ from society to society. Cross-culturally, children may have vastly different communicative and social behaviors (Neitzel et al., 2019). Given

research that has shown how breaking social rules can lead to communication and relational breakdowns among individuals (Ellis & Gauvain, 2013), it is important to understand how differences in their first cultures of learning may impact young children establishing and maintaining peer relationships in culturally diverse classrooms.

**Refugee and Immigrant Students' Education**

In the last decade, political crises as well as civil and international wars have forced an unprecedented number of persons to flee from their homelands in fear for their lives and livelihoods and in search for sanctuary and a better life (Arar et al., 2020; Arar et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2019; Banks, 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Today, more than 79.5 million people are classified as displaced persons throughout the world (UNHCR, 2020a, 2020b).

Recently, many US public school systems have faced large demographic shifts: rising poverty, the growing number of students from newcomer families, and increasing populations of students of color (Turner, 2015). American society and schools are more diverse and more unequal than ever. More than half of US cities are now majority multiracial, and Asian, Black, and Latino populations have migrated to parts of the United States where they have not traditionally lived (Rusoja, 2022; Frey, 2011; Singer, 2004). Immigrants, primarily those from Latin America and Asia, are contributing to an increasingly multiethnic and multiracial nation (Rusoja, 2022; Frey, 2011; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002), and children living in immigrant families now constitute almost one-quarter of US youth under age 18 (Passel, 2016).

Education is a basic human right that is recognized in several international conventions, including the immigration Convention of the United Nations in 1951

(UNHCR, 2019a). It is also one of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development

Goals and is seen as critical for the development of peaceful and inclusive societies (Wolf

& Ebner, 2018). However, out of the 196 countries that signed this convention, only a

few have opened their gates to the influx of displaced persons in the last decade, and even

fewer have provided the necessary pathways to higher education (Arar et al., 2019; Arar

et al., 2020). The reality of vast numbers of immigrants flowing into host states means

that the humanitarian needs of the newcomers inevitably compete with the priorities of

the host state, and oftentimes, the education response is limited (Arar et al., 2020;

Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). For instance, when immigrants move to a new country, they

need housing, health and wellness assurance, immigration status, and more. Sometimes,

deficient educational provision leaves entire generations uneducated, developmentally

disadvantaged, and unprepared to contribute to either the host society or their own

society's future recovery (Arar, 2020).

The ways schools respond to these demographic shifts can alter the schooling of

millions of children. For example, how schools manage shifting enrollment affects the

availability of engaging, appropriate, high-quality instruction (Trolian & Parker, 2022;

Thompson, 2018; Wortham et al., 2002); the nature of homeschool (Lowenhaupt, 2014;

Posey-Maddox, 2014); and thus, the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of schooling.

Nevertheless, like many social organizations, schools often act in ways that are

insufficient for meeting these children's needs and building on their potential (Cooper,

2009; Thompson, 2018; Evans, 2007b; Wortham et al., 2002). While scholars suggest

that school districts are a crucial lever for improving schooling in systemic and equity-

enhancing ways (Cuban, 1984; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Honig et al., 2010; Marsh et al.,

2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Rorrer et al., 2008), we know little about how district policymakers react to these important demographic changes or indeed the factors that consistently shape district leaders' and in turn school leaders' policymaking.

Scholars who study immigration indicate that there are direct correlations between discrimination with respect to access and placement and policies for integrating immigrants and refugee students, especially those coming from underdeveloped countries (Banks, 2017; Waite, 2016; Arar et al., 2019). Therefore, any kind of insensitivity culturally or politically by the host nation's educational systems can lead to student failure. Without any guarantees, education has the exclusive power to reshape children's and adult lives (Harrington, 2016; Hatton, 2017; Thomas, 2016) and to free them from the adverse effects of trauma and catastrophic life events while creating opportunities for a better future.

Although some sociologically and geographically in-depth studies have been conducted on immigration/migration and refugees (Arar et al., 2019), there has been scant attention from the educational research community, particularly about school leaders (Banks, 2017; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waite, 2016). According to Arar et al. (2019), "The knowledge gap is evident in the field of education writ large and small concerning the dramatic significance of humanitarian crises impacting schools around the world" (p. 4). Immigrant students' education has different stages that are discussed below.

**Immigrant and Refugee Students' Education Stages**

According to Dryden-Peterson (2016), the educational trajectories of immigrant students can be divided into three periods: pre-resettlement, at arrival, and post-

resettlement (p. 6). Research has focused on the two latter periods, with scant attention to the educational experiences of refugee students before they are resettled. The educational attainment, literacy, and English proficiency of newcomers at the time of their arrival in a resettlement country in addition to language learning and processes of integration in post-resettlement schools are mostly well documented.

Immigrant students, arriving in English-speaking countries they aim to call home, exhibit limited English proficiency. They require assistance in learning English (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waite, 2016) or other languages of instruction in resettlement countries (Brown et al., 2006; Fennelly & Palasz, 2003; McBrien, 2005; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Prior & Niesz, 2013; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). In some of the countries, they are embedded in families with low literacy rates and educational attainment. For example, upon arrival in the United States, 23% of immigrants and refugee men and 27% of women over the age of 25 have not completed high school—lower than rates among the US-born population (Migration Policy Institute, 2014)). Numerous scholars state that newcomer children experience challenges related to social integration in school settings (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Bigelow, 2010; Buck & Silver, 2012; Dippo et al., 2012; Due & Riggs, 2009; Isik-Ercan, 2012; Rutter, 2003; Rutter, 2006; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). They also face ongoing challenges related to trauma exposure (Betancourt et al., 2012; Gahungu et al., 2011; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Szente et al., 2006).

Newcomers usually access primary and secondary school in countries of first asylum at lower rates than do nationals in the same countries. These differences are often stark, particularly in countries that have achieved near universal access for nationals (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Variation in access rates reflects multiple ways in which

education is disrupted for refugee children. Various scholars, while observing immigrant and refugee students' classrooms, found that newcomer students spend a disproportionate amount of time learning languages while often falling behind in age-appropriate academic content (Bigelow, 2010; Buck & Silver, 2012; Dippo et al., 2012). Most newcomers transition to a new language of instruction in a country of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Ongoing migration and shifting policies also contribute to the ways in which language learning shapes the educational trajectories of immigrant and refugee children pre-resettlement.

One of the biggest aspects of newcomer students' education while they exile their homeland and resettle to the United States is that refugees leave behind many aspects of their lives: "material goods, in-person social networks, and usually any clear sense of what the future holds for them and for their children" (Dryden-Peterson, 2015, p. 17). Many newcomers express the idea that education is the one thing that cannot be left behind (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Winthrop & Kirk, 2011). However, pre-resettlement educational experiences of newcomer students remain largely opaque to post-resettlement researchers and teachers (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Whether or not these experiences are made visible or understood post-resettlement, they do remain part of the educational trajectories of refugee children. Refugee children do not leave these experiences behind.

**Unraveling the Immigrant Education Paradox**

As newcomer students enter American schools, they tend to be both optimistic about their future and engaged in learning (Aretakis et al., 2015; Bui, 2013; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco 2001; Rusoja, 2022). Over time, however, this engagement can become precarious and vulnerable to change. Indeed,

despite their initial academic advantage, for nearly all immigrant groups, length of residence in the United States appears to be associated with declines in academic achievement and aspirations and in physical and psychological health (Aretakis et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009; Chun & Mobley, 2014; Fuligini, 1998; Hernández & Charney, 1998; Youth, 2009; Vernez et al., 1996).

Studies show that children of immigrants and refugees have higher grades, test scores, educational ambitions, and educational attainments than do their counterparts with native-born parents (Alon, 2009; Bailey & Weininger, 2020; Duong et al. 2016; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Glick & White, 2003; Hao &Woo, 2012; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Keller & Tillman, 2008). These findings have led to concerns that Americanization undermines achievement. For instance, in their study, Lee et al. (2017) examine Asian Americans as model minorities whose academic success is used to argue that US schools are meritocratic and to blame other students of color for their own academic challenges. Rumbaut, (1999) argues that there is "an erosion of an ethos of achievement and hard work from the immigrant generation to the third generation" (p. 19). García Coll and Marks (2012) also ask, "Is Becoming American a Developmental Risk?" However, although often not emphasized, the findings upon which these concerns rest are qualified in an important way: immigrants' children are often advantaged only relative to children of native-born parents with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Crosnoe, 2012; Alba et al., 2011). However, this evidence is largely drawn from high school students. Data on the performance of children entering elementary schools is more mixed, often pointing to greater risks among the children of immigrants. In addition, it's due to the skills children

bring with them at kindergarten and elementary levels that is a particular cause of concern.

The immigrant advantage in education is also paradoxical in light of the well-established finding that in the United States, inequalities are replicated across generations: parental educational and occupational attainments are often reproduced among children (Alexander et al., 2014; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Haller & Portes, 1973). However, recent research shows that social origins and outcomes are not as highly correlated in immigrant families, with immigrants' children often rising far above the socioeconomic position of their parents (Luthra & Soehl, 2015; Luthra & Waldinger, 2013).

**Developing Culturally Responsive Schools for Refugee Students**

Several studies have illustrated that the primary component in effectively shaping school climate and guiding reform site-based efforts is the leadership of the principal (Dewitt, 2018; Snowden & Gorton, 1998). Effective, socially just, and culturally responsive leadership, according to Dudley-Marling (2015), requires a leadership team that develops inclusive spaces where diverse students, families, students with different abilities, and students living in poverty have opportunities to learn content associated with the highest levels of academic achievement. Dewitt and Slade (2014) found that a positive school climate is an environment in which all people—not just adults or educators—are engaged and respected and where students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision (p. 9).

**Community Engagement**

Okilwa (2020) argued that major stakeholders such as parents, students, and teachers have the right to be involved in making decisions that influence teaching and learning. Since all change flows through the principal, they can facilitate engagement through shared leadership so that members of the school community can contribute their experiences, knowledge, and expertise toward improving the school. Murphy and colleagues (2009) note, "These formal leaders are in a critical position to move initiatives forward or to kill them off quickly through actions or slowly through neglect" (p. 182). Partnership with these stakeholders is too important to ignore. Teachers, as implementers of most of the school initiatives, for instance, need to feel involved in the decision-making process. Otherwise, the implementation phase becomes unlikely to succeed. Ryan (2006) suggests a variety of formal and informal opportunities to involve families (e.g., school council membership and volunteering) and students (e.g., advisory teams, student council, surveys, and roundtable discussions) in leadership processes. Similarly, Epstein (1995) proposes a framework of six types of involvement that have the potential to "promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together" (p. 704). Epstein's involvement framework encompasses various dimensions, including parenting (families fostering conducive learning environments at home); communicating (establishing effective communication channels between school and home); volunteering (mobilizing and organizing parental support); learning at home (families assisting with homework and related activities); decision-making (involving parents in school decisions and leadership roles); and collaboration with the community (identifying and utilizing community resources and services). In this context, parents and community members, as taxpayers, should be regarded as part owners of neighborhood

schools (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2012). Establishing meaningful dialogue is crucial, emphasizing the need for schools to create opportunities for effective communication among all stakeholders (Ryan, 2006, p. 119). The principal plays a pivotal role in fostering a "safe space" (Fernando & Bennet, 2019), where traditionally marginalized voices are not only heard but also valued. This kind of meaningful dialogue has the potential to form coalitions that support inclusive school improvement, as exemplified by Ishimaru (2013), who documented three principals collaborating with a multiethnic and interfaith community-organizing group, People Acting in Community Together (PACT), to lead three new successful, small, and autonomous schools.

**Navigating New Beginnings: Challenges and Opportunities for Newcomer Immigrant Students in US Schools and Relationships to Ensure Success**

Newcomer immigrant students face several challenges in their adjustment as they enter schools in the United States. The literature suggests that relationships in school play a particularly crucial role in promoting socially competent behavior in the classroom and in fostering academic engagement and school performance. Background-related factors and characteristics or various forms of family capital are among the most stable predictors of resilience in children (Okilwa, 2020; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1997; O'Donnell et al., 2002). Newcomers often live in varied and complex household configurations. Some live in traditional two-parent families, but many others live in extended families, in blended families, or with nonparental caretakers (such as grandparents, godparents, aunts, and uncles).

Multiple caretakers are better equipped to diffuse the many stresses of childcare in a foreign country, to deploy resources that reduce social anxiety, and to facilitate

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academic engagement and achievement. There is also a direct relationship between parental education and performance on achievement tests, grades, and dropout rates (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Feliciano, 2006; Jencks, 1972; Madaus & Clarke, 1998). Parents with higher educational levels in their country of origin are better able to provide the types of resources that would place their children at an advantage over children whose parents have lower levels of education. These resources include providing more literacy opportunities, communicating with more sophisticated vocabularies, providing access to computers, actively scaffolding homework assignments, and accessing college pathway knowledge and other academic supports (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Parents with higher educational backgrounds in their home countries possess the capacity to provide valuable resources, placing their children at an advantage over those with lower-educated parents. These resources include enhanced literacy opportunities, communication with more sophisticated vocabularies, and access to computers, active scaffolding of homework assignments, and knowledge about college pathways and other academic supports (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In building on these insights, it is essential to delve deeper into the mechanisms through which schools can actively foster and strengthen these relationships to ensure the success of newcomer immigrant students in their educational journeys. Understanding how educators and schools can further support and engage with newcomer families is crucial for creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment.

**Immigrant and Refugee Family Interactions**

Knowing a refugee child's family interactions is an important part of understanding the child (Rah, 2007). Refugee children are a diverse group with a wide

range of family characteristics; however, the following aspects are considered commonalities among refugee families. First, refugee children are deeply affected by family trauma, history, and feelings about their origins. In a study of Vietnamese refugees, Zhou (2001) found that children who were born in the United States can still be deeply affected by their family's experiences prior to their flight, and other traumas can be immediate realities for young people.

Refugee children often experience discrimination in their pre-resettlement education. Assumed in much of the literature is that refugee children experience the process of cultural adaptation and marginalization vis-à-vis schools and teachers for the first time when they arrive in a resettlement country. For most refugees, however, these experiences are typically not new. They fled their homes due to persecution, and most previously entered a new education system in a country of first asylum ("First asylum country" refers to the country that permits refugees to enter its territory for purposes of providing asylum temporarily, pending eventual repatriation or resettlement. It can be provided locally or in a third country). Ethnographic observations and interviews with children reveal frequent experiences of discrimination, primarily in the content of the curriculum and in treatment by peers and teachers. The instructional content to which refugee children are exposed in countries of first asylum can be at best difficult to relate with and at worst highly politicized and discriminatory.

**Breaking Barriers for Educational Success Empowering Newcomer Families**

Refugee and immigrant families are often labeled as "hard-to-reach" due to various socio-economic factors and their experiences with the educational system. However, research consistently emphasizes the crucial role parents play in the emotional,

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behavioral, and educational development of their school-going children. This influence surpasses the impact of maternal education, poverty, peers' socio-economic status, and the type of schooling (Beatson et al., 2022; DfES, 2003; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Tezcan-Güntekin et al., 2022; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Despite this, parental engagement is contingent on factors like family socio-economic status and parents' familiarity with the educational system (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Lareau, 2003). Addressing the challenge of engaging "hard-to-reach" parents can significantly enhance student learning and achievement, as demonstrated by the disproportionate positive effect reported in studies (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Crul et al. (2014) highlight the role of both schools and family resources, including mentoring from older siblings, teachers, and community mentoring centers, in driving unexpected educational success among immigrant children.

Recognizing that major stakeholders, including parents, students, and teachers, have the right to be involved in decisions impacting teaching and learning, schools must proactively address engagement barriers. Principals, as key change facilitators, are strategically positioned to foster engagement through shared leadership. This approach offers members of the school community opportunities to contribute their experiences, knowledge, and expertise, ultimately working collaboratively toward achieving school improvement. The focus should be on empowering newcomer families and breaking down barriers to ensure the educational success of their children.

Ryan (2006) suggests "those involved in leadership enterprises need to be prepared to actively promote inclusion" that gives every child an opportunity to succeed (p. 105). As schools experience an increasingly diverse student body (economically,

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linguistically, culturally, and in ability), the expectation for school leaders to orchestrate an environment where these differences are in fact appreciated is imperative (Hamm et al., 2016). The preparedness of those in leadership to advocate and facilitate an inclusive school climate and culture is thus tested. Advocating for inclusion may first require a reflective orientation from the leader. That is, the principal should

> "use information gathered from reports, teachers, parents, and community members to develop reasoned approaches for action and help generate new meanings about the changes ahead…mobilize teams of teachers and parents to inform their decision-making" (Salisbury & McGregor, 2005, p. 5).

The collective information acquired should consequently translate into actionable strategies that bring about desirable changes. In line with the above suggestions, Hidalgo et al. (2004) argue that community involvement can promote school improvement, family assistance, and immigrant students' success. Moreover, they propose that communities have resources that extend beyond the scope of the school or the family and that can promote students' success and inclusion. Frequent communication between school leaders and community leaders is a prerequisite of effective school-community partnerships. Nevertheless, family and community do not operate in distinctive ways from each other. On the contrary, schools, communities, and families "exchange information, assist one another, and help students succeed in school" (Hidalgo et al., 2004, p. 633).

**Empowering Newcomer Students: Unveiling Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge**

Community cultural wealth, conceptualized by Yosso (2005), elucidates the multifaceted resources employed to empower newcomer students encompassing

knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks. Yosso's theory identifies funds of knowledge as a manifestation of different forms of capital. However, Lubienski (2003) distinguishes between funds of knowledge and cultural capital, cautioning against using them interchangeably, as cultural capital may imply deficit thinking. In contrast, funds of knowledge extend beyond socioeconomic perspectives.

Rios-Aguilar et al. (2011) challenge the exclusive nature of funds of knowledge and capital, asserting that they can coexist. They advocate for the recognition and transmission of funds of knowledge, transforming them into capital through collaboration among educators, parents, and students. The emphasis extends beyond educators' roles; parents and students should also activate their funds of knowledge, converting them into potent capital for academic success. This process unveils power imbalances within educational and societal structures, promoting a comprehensive examination of existing inequities. In this way, funds of knowledge can be used to examine existing power imbalances and inequities in educational and societal structures.

Community cultural wealth is enhanced even further when the lives of students are emphasized. A related concept is the "funds of knowledge" first described by Moll et al. (1992). It is a term used by Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez in their book, *Secondary Educators Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (2001). They explain that funds of knowledge "refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Bennett, 2020, p. 186). The use of the word "fund" connects to the idea of background knowledge as a foundation for learning.

Community cultural wealth encompasses the investment in symbols and meanings that challenge the deficit notion, asserting that communities of color are inherently inferior, a belief perpetuated by the dominant societal class. This wealth of cultural resources counters prevailing narratives and empowers marginalized communities (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Márque et al., 2018). Cultural wealth is passed down, or reproduced, through generations and is the knowledge that enables an individual to interpret various cultural codes. Cultural capital relates to knowledge about educational choices and ways of navigating the education system, and educational access is referred to as academic capital (St. John et al., 2011).

Yosso (2005) believes that cultural capital is created by "recognition, transmission, conversion, and activation" (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011, p. 165) of funds of knowledge. Cultural capital, according to Yosso (2005), is something that is owned by a community as well as an individual. In doing so, she redefines capital as something that is everyone's property, no longer reserved for the dominant few. In this framework, she recognizes that several "forms of capital are nurtured" by communities, including "aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant" capital, which overlap and develop each other into a richer and denser capital than any one of them could be apart (p. 77). These forms of community cultural capital are defined as follows:

- The ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, despite real and perceived obstacles, is called aspirational capital;
- The ability to communicate in more than one language is one measure of linguistic capital;

- "Familial capital refers to that cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79);

- Networks of people and community resources can be thought of as social capital;

- A person's navigational capital refers to their ability to maneuver through social institutions;

- "Resistant capital refers to those knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 81).

In addition to these forms of converted funds of knowledge or capital are what Giraldo et al. (2018) call "dark experiences" (p. 50). This phrase supports parents and students in conceiving of their funds of knowledge as the light "within dark spaces" (p. 50). Acknowledging a person's dark experiences, such as "life-altering and impactful traumas that ultimately triggered and defined" (p. 50) a person's identity, allows these experiences to be redefining as positive lessons that have become "a means of survival and adaption" (p. 50). This is especially important in the lives of Afghan refugees and their families. Including these as part of a person's funds of knowledge allows them to become exceptionally powerful forms of capital once converted and activated.

A general lack of research on newcomer students compounds the issue of a lack of explicit support for the development of their community cultural wealth. There is limited research to help us understand how newcomer groups engage productively with community culture at school, how teachers might play a role in developing newcomers' community cultural wealth, or how the structure of a newcomer program within a school supports or inhibits the development of community and cultural capital. It is clear that there is a "need to be more explicit about teaching certain unspoken American classroom

rules, attitudes, and behavior" (Pollock, 2018) and "community and cultural capital in the form of relationships with teachers and staff also are key to immigrant students' success" (Lee & Walsh, 2015).

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) adds an important intrapersonal dimension to the practices at schools because it describes the wealth of assets and skills, which the school leader should be able to demonstrate and build upon as they engage in social justice praxis and develop new skills associated with transformative leadership. Cultural wealth is informed by the culture of newcomer students and their lived experiences; families and students can articulate this wealth to engage in a process of collective transformative agency. This theory illustrates that families and students do not live in a vacuum and are instead unique dynamic products of their histories, cultures, families, and communities. Together with insights available through community cultural wealth and their empowered participation in the process of collective transformative agency, principals learn to use community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge to understand the assets that newcomer students and their families bring and contribute to school culture.

**Culturally Responsive Leadership**

Most newcomer students lack the basic resources for learning and even living. They have endured loss as well as physical and emotional difficulty, and their culture and language usually differ from that of the majority in the host country (Lopez, 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) state that educational reformers have long claimed school leadership is a crucial component to any reform of education, secondary only to the very act of teaching. This same research suggests good teachers will eventually leave schools where

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there are ineffective school leaders, especially in urban educational environments. Principals play a decisive role in ensuring newcomer students' continued education, helping to bridge periods when they missed schooling and assisting them to achieve academic success and social integration (Brooks & Sutherland, 2014; Lopez, 2016; Nolan, 2007). Adopting culturally responsive leadership (CRL) positively influences students' engagement through the development of appropriate organizational policies (Beachum, 2011) that set high standards, empowering diverse and under-resourced students and families (Banks, 2017; Brooks and Sutherland, 2014; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lopez, 2016).

According to this approach, leadership is practiced with ethics of care (Arar, 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Culturally relevant leaders develop a critical consciousness in their teachers and students, identifying and challenging inequities inherent in the larger society.

CRL (Horsford et al., 2011) involves different components: political contexts, pedagogical approaches, personal journeys, and professional commitments. Each of these components will be examined in this study to understand the complex reality in which American elementary school leaders attempt to meet the educational needs of Afghan refugee students in a relatively new form of schooling called a newcomer school. This conceptual framework, in collaboration with the ideas of community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge, guides this investigation of the daily strategies adopted by this educational leader to teach in a reality overshadowed by sociopolitical conflicts and tension (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Lopez, 2016).

The components of CRL in the form of political contexts, pedagogical approaches, personal journeys, and professional duties (Horsford et al., 2011) are reflected in the narratives and experiences of the newcomer students in the newcomer program. The political context poses difficulties considering the host country's systemic discomfort and unfamiliarity with multicultural education. Therefore, neither the policies nor the education workforce was fully ready when the influx of newcomers suddenly arrived in the schools, causing initial difficulties in 2021. Since then, the situation has become clearer. Regardless, policies were still evolving, and the principal had to cope with this in his professional duties (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Johnson, 2006). The schools fulfilled an important human mission, and it seems clear that the staff function is critical within this policy context (Banks, 2017; Waite, 2016). Many decisions are reached in the political echelons, and the principals are expected to implement them in challenging circumstances, engaging the community, students and teachers, and parents (Brooks, 2015). These dilemmas can include different cultural aspects, for instance teachers who lack appropriate inclusive pedagogical training. With the assistance of some support staff, school leaders manage, inspire, negotiate, investigate, and lead various stakeholders within the school community. The staff needs more concrete policy texts and regulations for the particular challenges they face (Theoharis, 2009). The context in this study is for newcomer students and newcomer program school leaders and how their cultural norms affect the lives of the newcomer students and families in the US, how they get involved in the US community, and how policies should be more inclusive.

A school leader's leadership team should be characterized by a strong sense of commitment to official district and government policies and also to humanistic and

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multicultural goals by developing trust between the different teaching staff (Brooks et al., 2007) in a school format of "all together, but each to himself" (division between the two cultures in learning and teaching styles). The schools can provide a warm, accepting environment, offering a hopeful and welcoming second opportunity for the refugees, although work conditions are difficult (Brooks et al., 2017; Brooks & Sutherland, 2014).

According to this approach, leadership is practiced with ethics of care (Arar, 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Culturally relevant leaders develop a critical consciousness in their teachers and students, identifying and challenging inequities inherent in the larger society. They are sensitive to the reality that their students endure as penniless refugees coping with loss and personal tragedy and respond to special needs of staff and students including consideration of their own background and culture (Abaya and Normore, 2014), while noting the strengths and values they bring with them.

The term "culturally responsive teaching," used initially by Geneva Gay (2000), is often used interchangeably with the term "culturally relevant pedagogy." The major difference in the two terms is that culturally relevant pedagogy speaks directly to the experiences of ethnically diverse refugees and other diverse students in the wording of its definition; however, culturally responsive teaching can be generically applied to ethnically diverse cultures. According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning experiences more relevant to and effective for learners. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming.

Despite the importance of community cultural capital to newcomers' success, many schools seem to limit their schooling experiences to the remediation of English language proficiency (Estrada, 2014; Kanno, 2018; Alogali, 2018; Kustati & Al-Azmi, 2018). There remains a significant lack of comprehensive policies that address the structural, economic, and linguistic factors for newcomers to build the necessary cultural capital while in school, which could lead to building post-secondary economic capital and to equal participation in US education (Noguera, 2004; Straubhaar, 2013; Tang, 2015).

**School Leaders' Advocacy for Immigrant Students**

Leadership is not a rank to be achieved; it is a responsibility to see those around us rise (Sinek, 2020). While new organizational structures and new leadership roles matter to instructional innovation, what seems most critical is how leadership practice is undertaken. However, the practice of school leadership needs further research. Supportive relationships with families, peers, teachers, and school leaders are crucial to refugee and immigrant students' academic success. Relationships with school personnel matter to students' academic performance and sense of engagement at school (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Research is limited, but some extant literature shows immigrant students may cultivate relationships primarily with teachers and counselors (Crawford et al., 2017; De Leon, 2005). There is some evidence that when school leaders recognize immigrant students as valued school community members, they support the paths of these students into higher education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). School leaders can facilitate the critical connections among students and school personnel, information, and resources that are essential to an inclusive school environment where diversity in culture, language,

national origin, and legal status are viewed as assets (Crawford et al., 2018). They also can lead their schools and districts by anticipating that newly arrived immigrant students may have experienced trauma and may be emerging English speakers, highly mobile, and adaptive to different cultural and schooling norms (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). According to Spillane et al. (2004), "Where there are good schools there are good leaders, it has been notoriously difficult to construct an account of school leadership, grounded in everyday practice, that goes beyond some generic heuristics for suggested practices" (p. 196). School leaders, in addition to finding ways to support students, need to be aware of hurdles that they must overcome (Crawford et al., 2018).

Various studies (Arnold, 2015; Crawford et al., 2018) demonstrate a keen awareness of how students are nested within larger institutional structures and how social and school policies position students to reinforce and reproduce circumstances that perpetuate their marginalization (Crawford et al., 2018). School leaders readily use the powers of their positional authority (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015) to address the faults school leaders perceive in central office leadership. School leaders also illustrate how they resist reifying marginalizing views of their schools and communities unjust and cross borders by standing against local policies and views that devalue school community members.

According to Arnold (2015), acts of advocacy include taking risks that are meaningful. Meaningful risk will look different from person to person, as will the level of risk a leader is willing to take and whether the risk is small or carries a professional cost. The risks leaders take could result in professional repercussions, but nevertheless, school leaders are committed to seeking equitable outcomes for students.

**Inclusive Leadership**

With an influx of newcomers and the differences in the structure and access to education between different countries, schools receiving newcomer students need to be prepared to be inclusive. Some schools offer programs, called newcomer programs, to support students coming to the US school system from other countries. Many school leaders, particularly the ones offering newcomer programs and ELL classes, should be ready to invest in an inclusive community. Ryan (2006) stated that as diversity becomes more apparent in schools and communities, educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice. Ryan further stated that "the divisions that separate the advantaged from the disadvantaged have also widened" (p. 4). As one of the constellations of approaches to leadership and social justice, inclusive leadership is concerned with inclusion, both in its processes and the ends for which it strives.

The term "inclusive leadership" was initially studied in the Western education domain, and it advocated that people of various ethnic backgrounds and abilities should be educated inclusively (Fang et al., 2019). Edmonson (2006) coined the term "inclusive leadership" defining "leader inclusiveness" as leaders' verbal and behavioral performance to motivate and appreciate employee contribution. Hollander (2012) defined inclusive leadership as a win-win situation for leaders and their colleagues alike with the aim of a mutually beneficial relationship. Hollander emphasized the role of subordinates in this relationship as well as their concept of appropriate leadership. Building on Hollander's leadership concept, Carmeli et al. (2010) developed their notion of inclusive leadership, defined as a "leader's ability to exhibit openness, accessibility, and interaction with followers" (p.34). This approach has been widely adopted in subsequent studies on

inclusive leadership (Choi et al., 2017). Based on this model, inclusive leaders demonstrate that they are individuals with unbiased judgments. They are leaders who manifest this behavior, who learn, support, lead, and motivate their followers in reproducing just systems (Hantula, 2009; Lin, 2018). Inclusive leaders are more apt to show concern for followers' expectations and feelings, leading them to be supportive of their subordinates (Javed et al., 2019). Specifically, inclusive leaders share their visions about organizational infrastructure with employees whose ideas are being implemented. For this reason, employees feel empowered and engaged with their leaders, which leads them to be more responsive in their behavior and demonstrate conduct exceeding their average output (Choi et al., 2017).

Bannay et al. (2020) state, "Inclusive leadership stands for positive interaction with employees" (p. 482). They mark inclusive leadership with three characteristics: openness, accessibility, and availability (Carmeli et al., 2010). These features of inclusive leadership enhance satisfaction, along with expanding knowledge frames and expertise (Banny et al., 2020). Inclusive leadership has significant effects on school organization, the way teachers work, student outcomes and the effectiveness of leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Louis, Leithwood et. al, 2010). Accordingly, educators are motivated to contribute to innovative operations, and inclusive leaders support their participation in decision-making processes, to support "inclusive culture" (Banny et al., 2020). Through active decision-making and contributions, educators and community members willingly support and implement progressive ideas (Louis et. al, 2010). Inclusive leadership enables solid connections and reliable support of educators' and community members' inputs and outputs without depending on individual output.

For school leaders, the crucial point of attention must be the attitudes of the teaching staff, since it is their activities that have a direct consequence on the quality of learning and teaching and on obtaining the best results from students. In schools, the directors are no longer the only leaders; instead, leadership responsibility is shared (Crisol et al., 2020). For the management of the organization, this means that a combination of functions is necessary so that there is a balance between flexibility and control and between its external and internal orientation (Fuente-Anuncibay et al., 2017; Agasisti et al., 2019). They need to formulate policies to fit the environment, to achieve objectives, to integrate people so as to obtain a positive social atmosphere, and to find a balance between authority, order, rationality, and internal coordination in the administration of the organization. In addition to transformative, distributive, and pedagogical leadership, the literature increasingly points to the concept of inclusive leadership (Bowers, 2020; Hallinger, 2018). The role of inclusive leadership refers to the participation and representation of teachers, administrators, the school community, and students (Crisol et al., 2020). Inclusive leadership through collegial leadership focuses on improving the learning conditions of all students, is committed to the values of inclusion, and encourages and supports all processes of reflection and discussion among all members of the school (Boyce & Bowers, 2018).

School leadership is best understood through considering leadership practice in the execution of routines and enactment of tasks; furthermore, leadership practice is distributed in the interactive web of leaders, followers, and the situation (Spillane et al., 2017). As evidenced in Hutchins' (2017) "socio-technical system," the situation also matters because people don't interact directly with one another; their interactions are

made possible by social structure—everyday aspects of the situation that are often taken for granted include, but are not limited to, language, social norms, organizational routines, work procedures, rules, and tools (p. 30).

Scholars and other experts have much to say about leadership and inclusion. However, they are not the only ones who recognize the value of inclusion. Many practitioners—teachers and administrators as well as students, parents, and community members—also promote the idea and practice of inclusive leadership. Nevertheless, unlike many scholars, they are intimately involved in the practice of it. Putting these inclusive practices into place, however, does not come easily; many struggle in their efforts to promote inclusion (Ryan, 2010a). These struggles emerge as members of school communities attempt to promote inclusion in the ways they communicate with others, look critically at their environments, work with their communities, use their political skills to advocate for inclusion, and work to change exclusive structures. Understanding these struggles, however, requires an understanding of the obstacles encountered by advocates of inclusion. Depending on how much inclusive leadership is endorsed across multiple levels of the system, and enacting individual, relational, and organizational dimensions, managerial benefits increase.

**Transformative Leadership for Newcomer Students**

As explained by Shields and Hesbol (2020), "Educational institutions (PreK-20) have been increasingly challenged by shifts in student demographics resulting from a rise of nationalism, strife, displacement, changing legislation, and fiscal exigencies" (p. 4). One of the important tasks that refugee children face when arriving in a host country is adapting to a new school environment. School leaders engage in a variety of activities in

order to prepare school facilities, curriculum, teaching staff, and current students to help

newcomers adjust to a new school life. Because the educational programs and services

that school leadership are engaged in are developed to meet the needs of groups of

students, developing an understanding of the nature of refugee children and their unique

needs is essential before discussing leadership practice for refugee children.

**Figure 1**



Figure 1: Tenets of Transformative Leadership adapted from Shields & Hesbol, 2020

According to Shields and Hesbol (2020), "The eight tenets represented in the

[transformative leadership] model indicate that one begins with a mandate for deep and

equitable change that requires knowing oneself, one's organization, and one's

community" (p. 6). They also emphasize, as part of these efforts, that educators must

change knowledge frameworks to ensure equity, including adapting content to cultures

and languages, eliminating deficit thinking, and tackling racism, xenophobia,

homophobia, and other forms of prejudice (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Principals influence

their staff and students; their perceptions change based on whether or not the staff and

students perceive their leaders' actions as competent (Grobler, 2012) and view their leaders as people who embrace the power of the relationships among the students and adults in the building (O'Malley et al., 2015). Successful leadership requires a leader who can unify, create harmony, and produce concepts. These concepts are essential to this study because they emphasize employing students' cultures to mitigate the negative effects of the dominant culture. Negative effects of the dominant culture include not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in textbooks or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Theoretical Framework and Its Application in this Study**

The framework for this qualitative study is the culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) framework (Khalifa et al., 2016). The CRSL framework identified leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, including students of color and historically marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The CRSL framework emerged from a synthesis of literature on exemplary leadership practices that promote cultural responsiveness for the diversity of students in schools. Khalifa et al. (2016) employed an extensive meta-analysis of scholarly literature published between 1989 and 2014 to find empirical evidence of culturally responsive leadership practices that had a direct effect on school climate, curriculum, policy, pedagogy, and student achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016). The researchers focused on specific leadership behaviors, practices, and school-level policies implemented by practicing principals to be responsive to the educational needs of students of color and marginalized students. Khalifa et al. (2018) indicate that the principalship is the most

recognizable leadership position in a school, and the position most empowered by district, and even state, policy. It is also the one held most accountable for progress or lack thereof. Khalifa et al. (2016) used their findings to develop four themes of the CRSL framework: school administrators who (1) critically self-reflect on their leadership behaviors and practices; (2) develop culturally responsive teachers; (3) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments; and (4) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts.

The first theme of the CRSL framework is critical self-reflection. School administrators reflect on individual behaviors and practices to determine how they demonstrate commitment to cultural responsiveness. Cognitively processing these outcomes helps to assess and measure student inclusiveness and cultural responsiveness concerning school-level policies and practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). Using the first quadrant (refer to Figure 2), school leaders engage in increasing awareness, critical consciousness (Khalifa et al., 2016), and practices that continue school-wide learning of cultural knowledge and use school data and equity audits to eliminate marginalization of groups of students within their schools. In this case, they make evidence-based decisions to promote equity for all students, particularly for newcomer students (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Nadelson et al., 2020; Skrla et al., 2004). When the school leader engages in critical self-reflection, they increase awareness of individual beliefs and practices that affect students' learning environments.

The second quadrant of CRSL focuses on how school leaders develop culturally responsive teachers. This theme is applicable because school leaders practice promoting culturally responsive learning environments by developing teachers' capacities for

culturally responsive pedagogy (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). For this study, culturally responsive pedagogy means the newcomers would have teachers who are aware of and knowledgeable about the newcomer experience and the issues they have faced in their journeys and use that information to inform their pedagogy. School leaders are responsible for supporting and developing the instructional capacity of teachers in ways that improve student achievement and ensure the learning and social-emotional needs of all students are met (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). School leaders develop culturally responsive teachers by providing in-service professional development, as well as opportunities for mentoring and modeling of culturally responsive practices (Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018).

The third quadrant of the CRSL framework focuses on the leadership practices school leaders use to promote a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment. The research-based strategies Khalifa et al. (2016) focus on include how school leaders build relationships with communities (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), model appropriate cultural practices (Khalifa, 2011; Tillman, 2005), and leverage the diversity of students and stakeholders in their schools (Antrop-González, 2011; Khalifa, 2011, 2012; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

The last quadrant of the CRSL framework focuses on how school leaders engage students and parents in the community context. The research Khalifa et al. (2016) conducted about leadership practices indicates that effective school leaders connect and develop not only meaningful but also positive relationships with students, parents, and other stakeholders (Capper et al., 2002; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Johnson, 2006;

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Khalifa, 2012). Furthermore, this theme identifies how school leaders serve as servant

leaders (Alston, 2005; Johnson, 2006), advocates, and social activists concerning the

needs of their school communities (Capper et al., 2002; Khalifa, 2012). The CRSL

framework, shown in Figure 2, provides a detailed description of the framework.

**Figure 2**

| Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors | Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers |
|---|---|
| • Is committed to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006)<br>• Displays a critical consciousness on practice in and out of school; displays self-reflection (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Johnson, 2006)<br>• Uses school data and indicants to measure CRSL (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004)<br>• Uses parent/community voices to measure cultural responsiveness in schools (Ishimaru, 2013; Smyth, 2006)<br>• Challenges Whiteness and hegemonic epistemologies in school (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011)<br>• Using equity audits to measure student inclusiveness, policy, and practice (Skrla et al., 2004)<br>• Leading with courage (Khalifa, 2011; Nee-Benham, Maenette, & Cooper, 1988)<br>• Is a transformative leader for social justice and inclusion (Alston, 2005; Gooden, 2005; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Shields, 2010) | • Developing teacher capacities for cultural responsive pedagogy (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003)<br>• Collaborative walkthroughs (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Creating culturally responsive PD opportunities for teachers (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Voltz et al., 2003)<br>• Using school data to see cultural gaps in achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services (Skrla et al., 2004)<br>• Creating a CRSL team that is charged with constantly finding new ways for teachers to be culturally responsive (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006)<br>• Engaging/reforming the school curriculum to become more culturally responsive (Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002)<br>• Modeling culturally responsive teaching (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Using culturally responsive assessment tools for students (Hopson, 2001; Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Bratton, 2003) |
| **Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment** | **Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts** |
| • Accepting indigenized, local identities (Khalifa, 2010)<br>• Building relationships; reducing anxiety among students (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Modeling CRSL for staff in building interactions (Khalifa, 2011; Tillman, 2005)<br>• Promoting a vision for an inclusive instructional and behavioral practices (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Webb-Johnson, 2006; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007)<br>• If need be, challenging exclusionary policies, teachers, and behaviors (Khalifa, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Acknowledges, values, and uses Indigenous cultural and social capital of students (Khalifa, 2010, 2012)<br>• Uses student voice (Antrop-González, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Using school data to discover and track disparities in academic and disciplinary trends (Skiba et al., 2002; Skrla et al., 2004; Theoharis, 2007) | • Developing meaningful, positive relationships with community (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Walker, 2001)<br>• Is a servant leader, as public intellectual and other roles (Alston, 2005; Gooden, 2005; Johnson, 2006)<br>• Finding overlapping spaces for school and community (Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012)<br>• Serving as advocate and social activist for community-based causes in both the school and neighborhood community (Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Gooden, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa, 2012)<br>• Uses the community as an informative space from which to develop positive understandings of students and families (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006)<br>• Resists deficit images of students and families (Davis, 2002; Flessa, 2009)<br>• Nurturing/caring for others; sharing information (Gooden, 2005; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012)<br>• Connecting directly with students (Gooden, 2005; Khalifa, 2012; Lomotey, 1993) |

*Figure 2: Cultural Responsive School Leadership Framework Khalifa et al. (2016)*

*Note.* Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, produced this framework. The model includes four quadrants of the culturally responsive school leadership framework (CRSL). From *Organization Leadership, Policy, & Development. Reprinted with permission.*

This framework is appropriate for this study because it supports the investigation of why some school administrators and leaders experience challenges in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments, despite the increasing diversity of US public schools. Leadership is a critically important aspect of education and fundamental to school and student success. Scholarly evidence indicates how the beliefs, dispositions, and practices of school administrators influence student learning and contribute to school effectiveness (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020; Young et al., 2017). Leadership frameworks have emerged from empirical evidence of practices that influence student learning. Although there are other leadership frameworks, CRSL fits this study best for several reasons. Based on a meta-analysis that Marzano et al. (2005) conducted on the relationship between specific school leader practices and student achievement, the behaviors and competencies of Leithwood's (2012) Ontario leadership framework have been widely referenced and implemented at both school and district levels to influence positive student outcomes. However, such frameworks focus on instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership principles and do not address the transformative (Shields & Hesbol, 2020) leadership practices regarding cultural backgrounds, norms, and proclivities concerning the educational needs of diverse student populations. Using this framework, this study is important for educational leaders to not only identify issues of teachers' cultural and ethnic biases in the classroom but also to feel comfortable tackling these issues to move toward a more socially just education climate and culture. The growing diversity of American public schools raises the importance of educational leaders and scholars expanding educational leadership

frameworks and principles to include practices and contexts that are responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse groups of public school students. Educational leaders need to embrace and model a culturally relevant approach to school leadership.

**Summary**

Researchers have recently identified a pattern whereby children of immigrants do better at school than children who are native born and raised here in the US, despite cultural differences, unfamiliarity with the educational system, and possible linguistic challenges (Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020). An immigrant student's inability to succeed is a great paradox. In order to overcome this ideology, a principal or a transformative leader must bring unity and harmony and achieve effective results (Weller & Hartley, 2012). By bringing faculty and staff together, developing and communicating a shared vision, and reiterating that vision until others are inspired to accept it, a principal achieves leadership success, allowing students to thrive in the classroom. A transformative leader embraces the power of relationships and community building among the students' families and teachers, can use community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge to inform culturally relevant practices, and change and adapt to different cultural and schooling norms. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of funds of knowledge is that it highlights and values the resources embedded in students, families, and communities, thus countering deficit perspectives.

Being a school leader is different from years past (Brown, 2020; Grobler, 2012). One study highlighted perceived changes in recent years as an increase in administrative demands, a greater emphasis on assessment of performance, and a greater push toward professional learning communities where the principal is leading instructionally (State of

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School Leadership, 2005). School leaders are expected to work based on the unique culture and values within their schools, which means there is a greater emphasis on building relationships with all school stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2000). However, leadership training has not kept up with the changing times (Copland & Honig, 2010; Sheninger, 2019). There is widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes, which requires trained, committed, and highly effective principals (Bush, 2009; Reyes et al., 2012; Tatlah et al., 2014). Leadership encompasses many elements that are often conflicting or discursive (Bruggencate et al., 2012); principals must be able to balance them all.

Although some sociologically and geographically in-depth studies have been conducted on immigration/migration and refugees (Arar et al., 2019), there has been scant attention from the educational research community, particularly about school leaders (Banks, 2017; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waite, 2016). As Arar et al. (2019) note, "The knowledge gap is evident in the field of education writ large and small concerning the dramatic significance of humanitarian crises impacting schools around the world" (p. 4). Immigrant students' education has different stages that are discussed below. Most of the changes at a school flow through the principal. They can facilitate engagement through shared leadership, allowing members of the school community to contribute their experiences, knowledge, and expertise toward improving the school. Community involvement can improve school performance, close the gap in family assistance, and help immigrant students succeed.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

**Introduction**

These first two chapters created the foundation for this study. Newcomers often experience significant adjustments to life in their new communities and schools. A school leader needs to know how their leadership decisions build capacity for newcomer students to have optimal educational outcomes. This chapter discusses the methodology used to answer the research question and achieve the intended purpose of this study. After discussing the research sample, study site, methods of data collection, timeline, data analysis, and credibility and transferability of the study, this chapter closes with a discussion of the researcher's positionality.

**Research Design and Analysis**

This qualitative case study was designed to understand how a newcomer program school leader and their team develop the culture and practices of the school to address the nuanced needs of newcomer students (Yin, 2018). To study the leadership actions and their impact on refugees at one newcomer school in the Rocky Mountain West, I will explain the proposed methodological approach, my positionality in this research and my lived experience, and finally the detailed research design of this case study.

Due to the nature of this study and its research question, a qualitative methodological approach was used. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), qualitative research "is exploratory or descriptive and…stresses the context, setting, and

participants' frames of reference" (p. 54). Merriam (2009) expands on this statement, writing, "All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings" (p. 24). Creswell (2007) calls qualitative research an "interpretive inquiry" (p. 39). Qualitative methods provide local insight and a deeper understanding behind large-scale trends in education. Scholars can utilize qualitative methodology to analyze the dynamics at various policy levels and understand their interactions in ways that quantitative methods cannot capture. The study of second language learners (who are also newcomers in this case) has been described as multilayered, like an onion, with a leader at the center (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Menken & García, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Because of the complex and varied nature of newcomer schools, researchers in this field adopt and adapt theoretical perspectives and methodologies from other areas of study (Hult & Johnson, 2015; Ricento, 2006). These methodological approaches have brought important insight into the field of education, particularly for school leaders at the center of this study's focus, informed by interviews and observations. A qualitative methodological approach accurately and thoroughly represented the thinking and processes used by a leader to address the needs of newcomer students.

The specific qualitative methodology used in this research study is a single case study of the school with several elements that were the school leadership team. Merriam (2009) describes the case study as "intensive holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system" (p. 12). The case study concerns itself "with how and why [and] does not require control over behavioral events . . . [This case study] focuses on

contemporary events" (Merriam, 2009, p. 12). As such, the research sought to explain, describe, and explore the leadership team of the newcomer school under investigation (Yin, 2018)—in this case, the school leadership team that supports newcomer students in a school in the Rocky Mountain West. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for the chosen research topic since it assumes a "single objective reality that can be investigated by following the traditional rules of scientific enquiry and considers context to be an essential part of the case being evaluated" (Yin, 2018, p. 64). Moreover, Yin emphasizes that the case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 14). A case study copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points; therefore, benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulated fashion (Yin, 2018, p. 15).

This case study explores the experiences of a newcomer school leadership team in relation to the research question of contributing and empowering a newcomer program, supporting their diverse academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs. Quantitative or positivist methods cannot accomplish this due to the specific and contextual nature of the research. It requires incredibly detailed description or "richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) data to truly represent and analyze the participants' points of view. Though this research is "non-generalizable" (Omasta & Saldana, 2018, p. 99) due to the contextual nature and the use of a small sample size, these participants' experiences are of critical importance to both the community they represent and the call for adaptation in

American schools and their leaders resulting from the unique contributions of this growing newcomer population.

It was through this method that meaning was made of participants' uniquely contextual experiences. This case examined the newcomer program for students who had arrived in the US in 2021 and 2022, their experiences of schooling and how the newcomer program school leadership team shifted practices to meet their diverse academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs. Some of the newcomer students had not been to school; some might have, but the context of how schooling functions is very different in the US compared to the countries from which they originally came. Therefore, this study examined the practices of one newcomer program school leadership team as well as the newcomer culture of the school.

**Research Question**

The research question is as follows: How does a leadership team of an elementary school with a newcomer program build a school culture that supports the diverse needs of newcomer students? Both the research question and purpose of the study require a clear methodological approach to critically analyze, empower, and truly illustrate the unique essence of the participants including the principal, informed by multiple stakeholders and their experiences with that leadership team.

**Study Site**

School districts in the Rocky Mountain West are not new to the challenges of educating culturally and linguistically diverse populations, including English learners and migrants. According to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), in the 2019–2020 school year, Colorado public schools served 123,248 English learners, which comprised

13.4% of the total student population, although there was a decrease of 3.3% attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 913,223 students enrolled in Colorado public schools, 34% self-identified as Hispanic, 52.9% as White, 4.56% as African American, 3.2% as Asian, and 0.6% as American Indian (Colorado Department of Education, 2021). Although the number of refugee and immigrant students enrolled in Colorado schools was not provided in the data, there was a breakdown by race/ethnicity of students enrolled in bilingual or ESL programs. During the 2016–2017 school year, 88.3% of the students enrolled in bilingual or ESL programs were:

- Native Spanish-speaking students (includes non-English Learners): 32,854 (36.4% of district population)
- English language learners (Early Childhood Education and older): 37,476 (36.3% of DPS population)

To conduct this study, the first step was to identify school sites, which housed many newly arrived refugee and immigrant students or newcomer students. This group was accessible to my research because they recently settled in the United States based on a geopolitical crisis that happened in the 2021 and 2022 school years. I chose a site in the Rocky Mountain West because this was where I lived and where the federal government (CRSP, 2021) was settling many newcomers. There are six newcomer centers in this large metropolitan city; one school was identified as the site and case for this study.

This case study focused on the newcomer elementary school and the case element was the leadership team of a newcomer program for multilingual newcomer students developed at an urban school in the Rocky Mountain West. The multilingual education (MLE) unit of the Wisdom Elementary School [(WES) a pseudonym] provides

newcomer centers to newly arriving students and families in the school district of study. The newcomer center at this school serves multilingual learners (MLLs) who are new to the United States. Students in a newcomer program receive English instruction that focuses on accelerating both English and content proficiency with low student-adult ratios. Most importantly, students do not need to live near the school with the newcomer program to attend.

WES opened more than 10 years ago. It was categorized as a magnet school to serve the newcomer students of this metropolitan city, which is essential support for the academic success of the children (WES, 2022). Oftentimes, as newcomer families change jobs or status, they must relocate once again. For children in a typical school, this would mean a change in schools and a break in their educational continuity. Since this school was founded as a magnet school, regardless of changes in family circumstances, the children are always assured that if they reside within the city, they will not have to change schools. Obviously, this is comforting to children and their families who have already experienced a great deal of traumatic change in their lives. From early childhood education through grade 5, refugee children come to this school from all areas of the school district attendance area. Almost all the children who attend this school are bussed in or utilize some sort of transportation that is facilitated by the school district from as far as 20 miles away. Each morning and each afternoon, over 20 full-sized school buses surround the school to either deliver children or bring them home.

I chose to study the leadership team of one elementary newcomer school because of its high proportion of newly arrived refugees and the willingness of the school leader to participate in the study. This particular site has students from 64 countries other than

the United States. The current demographic identities of students at this study site include Hispanic: 328, White: 77, Black or African-American: 235, Asian: 75, Pacific Islander: 140, American Indian: 4, Multiple Races: 24, and most importantly the Percentage of Minority Students: 89.7%. Many of the children have spent more time in refugee camps than in their home country. Students here speak 65 different home languages and dialects. Many come to the school knowing little or no English. As the average family income is approximately $24,000 per year, over 96% of the students receive free or reduced-price meals (School history website, 2022). Some of the children have not had any formal education; some of the children have had interrupted education. Many of the children struggle with the intricacies of school when they first arrive. Consider how strange an American school must seem to children who never sat at a desk or used indoor plumbing. See Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Table 2: Selected Site Student Demographics 2021-2023*

| Enrollment by Demographics | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) | 669 | 607 | 695 |
| FRL% | 90% | 92% | 93% |
| ELL | 542 | 456 | 462 |
| ELL% | 73% | 69% | 62% |
| SPED | 97 | 77 | 88 |
| SPED% | 13% | 11% | 12% |
| Minority | 653 | 586 | 669 |

| Minority% | 88% | 89% | 89% |

In addition, the student supports offered by this school include:

- Tutoring

- Language Support

  - English as a Second Language (ESL)

  - Transitional Native Language Instruction (TNLI) (students are instructed primarily in Spanish in the early grades]

  - Newcomer Center

- Special Education

  - Mild-Moderate Support

  - Multi-Intensive Center-Based Program

  - Multi-Intensive Autistic Center-Based Program

The figure above shows the Median Growth Percentile (MGP) of the site selected for the study in comparison with the district's other schools' performance for math and literacy scores which are considerably lower than other schools in the district. Median Growth Percentile (MGP) is a measure used in educational assessment to evaluate a student's academic progress over time. It compares a student's growth to that of their academic peers and expresses it as a percentile rank. A median growth percentile of 50 indicates average growth, while scores above 50 suggest above-average progress compared to peers.

**Participant Selection**

To identify the participants (school leadership team) within this elementary school site to interview, I used purposeful sampling. A purposeful sampling technique is a

common approach in qualitative studies. It enables the researcher to select sites or

individuals because they can inform the research question and provide rich details about

the case (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling allows for a selection of participants

based on their anticipated relevance to the study's research questions (Yin, 2016). Patton

(2002) described purposeful sampling as a sampling strategy used in qualitative research

that yields important details about the case based on the individuals and sites selected for

the study. Specifically, I used criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), limiting to a

pool of participants that are part of the newcomer program implementation at school, in

order to capture the decisions of the school leader informed by multiple stakeholders and

their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define criterion sampling as purposeful

sampling based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover or understand the

phenomenon occurring among selected participants.

Furthermore, group exploration of a shared phenomenon may vary in size from

three or four to ten to fifteen individuals (Creswell & Ploth, 2018, p. 124). A sample size

for qualitative research can include one to ten participants because individuals are able to

generate a multitude of ideas and words, resulting in a vast amount of data not requiring a

larger sample size (Boddy, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The purposeful sample for

this study includes seven participants. For this study, I conducted hour-long, semi-

structured interviews with the current principal, the former principal, a social worker, a

community engagement specialist, and one office support team member after I obtained

the participants' consent. I also conducted a second interview with the former principal

because further questions arose after I conducted the first interview.

**Demographics**

Seven participants who met the criteria were invited, and six agreed to participate in this study. I scheduled individual interviews with each of the participants either via a videoconference program (Zoom) or in person. Of the seven participants, one was a former principal of this school who changed roles and was promoted to a higher position in the district. Another participant was the assistant principal, who served as the acting principal when the administrator was promoted and left the school. One was the newcomer teacher leader. The three other participants were site assessment leaders (SALs): the school social worker, the community liaison, and a member of the office support team. All participants were at the K–8 school level and had varying years of school leadership experience, ranging from 2.5 to 18 years, with an average of 3 years of experience. The amount of experience in education ranged from 4 to21 years, with an average of 18 years. Participants included two white men, one white woman, and two women of color. Table 3 shows the demographic breakdown of the sample.

**Table 3**

*Table 3: Participant Roles and Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Role | Gender | Race/Ethnicity |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| James | Principal | Male | White |
| Brooks | Assistant Principal | Male | White |
| Lisa | Lead Teacher | Female | White |
| Maryam | Office Support | Female | Arab |
| Lauren | Community Liaison | Female | Latina |
| McKenzie | Social Worker | Female | White |

**Data Collection**

Collecting qualitative data for educational research involves many different components. Gathering data from a variety of sources is crucial to ensuring a better understanding and analysis of the context (Hess-Biber, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Yin (2018) suggests that a case study must use evidence in a converging manner to define the facts of the case. If evidence from multiple sources coincide, a robust fact is considered to have been established. Yin suggested that "to get such convergence, you must ask the same questions of the different sources of evidence" (p. 233). Per Yin's recommendations, I collected data from different sources to increase the validity of the study. Table 4 provides an overview of the study's methodology, outlining the types of methods employed, the corresponding participants involved in interviews and observations, and the allocated time for each activity.

**Table 4**

*Table 4: Interview and Observation Participants*

| Method | Type | Participants | Time needed |
|--------|------|--------------|-------------|
| **Interviews** | Semi-structured interviews | Former principal, and current assistant principal (interim principal), social worker, office support staff, school psychologist, and community engagement specialist | 1 hour for each interview with each participant  (total of 6–7 hours) |
| **Observation** | Observation | Assistant principal | 2 hours for 2 observations  (total of 4 hours) |

| Method | Type | Participants | Time needed |
|--------|------|--------------|-------------|
| **2nd Interviews** | Semi-structured follow-up interviews | Former principal and assistant principal | 1 hour for each interview with each participant<br><br>(total 2 hours) |
| **Artifacts** | School websites, emails from school to parents, art installation on school building | | 4 hours |

*Semi-structured Interviews*

The main tools for collecting data were semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The purpose of using semi-structured interviews was to allow new ideas to be brought up during the interview because of what the participants say (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on the research question, I believe that the semi-structured interview was an appropriate tool to learn about the experience of an elementary newcomer school principal successfully leading an inclusive learning community for immigrant students. All interviews were conducted in English at a convenient site for the participants. The interviewer asked participants to provide pseudonyms for themselves in the study. From this point on, all data collected from individual members were coded with these pseudonyms. I facilitated each interview if in person or zoom. I recorded audio interviews using a recording device and transcribed the data. The interviews were transcribed within 48 hours (about 2 days) of the interview and coded using the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2018). To analyze the findings of the data collected, I used Zoom for transcription.

I used the semi-structured protocol to interview each participant. Participants included the school's former principal and assistant principal, who also took on the role of interim principal; the school's former principal led this initiative, and the assistant principal has been working in this school for a long time and has all the institutional memory. Since the focus of the study is on leadership practices rather than the effectiveness of the programs or satisfactions of the beneficiaries, this study does not include data directly from the newcomer students or parents/families. However, I conducted two interviews within the newcomer program: the social worker, office support staff (who directly interface with newcomer students and families), a school psychologist, and a community engagement liaison, each of whom engage with newcomer students daily.

### *Observations*

Observations are one of the key methods in qualitative research that adds value to the research for several reasons. Observations allow researchers to immerse themselves in the natural context of the study, providing a firsthand and in-depth understanding of the setting, participants, and interactions. This rich contextual insight is valuable for capturing the nuances and complexities that might not be fully conveyed through other data collection methods. I observed the assistant principal two times at school for an hour each while performing various tasks related to the newcomer program. In an effort to genuinely understand the effectiveness of culturally responsive strategies, it is important to view how principals utilize them. Thus, observing the assistant principal in their natural settings such as interacting with students or engaging with parents was helpful in answering the research question. Direct observations offer a

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unique advantage by uncovering insights that principals might be hesitant to discuss in interviews (Patton, 2015). Moreover, Patton (2015) suggests that observational fieldwork provides an opportunity to notice aspects that may elude principals immersed in their daily operations. Navigating the complexities of culturally diverse school environments entails both challenges and opportunities. Therefore, observing how principals in a newcomer program effectively engage and include students from diverse backgrounds became crucial for understanding the culturally responsive leadership strategies applied. Witnessing principals in their natural setting facilitated the identification of patterns that might have been overlooked during interviews.

### *Artifacts*

Along with field notes and interview transcripts, the artifacts were coded in an initial round using descriptive coding. Here, the term "artifacts" follows the definition of "the programs, procedures and policies designed to shape or reform existing practices in the institutional context" (Halverson, 2003). As part of the study, I analyzed what the leaders were thinking when they designed the artifacts and elicited the lessons they learned along the way. For instance, I observed the art around school buildings, daily school schedules, attendance procedures, the site universal improvement plan (UIP), policies, and emails that were sent to parents to focus on the content of the document (Saldaña, 2016).

## Data Analysis

Observation notes, documents, and artifacts were analyzed and added to the data. Data analysis and data collection happened concurrently. For example, interview one informed how I conducted interview two. This also helped me be more rigorous on data

collection and taking observation notes. At the data analysis stage, the qualitative data from different sources were triangulated through extensive crosschecking to identify any contradictions. The researcher developed initial patterns and themes after manually reading and reviewing the transcripts and findings. I did a manual review of the data to discuss key themes and trends observed. For instance, I highlighted everything that seemed to be relevant or potentially interesting. Then, I uploaded them to NVivo to support coding and locate themes within transcriptions. In later stages of analysis, NVivo software was used to analyze the qualitative data collected through the semi-structured interviews, and the artifacts before entering the qualitative data in NVivo.

Based on the initial reading of the transcripts and the CRSL framework, I designed a coding strategy to capture key themes related to the research questions as well as strategies to readily disaggregate findings. I applied both inductive and deductive coding to the collected data. I utilized an inductive data analysis of themes and codes, as this requires the ability to think about specific raw data and categorize them within deductive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For instance, for inductive codes, I read the interview data and developed the codes based on what I found within the data. As explained above, one codebook derived codes from the data. The second codebook reflected *a priori* deductive codes from the nodes found in the literature review, manual coding, and the cultural responsive school leadership framework (Khalifa, 2016). I coded the artifacts and observation notes with thematic codes emerging from leadership team practices to highlight the main ideas expressed in the materials and to look for insights into leadership practices and major themes reflected in the literature review (Saldaña, 2016).

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NVivo had the capability to "tag" relevant quotes. Quotes were weighted and differentiated using separate tags related to the population groups of interest based on the theoretical framework and literature review. These tags allowed for a more rigorous analysis of the qualitative data.

**Presentation of Results**

Analyzing the qualitative data involved a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the transcripts. Fossey and Crow (2011) suggest that "the case writer should always keep in mind the four essential elements of a good case: context, complexity, ambiguity, and relevance" (p. 4). Herreid (1997) purports that a good case tells a story, focuses on an interest-arousing issue, takes place within the past five years, creates empathy through the central characters, contains quotations, is relevant to the reader, must have pedagogic utility, provokes conflict, forces decisions, has generality, and is short. Fossey and Glover (2006) suggest that many of these characteristics are best accomplished through undisguised cases. The authors further explain how undisguised cases have certain advantages as teaching tools. It gives case writers credibility with their learners as they are also often intrinsically more interesting than disguised cases. They also explain that undisguised cases are much more useful than disguised cases in producing research data for policy analysis.

To better present this case, once the data was collected and transcribed, I listened to each interview and read the transcription multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I engaged in a process of open coding, where I identified and labeled meaningful concepts, ideas, and patterns within the data. This involved systematically reading the transcripts line by line, highlighting significant passages, and assigning

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descriptive codes to capture the essence of the data. Interpreting the data led to cycling

back through the phases of disassembling and reassembling to ensure I presented an

accurate interpretation of the data and to address any discrepant cases that did not support

the emerging themes (Yin, 2016). I closely adhered to the procedures for data collection

and analysis. After I examined all the data, I found no discrepant data.

**Figure 3**



*Figure 3: Hierarchy Chart Extracted from NVivo-Coded Interviews*

I began the analysis process through an inductive approach by compiling raw data

from each participant's interview, observations, and artifacts and looking at the four

dimensions of the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016). In this framework, school

leaders (a) critically self-reflect on leadership behaviors; (b) develop culturally

responsive teachers; (c) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school

environments; and (d) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts

(Khalifa et al., 2016). Using the framework, I categorized each excerpt of raw data

obtained during the seven semi-structured interviews by one of the four dimensions of

CRSL. The following table shows a sample.

**Table 5**

*Table 5: Sample A Priori Coding*

| Participant | Excerpt from interview | Codes based on CRSL Framework |
|---|---|---|
| (Brooks) | "I immersed myself in learning about the culture groups, and some of that is my love of learning and I think some of it is that's the way I needed to be an effective leader." | Promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments |
| (James) | "The major learning always came from just being in the schools and working with families and pushing myself to learn from them and learn about them, and then just model that for the staff." | Develop culturally responsive teachers |
| (Maryam) | "We had a lot of home visits where I was able to sit down with the families and help them." | Engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts |
| (Lauren) | "We're gonna have an international night on May 10, where we want everybody to come and talk about their culture, let us know the food, everything they do. And I think also having them remember that their culture is just as important as every other culture in the United States." | Engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts |
| (Jolene) | "I help with attendance stuff which sometimes comes into play with our newcomer families like making sure they know kind of the laws around attending | Develop culturally responsive teachers |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | school, and like what we can do to support and make sure that they are here every day." | |
| (Lisa) | "I think, recognizing the students' resiliency. That is really important. I see a tendency to want to pity newcomers. Oh, poor newcomers! And I think the difference for me between empathy is like wow! That is incredibly hard. What you're doing, what you've gone through and saying, let me do everything for you" | Promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments |

After completing the open coding, I moved on to the next phase of analysis, which involved grouping the initial codes into higher-level themes used in the analysis. This process, known as axial coding, allowed me to establish connections between the codes and organize them into coherent categories. I examined the relationships between different codes, identified commonalities and variations, and refined the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, I employed various strategies. First, I engaged in constant comparison, where I compared new data to existing codes and themes, revising and refining them as necessary. This iterative process allowed me to ensure consistency and coherence in the coding and thematic development. Additionally, I discussed my interpretations and findings with two of my doctoral cohort peers and sought their feedback to enhance the rigor of the analysis.

Throughout the analysis process, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, biases, and reflections. This reflexivity helped me remain aware of my own perspectives and biases, ensuring that they did not unduly influence the interpretation of

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the data. It is important to note that the analysis process is ongoing and dynamic. As new insights emerged, I revisited earlier transcripts to confirm or refine the codes and themes. This constant movement back and forth between the data and the analysis allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The qualitative data analysis entailed a methodical procedure that encompassed coding, categorization, and interpretation of the transcripts. By engaging in this rigorous analytical process, I was able to derive meaningful and robust findings that will contribute to the understanding of the research question and objectives of this study.

**Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality**

I completed and submitted an IRB application with both University of Denver and Rocky Mountain West School District, as I worked with school leaders and staff in this district. Before participants joined any portion of the study, a written consent form (Appendix C) was given to each and explained. Once the consent form was explained, participants were asked to sign the form, acknowledging that they understand it and agree to participate in the study.

Only the researcher had access to the actual identities of the participants, which are in the strictest confidence. The pseudonyms provided by interviewees were used to identify all information gained from each participant during the research process, presentations, and in any future publications. Audio recordings were held in an external password-protected hard drive for the strictest confidence and locked in a secure file cabinet in the researcher's house. These will be destroyed or deleted after three years. Every form of data was labeled using the pseudonym provided. Additionally, any personal information given by the participant in any recorded and transcribed interview

or other communication was stricken from the transcription and replaced with the appropriate pseudonym. The researcher provided the participants with his phone number, email address, and University of Denver and Rocky Mountain West District IRB (as well as the name, number, and email of the researcher's dissertation adviser) in case they have any questions or concerns about this consent, confidentiality, or the study at any time.

Within the consent form, and at the beginning of every interview, the researcher assured participants that data were confidential to the maximum standard possible. With a goal of engaging diverse participants, the researcher ensured that all qualified participants feel welcomed and were able to participate fully voluntarily in the study. The researcher accommodated all needs to ensure the full participation of every participant in the study. However, reported data may include partially identifiable descriptions of the participants. This was exacerbated by the fact that there were only six participants.

## Credibility and Transferability

This is referred to as the "stability" of the findings" (Chase et al., 2002, p. 523). This researcher met credibility standards by recording and transcribing all interviews with consent given by the participants in advance. Accuracy in these transcriptions was achieved by member checking or having the participant read her/his transcribed interview and correct it for any errors after transcription was completed. Moreover, I used the member-checking technique to ensure accuracy and increase the credibility of the findings. This strategy is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be the most effective strategy for checking and establishing credibility for the study's findings (Creswell, 2014). This allowed the researcher to ensure that "the explanation fits the description" and "the research reflected the experience of the participants…in a believable way"

(Chase et al., 2001, p. 530) while helping the researcher maintain credibility in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore, after analyzing the data, I asked the participants to review the interview transcripts, my interpretations, and the findings of the study to ensure the credibility of the study's findings (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2014). I asked them to check the accuracy of the transcripts and interpretations to ensure the full context of their responses to the interview questions. I also asked them to examine the language I used and provide alternative language if they wish. Stake (1995) stated that the study's participants should play important roles in case study research (as cited in Creswell, 2014). Due to the qualitative nature of this study, an alternative to the traditionalist positive definition of validity was used (Chase et al., 2001). According to Chase et al. (2001), "Reflexivity, open inquiry, and critical analysis of all aspects of inquiry contribute to validity in qualitative research" (p. 531). The key difference between the traditionalist definition of validity and the one used in this study lies in the emphasis on reflexivity, open inquiry, and critical analysis of all aspects of inquiry, as highlighted by Chase et al. (2001).

**Credibility**

Chase et al. (2001) state, "Assuring credibility refers to the conscious effort to establish confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the data…assurance that interpretations are trustworthy and reveal some truth external to the investigator's experience" (p. 530). To do this, it is first important to understand the researcher. The researcher also enhanced the credibility of this study by extensively engaging with participants twice as a group and four times individually for collaboration, interviews,

member checks, coding, and presentations. During this time, the researcher built trust, began to understand the participants' culture, and checked "for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). This allowed the researcher to ensure that "the explanation fits the description" and "the research reflects the experience of the participants…in a believable way" (Chase et al., 2001, p. 530).

**Authenticity**

Authenticity runs deeply throughout this research. This is to ensure that the "portrayal of research…reflects the meaning and experiences that are lived and perceived by the participants" (Chase et al., 2001, p. 530). This study also uses confirmatory member checks to continuously account for authenticity throughout data collection and analysis. Authenticity is not just a surface consideration in this research; it permeates every aspect, ensuring that the portrayal of research accurately mirrors the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. This commitment to authenticity aligns with Chase et al.'s (2001) assertion that the essence of research lies in reflecting the genuine meanings and experiences of those involved. Moreover, the study employs confirmatory member checks as a rigorous method to continually validate the authenticity of the data collected and analyzed. This multifaceted approach underscores the dedication to maintaining authenticity as a guiding principle throughout the research process.

**Criticality**

Criticality determines how well the research shows "evidence of critical appraisal" (Chase et al., 2001, p. 531). According to Creswell (2007), it is imperative that researchers demonstrate criticality by "clarifying research bias from the outset" (p. 208).

This is evidenced in the positionality section of this chapter where the researcher presents an autobiographical portrait using four narratives that analyze his "past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208).

**Integrity**

According to Chase et al. (2001), the standard of integrity is met "if investigators are self-critical and seek integrity at each phase of inquiry" (p. 531). To ensure this, it is important that "researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). This researcher triangulated data using different data sources (Omasta & Saldaña, 2018). These include interviews, observations, document reviews, artifacts, field notes, and memos.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Ely et al. (1991), "Being trustworthy as a qualitative researcher means at the least that the processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people who are studied" (p. 93). In order to establish trustworthiness, I was transparent and reflective throughout my research. One way to ensure reflectivity and transparency is by journaling or writing memos (Jaime, 2005; Patton, 2002). Journaling or writing memos is not an option in qualitative research; it is a requirement (Creswell, 2007). Using journaling, I captured the essence of the interviews before leaving the interviewing environment. I was able to reflect on my own feelings and thoughts that could be referenced during my analysis process. Essentially, journal entries became a form of triangulation and a checkpoint for

ensuring that my voice is not dominating or clouding the data. Additionally, journaling allowed a space for my story in the research without taking away from the focus on the participants (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). Finally, memos provided an additional source of data to assist in the deciphering of interview data, differing between the narrative, the interpretations of the narrative, and the re-telling of the story, all of which were listed by Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) as possible challenges in narrative inquiry.

**Role of the Researcher**

The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about their own voice and perspective. Patton (2002) explains,

> A credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility, the researcher 's focus becomes balance understanding and depicting the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness. (p. 494)

In the spirit of true qualitative research, I attempted here to provide a brief explanation of my voice, perspective, commonalities, and approaches to conducting trustworthy and authentic research. I believe that we live in an ever-changing society that cannot deny the importance of diversity. While we are making strides in educational research to better understand immigrant students and school leaders, I think that we can reach greater heights by expanding our research. One of the examples of expanding our research is to take a pan-ethnic look at our students; therein lies an untouched resource.

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Within the Asian student population at school, some of the student body that has been only moderately studied (Younos, 1998; Yusuf, 2007) is composed of Afghan students. Therefore, I am writing about my lived experience and how it has influenced this research overall.

**Positionality**

Initially, I wondered how Afghan newcomers, who had lived their lives under authoritarian rule, would adjust to a more open, diverse, and democratic society. This consideration led me to question how American educators would address the long-term effects of trauma on Afghan students, whether from civil war, the dangerous journeys of migration, or their adjustments to a new society. The trauma experienced by Afghans mirrors the well-researched issues of burnout and stress among educators worldwide. Consequently, I pondered how educators in the US would cope with the surge of Afghans and the increased stress put upon frontline teachers, administrators, settlement workers, and social workers, particularly in the midst of a global pandemic. Moreover, Bogotch (2020) argues that different racial and ethnic groups have culturally diverse reactions to immigration/migration/asylum-seeking; thus, I questioned how American educators and school administrators would perceive the adjustment and integration of Afghans. On a broader societal level, I also considered whether the experiences and narratives of American educators and school administrators would be helpful in combating xenophobic and Islamophobic stereotypes. While researchers are years away from presenting theoretical models for successful integration, my goal is for this research in the US to serve some useful purpose for American school systems addressing newcomer issues,

potentially contributing to the development of theoretical and pragmatic models for the successful integration of refugees.

I write about my positionality because it shaped my entire research and influenced the choices I made when analyzing the impacts of those experiences on my research (Bucholtz, 2001). Scholars from various fields emphasize the need for qualitative researchers to examine their positionality to address issues of validity (Dodgson, 2019; Milner, 2007; Pillow, 2003). One of the critical aspects of interrogating issues of validity involves self-examination of researcher positionality due to the researcher's "mental definition of the situation" (van Dijk, 2009a, p. 66). This mental definition shapes the meaning of language and texts. Therefore, positionality should encompass an examination of how the researcher's lived experiences impact research questions, data analysis, and results (Milner, 2007; Pillow, 2003).

### *Lived Experience*

Personal reflection on my positionality requires contemplation to identify the cultures I have experienced, my life privileges, and my unseen biases. While identification with certain cultures comes naturally to me given my lived experience (Brunila & Rossi, 2018), observations regarding bias tend to be more difficult. In the interest of providing a robust description of my positionality, including the identification of certain notions of power that influence my personal and professional philosophies, I utilized a social-identity map (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). I am an immigrant, a south Asian man who, along with my family, evacuated from Afghanistan, and I am now living in an urban city in the Rocky Mountain West. I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree from a top-ranked university in Kabul. I hold a Master of Arts degree from a prestigious

American university through a Fulbright scholarship, focused on comparative international education. I am a young, multilingual individual who has had the privilege of working with many international agencies in Afghanistan, and I have spent several years as a doctoral student in the West.

Describing myself, I often talk about my experience of being educated in the West for a graduate degree, which was a privilege through a Fulbright scholarship in the US that is competitive and highly desired not only by many Afghan youth but also by graduate students across the globe. I note the importance of this scholarship since it paved the path for me to be part of various academic and professional experiences in the US and some other parts of the world. Because of this scholarship, I have been able to work in different positions with national and international agencies. As a result of these academic and professional experiences, I now have my family here with me in the US, and my children attend a school so they can study in one of their long-desired education institutions. Thus, after having my own children participating in the education system here in the US, I felt the urge to investigate newcomer education at a deeper level.

I am privileged that I speak the primary language of this country and have a network of people to support me; it was easier for me to use my own navigational capital to advocate for my children. I contacted the school district, registered my children into a newcomer school, and interacted with the school staff to ease the transition for my children. However, the feeling of emptiness about and concern for other Afghan families who are not familiar with the education system, who may not have the same level of support that I have, is with me on a daily basis. Now I question: How does school leadership provide levels of support to other families who might not be familiar with the

system, and how do they pave the path for them and their children to be able to integrate their new lives through a newcomer school?

Finally, my lived experience as an international student and being highly educated in the US has also informed my research. Therefore, my position in the community and my relationship with this school because of my children needs to be examined to ensure the research is authentic and not clouded by my background (Hess-Biber, 2017). The researcher must acknowledge the bias they bring to their work along with the surrounding "ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of ethnographic research" (Marcus, 1998, p. 49). For qualitative research to have value, researchers must be aware of the many internal and external factors that influence research and the lens through which the data is gathered and interpreted.

Moreover, since this case study focuses on a vulnerable population in the world, it is particularly important to pay special attention to protect the identity of the students and the school. The students in this newcomer program come from a place with individual and unique experiences that are both similar to and different from the experiences of my children. While some of the conditions these students potentially encounter in their home country are beyond what any human should experience in their lifetime, projecting pity or deficit views on this population is inappropriate (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro, 2014). Children are strong and resilient and refugee students should be given the same expectations, opportunities, and support as other students in the American public school system.

# Chapter Four: Results

## Overview of Findings

The evidence indicates that the school leadership team, after engaging in several discussions and reaching a consensus, implemented shifts in both school and instructional practices to accommodate the needs and interests of newcomer students. Subsequently, they evolved the school program to effectively address the diverse academic, social-emotional, and cultural needs of the newcomer students. Building on the evidence of the school leadership team's proactive efforts to address the needs of newcomer students, it is evident that their commitment to inclusivity and responsiveness played a pivotal role in reshaping the school's practices. Through ongoing discussions and collaborative decision-making, the leadership team recognized the importance of adapting both school-wide and instructional approaches to better serve the diverse needs and interests of newcomer students. By embracing this mindset, they not only acknowledged the unique challenges faced by newcomer students but also took tangible steps to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. As a result, the school program underwent significant transformations aimed at effectively addressing the academic, social-emotional, and cultural needs of newcomer students, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience for all students.

Transitioning to the themes outlined in this chapter, my findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of leadership and inclusivity within the newcomer school context.

Through in-depth analysis and synthesis of the data, several overarching themes emerged, each shedding light on different aspects of the school's journey toward inclusivity and support for newcomer students. In this chapter, I have grouped my findings into several themes: 1.) importance of diversity in leadership; 2.) inclusive practices designed to enhance the newcomer school's connection to the community; 3.) inclusive practices designed to support and promote individual student success, and 4.) the lack of support from the district.

**Importance of Diversity in Leadership**

The diverse membership of the leadership team had a broad range of personal and professional experience. This team consisted of multiple individuals. However, as I examined the data, it was evident that not every team member contributed to culturally responsive education for every student. Some participants' personal and professional backgrounds contributed and promoted culturally responsive school leadership of the newcomer program more than others. Because of the differences in their professional experiences and philosophies, there were some ideological differences that resulted in disagreement over which changes to implement and how. Here, I examine how diversity on the leadership team was exhibited through the team members' professional backgrounds and experiences and through their ideological differences and how that diversity influenced the changes that were made to the newcomer program at Wisdom elementary.

**Professional Backgrounds and Experience**

School leaders from a variety of professional backgrounds and experiences implement leadership practices, like transformative leadership, and demonstrate

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culturally responsive and empathetic behaviors to promote culturally responsive learning. To honor the culturally responsive school leadership and value the voices and experiences of school leaders, I present the data through a collective lens. The perspectives of all participants interviewed are considered and included in the findings. This approach ensures that the insights and contributions of each participant are acknowledged and that a comprehensive understanding of the collective leadership experience is captured. By highlighting the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants, the study provides indicators of the individual and collective, inclusive and nuanced portrayal of culturally responsive leadership.

Hollowell (2019) highlights the importance of diverse leadership teams in creating inclusive and culturally responsive educational environments. The presence of educators, leaders, teachers, and administrators with different backgrounds and experiences can foster a more empathic and supportive approach to serving newcomer students (Hollowell, 2019). As part of this research, I asked the leadership team to describe their role and background and how they became part of the newcomer program at the study site. Four of the leadership team members' working backgrounds were primarily in schools and neighborhoods that were economically under-resourced and had a diverse student population and English learners. The leadership team had experience serving in different roles, including as teachers, paraprofessionals, and former administrators.

Some of the leadership team members actively interacted with students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including those who were multi-language learners throughout their career. For instance, the school principal (James), the office support staff

(Maryam), and the assistant principal (Brooks) are the leaders who have been in constant communication with the refugee students and their families, those who were new to the country. Brooks said,

> I've been leading at different capacities, both as a dean, assistant principal and interim principal, for the last five and half of the last six school years, and before that I actually worked in a school that had newcomer and refugee students for almost the entire time. I was there. So, I've been working with refugee students for about 18 years.

Similarly, the principal (James) mentioned that he worked as a teacher with many newcomer students, although the district did not have any official newcomer school. He stated,

> I spent many years teaching at [Rose] Elementary, I spent many years teaching at [Rose], which at that time was kind of an unofficial newcomer center because [district] didn't have a newcomer center. So, that was a wonderful time spent there, working with newcomer students and families as a teacher.

> Additionally, Maryam said her experience as a language learner herself involved working in different capacities where she served most of the children who were new to the country and the education system. Maryam said,

> I started working in the cafeteria, preparing food for the kids. Then they hired me as a paraprofessional. Then I got a job as an office support. So, in my role with the newcomers, I help a lot of newcomers because, first I am a multi-language learner myself; I speak three languages or five languages plus my home language.

Another leader, Lisa, echoed that her experience with diverse students encouraged her to work further with newcomer students so she could better serve linguistically diverse students. Lisa mentioned,

> I think that my experience in my previous school as an ELD teacher gave me a lot of leadership experience, which is, I think, why you are hearing now, even though this is my first year here, that I am taking on a leadership role because I really built up, not a newcomer program but a multi-language learners program. At Lehigh (pseudonym), I was also the language content lead.

She further explained that she has a passion to work with students who are learning a different language and a new culture so that she can utilize her expertise to better design a program for them.

> My passion is with kids who are learning a language or learning a culture. They are just the most amazing students. And so, this is where I want to be. And I really am looking forward to making some positive changes in our program based on my experience with building up programs and systems.

All the leaders emphasized the significance of having a diverse leadership group and how their professional and lived experiences can contribute to raising awareness and understanding of cultural responsiveness within the organization. This includes fostering culturally responsive instruction and leadership.

### *Ideological Differences*

These diverse leadership perspectives also presented some challenges, namely in the form of ideological differences, which impacted the types of changes that were made at the newcomer school. For example, James reflected on the fact that two of the leaders

had to advocate for ideas that differed from other team members. These ideas were crucial for the newcomer students, especially concerning how they should approach learning content areas. James explained:

> Brooks and I felt strongly that we wanted to make sure that we were exposing students in our newcomer programs to grade level content, so we weren't doing them a disservice of having them be drastically behind when they exited newcomers and went into the generic education program. That was a big one for us and something that we kind of had to battle with some staff members around their mindset because there was a mindset of, "Oh we you know we're just gonna these students have been through a lot, so we're just gonna focus on teaching them English and supporting them with social emotional needs. But if we if we expose them to grade level content, it'll be too much" and we said, "No, we have to do all of the above." Because these kids are coming to us with assets and certain funds of knowledge and content areas, they might already have been exposed to math or science or different things.

Though this was a huge philosophical push among the diverse team members, some leadership team members had to decide to share it with the diverse team and convince the team of how it was going to be implemented. James summed up the importance of having a diverse leadership team in figuring out how to help build and strengthen the program.

> I've spent the initial period at [Wisdom Elementary] learning about how to work with a team with people with different lenses than myself and who come from

different cultures, and then just working with the team there to see how we could best strengthen the program.

**Inclusive Practices Designed to Improve the School's Connection to the Newcomer Community**

With the current influx of refugees from across the world, educational institutions are facing a very complex challenge of integrating newcomer students into their classrooms (Benediktsson, 2023). It becomes imperative for schools to adapt and cater to the unique needs of newcomer students and the community to which they belong. Instead of merely providing basic language support, a comprehensive approach should be adopted, including not only language acquisition programs but also culturally sensitive counseling services and community engagement initiatives.

School leadership at this case study site showed they had to think and collaborate with many other outside organizations to prioritize the needs of newcomer families. In re-envisioning these mechanisms, the principal emphasized the importance of collaboration between school and community organizations, providing the support needed by newcomer students and their families. James shared that "by forging strong partnerships, schools can tap into a wealth of resources and expertise, ensuring a holistic support system for newcomer students." Being inclusive of the voices of newcomer families and students themselves is crucial. Lauren, the school community liaison, shared that, "Understanding their unique challenges, aspirations, and strengths can guide us to have programs and initiatives that meet the needs of these children." Leadership team interviews revealed that in addition to James and Brooks, other leadership team members were focused on getting the relevant resources such as clothing, food, school bags, and

educational and legal resources for the newcomer families. Even though such staff members as the social worker, community liaison and office staff support, and the external resource center (community hubs) duplicated some efforts, the main goal reported by the participants was to accommodate the needs of the newcomer students and their families, which is further discussed here.

**Re-Imagining the Mission and Vision of the Newcomer School**

One prominent theme uncovered through interviews with the school leadership team revolves around the strategic restructuring of the newcomer center at this site. This restructuring aimed to effectively address the diverse needs of student groups, particularly when the principal assumed leadership. The leaders also revealed that comprehensive efforts to restructure were underway throughout the school, spurred by a history of poor performance. Nevertheless, the primary focus of these initiatives was directed toward enhancing the newcomer program. James elaborated:

> We were also engaging in redesign for the whole school, because the performance
> was really plummeting, so we were doing redesign work on everything for the
> larger elementary and middle school culture school systems, instructional systems,
> and all of these things and newcomers at the same time.

Some of the efforts that the redesigning involved included expansion of the school boundaries, providing more language support, ensuring smaller classes and combining different grades in newcomer classes, transportation services, and getting the resources that many newcomer students and families needed.

As part of school history, Brooks, the assistant principal, shared that because of decreasing enrollment in some neighboring schools, they combined some schools into this

site. When the district was thinking that it should be a refugee-focused school, it was viewed as a controversial idea. However, the leadership team had to think about how to do this better and do lots of work to restructure this site, including realignment of the mission and vision of the school and redesigning the newcomer program.

> The idea was that it was going to be a focus on refugee and immigrant populations to the point that they [the district] actually drew our attendance boundaries into the apartment complexes where most of the refugee families were moving at the time. So, with the partnership of a lot of the nonprofits in the Rocky Mountain West area we drew our attendance boundaries at [this site] to support the home attendance area being the more refugee-heavy areas of Rocky Mountain West.

The leadership team found the program was not functioning as well as they had assumed. Some of the leaders shared their concerns about program design and function, and one of them shared that when he stepped into the newcomer program leadership role, he had to make changes to the program with some of the other leadership team members. James explained:

> When I got there [to the site], the program just wasn't clearly defined. It was in a place where it needed drastic improvement, and Brooks and I, in partnership with some people from multilingual education (MLE), started to look at how we could redefine it.

### *Expanding the Community Served by the Newcomer School*

There has been a lot of discussion with the district trying to expand the school boundaries so that newcomer families could attend this school. The newcomer school is a school within a traditional K–8 school. The newcomer students and communities are a major

focus of the school. The leadership team had focused on the refugee population and asked the district to increase their neighborhood attendance boundaries to include mostly apartment complexes where many refugee families live. Brooks explained that,

> We drew our attendance boundaries at Wisdom Elementary to support the home attendance area being the more refugee-heavy areas of Denver. And so, the weird and unique thing about Wisdom Elementary is that we are still a traditional school, in addition to the newcomer school, but none of our students actually touch our school. Our communities are about two miles away and about four miles away and so that's why that's the case.

**Figure 4**
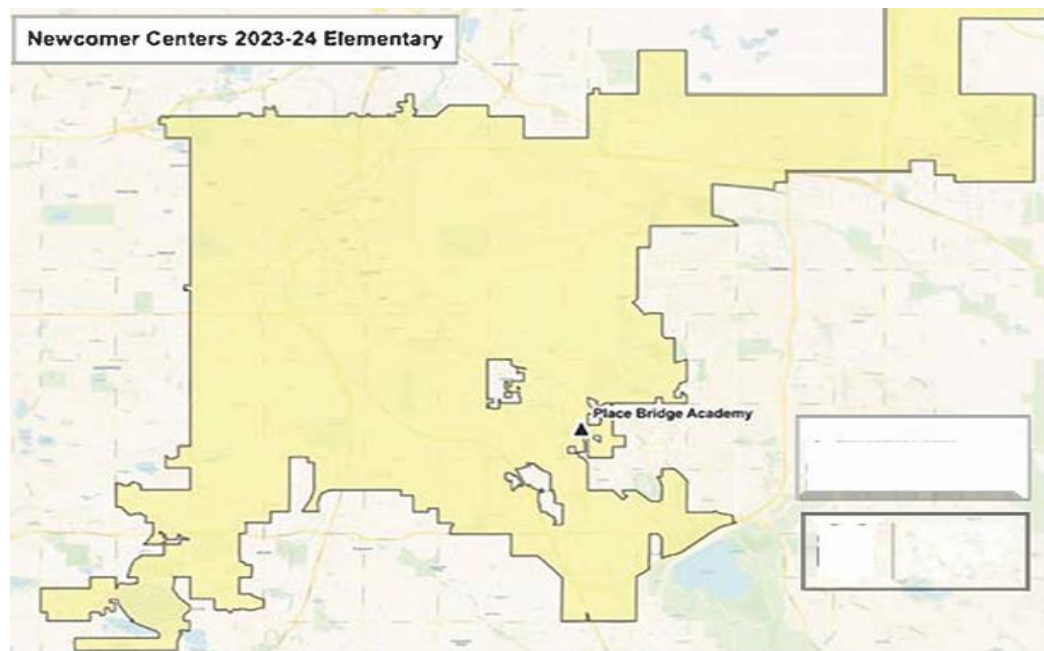


*Figure 4: Attendance Boundary Map for Wisdom Elementary*

Brooks added that another reason to expand the boundaries of the school was to accommodate families who had several children attending different grades at this school.

They expanded the newcomer program to pave the path for newcomer families with multiple students at the same school and make the transition easier for them.

Brooks stated:

> We had a lot of families who would have a kid in fifth grade, seventh grade, and ninth grade, and their kids were going to this site, Adams (pseudonym) Middle School and Evens (pseudonym) High School, and I struggle with that like again going back to advocating for what is best for families, and advocating for taking down the boundaries for families who are experiencing a lot as they move to the country. It makes more sense. If we had a middle school newcomer program as well, we have like 30 newcomers in the middle school this year, and I think some of our newcomer families have kids in multiple grades, I think that that is important in the long term.

James shared that efforts to expand the boundaries as well as the program from elementary to eighth grade was very crucial because when refugees and immigrant families arrive in this county, they could send all their K–8 children to this newcomer program.

> The fact that newcomer families would arrive in Denver and then they would be told, "OK, your elementary school children can come to Wisdom Elementary to receive newcomer services, but your middle school aged kids need to go somewhere else when we already have a middle school at Wisdom Elementary.

The leadership team considered that the expansion of the school boundaries and program from K–5 to K–8 was a very important step to accommodate the needs of the families.

### *Establishing Connections with Community Hubs*

Based on the observations, artifacts, and interview data, community hubs were brought to this site when Wisdom Elementary leadership team members realized that a significant disconnect existed between the school and newcomer families. Several leadership team members shared that every time they saw a parent/guardian or family member, this interaction became related to seeking support. Lauren stated that, "Most of my meetings with families have been about how to provide them the support they needed, whether it is about rental assistance, assistance for electricity, legal support or finding the right place or housing." As a response to this realization, the team has been proactive in creating opportunities and providing resources to strengthen the connection and engagement between schools and families, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. For example, James shared that when he realized the gap, he tried to find resources at the district level to support the newcomer families. He explained that

> We really wanted to have the ability to specifically connect with and support
> newcomer families, not just with the resources that are available, but making sure
> that we had someone who was there to on-board our newcomer families, in a more
> intentional way.

He spoke to the collaborative directors and the district in a concerted effort to bring the community hubs to this school. In his second interview, James shared that, "We brought services to greet newcomer families to help them navigate all of the systems that are associated with the school system of course, to connect them to the resources to just be more intentional with how we bring a family in and be more mindful of their experience." He also explained, "The community hub does a lot of wrap-around services

for our refugee families, providing some food support if they need it. Clothing support if they need it, and then also we have different trainings, English language classes for families." Brooks also added that, "I think that the benefit that the hub will continue to bring is that the hub has wanted to be more involved in the onboarding and support for newcomer families."

Maryam commented on the importance of the community hubs and she said that they are trying to refer more families there.

> We have our community hub. Therefore, anything they need, we refer them to there. So sometimes they need clothes, sometimes they need food, because the food stamp system in process takes too long to get it. So until then, we are helping our community hub helping the families with providing fresh food as well as with housing assistance and other programs they have.

The establishment of community hubs has proven to be pivotal in addressing the diverse and essential needs of newcomer families. James shared that,

> I know there's gonna continue to be a big emphasis on adult education classes that we offer through the Hub to make sure that we're trying to work with our newcomer parents and families to also provide them some opportunities to receive some training and skills that can support them, and then also just wanting to create that ongoing opportunity for them to feel like they're part of the school and part of the community.

These hubs serve as more than just physical spaces; they embody the spirit of inclusion, offering a sense of belonging and support to newcomer students and their families. By providing access to such vital resources as language classes, job training,

food, and clothing, these hubs empower newcomer families to thrive in their adopted communities. In essence, community hubs not only meet immediate needs but also contribute to the long-term social fabric of society, creating stronger, more resilient communities where everyone has the opportunity to succeed and flourish.

**Summary of Theme**

This theme reveals a multifaceted approach by the school leadership team to cater to the diverse needs of newcomer students. The leaders recognized the challenges posed by the current influx of refugees and sought comprehensive solutions beyond basic language support. Through collaborative efforts with external organizations, the team emphasized community engagement and the importance of accommodating the unique needs of newcomer families. This involved a strategic restructuring of the newcomer center and a commitment to reimagining the mission and vision of the school, particularly emphasizing the enhancement of the newcomer program. Additionally, efforts were made to expand the community served by the newcomer school by advocating for larger attendance boundaries, enabling families with multiple students to benefit from the program. Furthermore, the establishment of community hubs emerged as a proactive measure to bridge the gap between the school and newcomer families, providing essential resources and fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

This theme underscores the vital role of the school within the newcomer community, emphasizing community engagement and meeting basic needs. In contrast, next theme focuses on deliberate strategies aimed at ensuring the academic success of newcomer students by prioritizing their individual and familial needs, thereby fostering a supportive environment conducive to learning and growth within the school setting.

While both themes are interconnected, the distinction highlights the nuanced approaches taken to address different dimensions of newcomer student support within the school context.

**Inclusive Practices Designed to Support and Promote Individual Student Success**

High newcomer mobility makes providing effective educational services difficult for ordinary schools (Chang, 2019). This theme Inclusive Practices Designed to Support and Promote Individual Student Success that emerged pertained to their efforts to serve the newcomer community and better accommodate their needs. When newcomers arrive in a country, they are unfamiliar with everything. Figuring out how to enroll in school, managing transportation to and from school, and navigating the education system is not easy. The principal and assistant principal tried to push back on district policies such as school boundaries, getting more transportation, enrollment schedules, and expanding the newcomer program from elementary to middle school at this particular site to better accommodate the needs of newcomer families. The school leaders were successful in this pushback and got the resources needed for the newcomers.

In addition to the leadership team's efforts to address systemic challenges, a key aspect of inclusive practices designed to support and promote individual student success involved personalized support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of newcomer students and families. Recognizing the inherent complexities of navigating a new educational system and adapting to a foreign environment, the school leadership team implemented targeted interventions to facilitate the transition process for newcomer students. These initiatives encompassed comprehensive orientation programs, dedicated support staff, and culturally responsive resources aimed at addressing the academic,

social-emotional, and cultural needs of individual students. By prioritizing personalized support and fostering a welcoming and inclusive school climate, the leadership team demonstrated a commitment to empowering newcomer students to thrive academically and personally within the school community.

**Expanding Enrollment Opportunities**

Starting from registration and enrollment, most schools are designed to accept students only at certain dates and times throughout the academic year. Newcomer students arrive throughout the year, however, without consideration of enrollment deadlines. Newcomer programs must therefore be designed for flexibility and often differ from mainstream schools in class size, curriculum, and teaching style (Chang, 2019). Maryam, the school support staff member, mentioned that they get students at different times of year, no matter if it is the start of the academic year or near the end of it.

> We never say "no" or "we're not taking any of these kids." We're always happy to have them. We show them the school, we show them the classroom, we introduce them to the team, the school leader introduces them to the teachers.

Maryam indicated that some of these children might have been unschooled while in transition or may not have attended school in the countries from which they are escaping. As a result, students are placed in classrooms based on their age, not their educational background.

> The policy of the school district says that we go by the age, we place them in the classroom according to their age, so if we put them in fifth grade the next school year, they would remain in newcomer services, doing newcomer classes because

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they did not finish the whole year. They need to be in the newcomer classroom for the whole year as part of the policy and practice.

One leader shared that orientation was one of the important steps that the school team always valued and made time for so that the newcomer students and families understood the program and the difference between education systems and so that they would know what is expected of them. James explained,

> Families in general just go and register and sometimes they give you a Chromebook and you just go get it done. But with our newcomer families, we want it to be much more hands-on, and most of the time going through the process with them and making sure throughout each step that we were explaining what each process meant for them and why and just make sure we're getting the correct information.

James described that for enrollment (particularly the registration days), they would have a big team and seek support even from the district multilingual education (MLE) department if they didn't have the team members who spoke a particular language. He clarified that,

**Figure 5**



I think it was crucial to have a larger team so we could be more hands-on with families, but then from a linguistic standpoint, as much as possible, have languages represented. That was not always easy because sometimes we did not have a staff member who spoke a language and we were having to rely on MLE to come in and help.
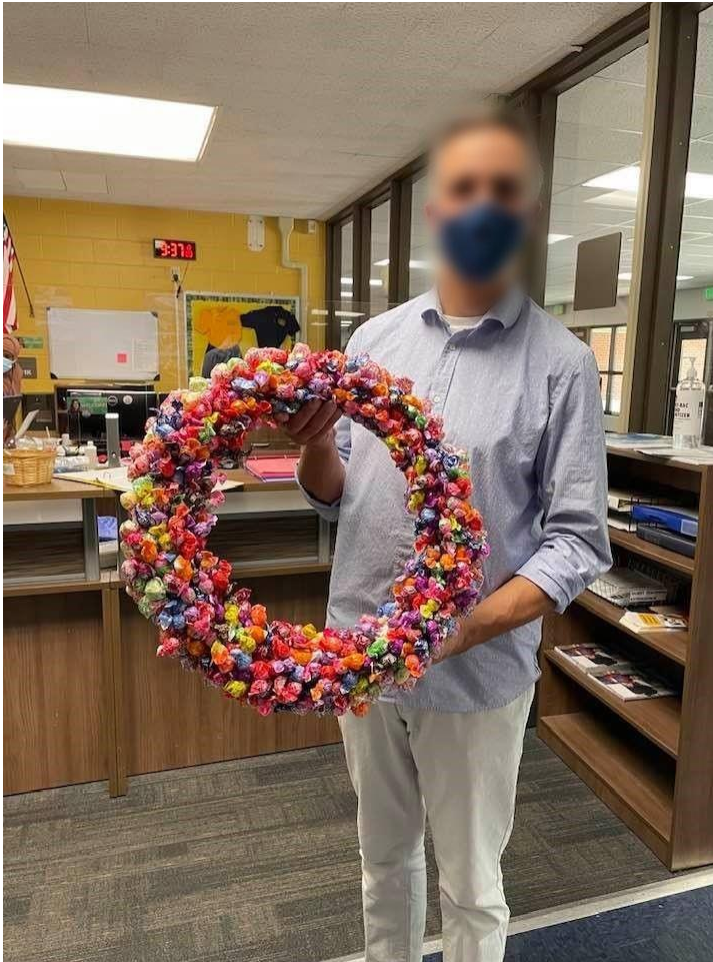
*Figure 5: Principal Welcoming Newcomer Students*

The observation data revealed that James, in welcoming a newcomer family, presented the students with a wreath of lollipops as a gesture to make them feel welcomed. Alongside this warm reception, he introduced the parents to the newcomer homeroom teacher and enlisted the help of Maryam to assist with the registration and paperwork process. James demonstrated a proactive approach to ensuring the smooth integration of newcomer students and their families into the school community. His warm and inclusive demeanor seemed to positively impact the families, fostering a sense of belonging from the outset. Moreover, he encouraged open

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communication, inviting parents to share any concerns or questions they might have about their children's transition into the school. This level of attentiveness and consideration reflects a commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for newcomer students and their families.

**Figure 6**
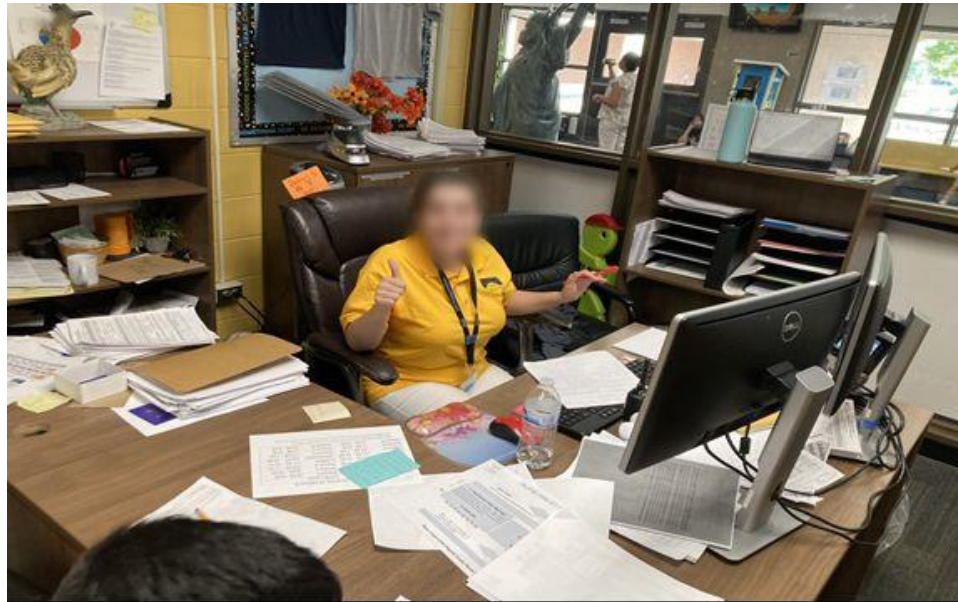


*Figure 6: School Front Desk Supporting Students with transportation first day of school*

**Balancing Learning Outcomes with Students' Social-Emotional Needs**

Some of the leadership team members felt that newcomers' academic outcomes should be a focal point, which was something that not all the participants shared. James mentioned,

Brooks and I felt strongly that we wanted to make sure that we were exposing students in our newcomer programs to grade-level content, so we weren't doing them a disservice of having them be drastically behind when they exited newcomers and went into the general education program.

One of the leadership team members advocated for diverse teaching methods in newcomer classes, including combining students of different grades in a single class, emphasizing the benefits of cultural exchange and community building among newcomers. Lisa thought that teachers should have used various methods inside newcomer classes such as combining different grades in one newcomer class. She shared that they have students from third, fourth, and fifth grade in one class, and they try to teach them all with the help of paraprofessionals. James mentioned, "By bringing students of various ages and backgrounds together, this setup promotes a rich cultural exchange and fosters a sense of community among the newcomers." Lisa further explained that as a newcomer teacher, new children could be accommodated any time during the course of a semester. One technique for doing this is spiraling: certain subject matter may be taught several times during the year, and crucial issues or themes are interwoven throughout the year's curriculum. For example, she explained:

> Take a student who is doing really well, and then pair them with a low language student who is new to the country, and they think that student is just going to learn and teach that one. And I didn't. I had questions whether that was effective. Right. You read about that in academic books that is a way you can do strategies.

From a similar perspective, team member McKenzie suggested that the emphasis in newcomer classes should be on providing services such as trauma support and expediting English language acquisition. In considering this viewpoint, it is noteworthy that the team has established partnerships with the Butterfly Center for infant, child, and family enrichment. This center offers comprehensive and creative arts-based therapeutic

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and educational services, aiming to enhance the overall health and well-being of young children, families, and their support systems.

McKenzie and her focus leaned more toward providing support of different kinds since these students are new to the country and not familiar with anything. She shared:

Actually, you know, getting here to the country, they witnessed violence or things like that. I would say, usually it takes a little bit of time to learn about school what is going on in here and how different it is from where they come. It takes time for them to share with school, but I feel like often they will share it with the teacher or with someone that they know more or see more often. Then, yeah, then, my role is just to offer support. And I know some families are, you know, don't want services or things for different reasons, but just letting families know that we do have a lot of resources at our school, and a lot of support for learning the language, is important.

**Figure 7**

*Figure 7: Multiple Cultures in One Display at Study Site*

While there were many common shared viewpoints and practices that the leadership team had worked on, some of the challenges still prevailed. For instance, while observing how things were going at school, there were many changes to how the school tried to be inclusive of all cultures. The artifacts represented different cultures and a welcoming environment for all students and their families. The school leadership team held multicultural meetings that offered students a space to have a booth, represent their culture, and share food typical of their home country. Similarly, there were other efforts to hire paraprofessionals from the same cultures as the newcomer students. This representation was significant for students because it facilitated a deeper sense of connection, understanding, and trust within the school community. Paraprofessionals from similar language and cultural backgrounds serve as invaluable resources for newcomer students, offering linguistic support, cultural guidance, and empathetic

understanding of their experiences. By having paraprofessionals who share common linguistic and cultural heritage, newcomer students feel more comfortable expressing themselves, seeking help when needed, and engaging actively in the learning process. This enhanced sense of familiarity and rapport fosters a supportive environment where students feel valued, validated, and empowered to succeed academically and socially. Additionally, having paraprofessionals from the same cultural background enables more effective communication between students, families, and school staff, facilitating collaboration and partnership in addressing the diverse needs of newcomer students. Ultimately, the presence of culturally responsive paraprofessionals enriches the educational experience for newcomer students and contributes to their overall sense of belonging and academic achievement.

**Fostering a School Community of Care**

The study revealed another prominent sub-theme the school leadership team should foster a sense of community to cultivate culturally responsive learning environments. This would be achieved through transparent communication and the cultivation of significant connections with all newcomer families. The leadership team members recognized the significance of open communication and meaningful connections with families in order to foster newcomer students' learning further. Some of the leaders provided examples of strategies they applied to establish meaningful bonds with newcomer families, including students, parents, and community members, all aimed at enhancing a culturally responsive learning environment. McKenzie stated that creating parent and teacher meetings with newcomer families was one of the most important things James had done.

I think you know [James] did a good job with starting those parents meetings to

kind of bring in more things, or, you know, sending newsletters …I think, like he

did a good job kind of bringing in different supports and trying to connect families

more with our school and I think [Brooks] will continue that, too.

Maryam suggested that when these meetings happen, they support the students'

social and emotional well-being. Sometimes, children step up to translate for their

parents.

When children see their parents come together, the kids will be very, very happy

when they see the parents together, listening to how his kid improved, how his

kids are doing at school and how smart they are. I noticed, like the Afghan kids

are very, very smart, that I have never seen in kids before. They are very

responsible. Can you imagine that they can translate for their parents after one

year, being in school, which is like they are picking up very, very fast.

James pointed out that "When the parents/guardians and families come to school, they see

the diverse staff and people smiling at them. They are warm to them; this makes the

families feel welcomed and gives them a sense of belonging." He went on to say, I think

it speaks to the complexity of the work. Because and what the most beautiful thing about

Wisdom Elementary is that there's 40 plus languages spoken and folks from all over the

world that also makes it a challenge because you have to dig deep to understand the

nuance there, and certain cultures like you just pointed out, they all value education. We

wanna start right there so that you know there's an asset-based approach to families and

students, and how they view education.

**Figure 8**

*Figure 8: Interpretation services provided at a Parents meeting at newcomer program*

In addition, the observation data show that when the school leadership wanted to talk to parents in a parent-teacher conference, they had more than 12 language interpreters available onsite (see Figure 9) so that they could accommodate all the needs of the families and be inclusive of the diverse community's linguistic and cultural needs. Lauren mentioned that they try to communicate with the families ahead of time to determine whether they need translation services for the meeting day. She shared that,

Just reaching out basically electronically, we do send paper forms home. But you had mentioned our parent meeting. Mr. Brooks was adamant about it, and I had talked about how we're going to do it, and what's the best way to reach out to our communities. We have interpreters and we sent an email out. We said, "Hey, if we were to have a parent meeting, let us know what languages you would need interpreters for." We got that, and that is how I was able to get which interpreters.

I needed those certain languages. We know that there is other languages, but what
we want to do is what we hear and use feedback from the community.

Based on the examined policy documents, the school is supposed to send the email
in the preferred language of families who are registered in the system. I learned that the
school only sent emails in English, which could account for why some of the families
were unable to participate in the parent advisory committee (PAC) meeting and share the
information or feedback they were supposed to get from school. The policy is as follows:

> [Wisdom Elementary] provides parents with information around school
> programming through a minimum of PAC meetings where information is shared
> around curricular changes, connecting families to teachers, connecting with
> families, and information about how the school is working, monitoring, and
> guiding students in instruction and assessments. Each year, Wisdom Elementary
> solicits feedback from parents around the PAC meetings to gain an understanding
> of what parents wish to know more about and how to continuously improve parent
> communication. (School Universal Improvement Plan, 2022)

On the other hand, in the meeting I observed, Brooks asked all the participants to
specify what form of communication they like and how to communicate school updates to
inform the families of newcomers.

One of the big changes in practice that the leadership team tried to make was
based on the needs of newcomer students, including making time for Muslim students
who observe Ramadan. The principal provided examples of how they had to
accommodate prayer time for students and staff at school, while some of the students
were fasting during the month of Ramadan. School staff led students' prayer times and
managed to provide space for students where they could pray. They had also contacted
families as part of community engagement to ask if their students were fasting and
whether they needed special accommodations while they were attending school.

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In conclusion, the community of care in newcomer schools exemplifies the importance of inclusive and compassionate leadership. By trying to accommodate the needs of newcomer families, such as making provisions for students and teachers who observe fasting during Ramadan, these schools promote a sense of belonging and understanding while fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated. Such initiatives demonstrate that the leadership listens to the unique needs of the community members and actively works to create an environment where everyone feels valued and supported.

**Summary of Theme**

As explained in the first quadrant of the CRSL framework, some of the leadership members showed a critical consciousness in their practices. For instance, while the experiences of multiple participants had lots of similarities, one participant's insights were quite different than the rest of the newcomer leadership team. The teacher who was more involved with the newcomer students had a slightly different experience with students who had faced severe trauma and challenges while staying in refugee and military camps. Some members of the leadership team generally viewed the progress and integration of newcomer students positively, although it was not clear based on what evidence. However, one teacher emphasized the unique needs and challenges faced by students with severe trauma or significant English language difficulties. The teacher also highlighted the importance of general assessments to evaluate students' grade-level knowledge and addressed their diverse needs in subjects like math and literacy. These needs often differed from what students had learned in their home country schools, if they attended school there (if they were in school). For example, Lisa's responses

highlight notable differences in the evaluation process of students, where tools like I-Ready are used to identify academic gaps but completely overlook students' social and emotional needs, as well as the behavioral patterns of newcomer students. Despite this, she does seek assistance from the counseling team. However, her main concern lies in trauma-related programs that could provide essential insights into her students' situations. Similarly, McKenzie, the social worker, shared the same concern and stated that trauma is one of the major issues she has experienced with many students and families.

**Lack of Support from the School District and School leadership Team Tension**

One of the other major themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data from various leaders at this newcomer site was the tension they felt with the district. Although the participants never called it tension, it was consistently obvious from the conversations. James mentioned that he would not call it "tension," but it was butting heads with multilingual education (MLE) or the district. He felt he was just trying to figure things out and when the district didn't always have the answers, he just had to figure it out himself.

> I don't know if it was just a tension; it was just frustrating. We were asking for them to come in and help us with the design of that small group model and give, you know, bring resources in and connect us with. Newcomer centers out there that might be doing this very well. And, and I feel bad saying this, but between you and me, there wasn't a lot of help on that front. It was. I think the desire was there to help, but they didn't always have all the answers.

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In addition, he pointed out that the MLE department in the district (that oversees the newcomer program) has had a vacant position for the newcomer program specialist for a long time.

> We heard she's not there anymore, like when we had a newcomer specialist when I first started. And I didn't always feel like she was able to help that much with some of the questions we were asking. Because it was a hard thing to solve and it's an ongoing journey, especially when we asked about best practices when we had third, fourth, and fifth grade in one room.

Brooks emphasized that this was a struggle for the team. Because they didn't have the support for program empowerment, they needed the expertise of the district newcomer specialist at the time.

> It was a struggle for me as a leader, who had this vision for newcomers and wanted to do right by the newcomer students, but I've never been a newcomer teacher and I had never done what I was asking the teachers to do. For me, that was part of the struggle, and I needed to get some folks in here that have the experience, that have the knowledge to do this and can help us strengthen the model.

One area of tension with the district, described by most of the leaders interviewed, stemmed from professional development. James, Brooks, and Lisa mentioned that they had received some professional development, which was mostly Culturally Responsive Education (basically a four-hour course); however, there was nothing particular to the newcomer program, and none of these were required. One of the leaders mentioned

Teachers are experiencing that the district is pushing for equity and pushing for being culturally and linguistically sustaining, but not enough support is provided in how to do that, like pedagogical approaches or suggestions like a toolbox or instructional materials and resources that could help them.

This became evident from the school universal improvement plan (UIP) as part of the artifacts. Brooks mentioned that as part of the UIP, the school is required to have CRE written in the UIP. It states,

> "Growth mindset and practice will be the foundation of the work done in every aspect of our environment. Improve school culture through equitable teaching and grading policies while supporting academic progress through whole child supports as measured through academic achievement, behavior, and engagement" (UIP, 2022).

However, in practice, the district does not provide many resources. Brooks shared that as a newcomer program, they see evidence of growing refugee families; however, the district has not offered them any support related to that growth. He shared,

> We're starting to see a lot of, you know, a lot of Guatemalan families who have been seeking asylum. They've started living here, and that means that's going to grow, because we know that when a community puts roots, they're going to continue to expand. And I think that's a good thing. So inform that school and then have a one-pager around. Here are some cultural things to pay attention to. Here are some dos and don'ts. I think that would be helpful, and I think that is what the training staff would want, like, I know, it's a little bit individualized by a school level. But then maybe you just make it on like, I don't want to typecast, but like, here's a video on, like, you know, here's a way to approach your Congolese families, right.

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Lauren, the community liaison, also brought attention to the growing number of newcomer families in the community and the district's failure to provide adequate support. As the number of refugee families seeking asylum increases, there is a pressing need for culturally sensitive guidance on engaging with these newcomers and their families. She suggested that a one-pager or video resources on cultural sensitivities and effective communication could be immensely beneficial for school staff. This gap between the district's aspirations for equity and the actual support provided on the ground has added to the tension experienced by educators and school leaders at this newcomer school. Addressing this issue is crucial for the school district to align its educational goals with practical strategies and resources that can benefit its diverse student body. The lack of comprehensive professional development programs tailored to the unique needs of the newcomer program has been a significant point of tension, as well.

**Chapter Summary**

This study's findings shed light on the comprehensive restructuring efforts undertaken by the school leadership team to enhance the effectiveness of the newcomer program. The team, comprising diverse members with extensive experience in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, focused on redesigning the program to cater to the nuanced needs of refugee and immigrant populations. Their initiatives included redefining the program's mission and vision, expanding school boundaries, providing language support, and creating inclusive classroom environments. The leadership team emphasized the importance of exposing students to grade-level content while also addressing their social and emotional needs. The team made focused efforts to

create an inclusive school climate, accommodating diverse cultural practices such as prayer times during Ramadan and fostering strong connections with newcomer families. Despite their commendable efforts, challenges persisted, particularly in staff hiring and training, as they grappled with the complexities of finding candidates with both language proficiency and teaching expertise. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive leadership and the necessity for continuous efforts to create an engaging and inclusive school environment for all students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the essential need for specialized professional development tailored to the unique requirements of newcomer school leaders and educators. The study revealed a lack of district-led training specifically focused on the challenges faced by newcomer programs, indicated by limited and unrelated current professional development offerings. Despite this deficiency, the participants, including James, Brooks, Maryam, Lauren, and Lisa, demonstrated a strong commitment to self-directed learning. They engaged in self-education through their lived experiences, interactions with diverse students, reading materials, and research case studies. The participants emphasized the importance of continuous learning, acknowledging the complexities of working with culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse student populations. Furthermore, the study underscored the importance of having diverse staff within newcomer programs, aligned with the participants' emphasis on hiring individuals who reflect the cultures and languages of the students they serve. While challenges persist in accessing relevant professional development, the commitment and resourcefulness of the school leaders and educators played a pivotal role in fostering

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culturally responsive learning environments in newcomer programs. The study's findings

highlight the need for educational institutions and districts to identify and recognize the

gaps in professional development and invest in targeted training to empower and equip

newcomer school leaders with the necessary tools to support their diverse student

populations effectively.

**Chapter Five: Discussion, Implication and Recommendations**

In this final chapter, I discuss findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications for future research. I also situate research findings within relevant literature and offer critical takeaways for elevating the voices of newcomer students and leadership and sustaining policy-change momentum in how the newcomer programs function and support the needs of the newcomer students.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the role of an elementary school leadership team, whose school has a newcomer program, in the success of newcomer students and requisite changes in school practices. School leaders have an impact on newcomer students and their families beyond education. Therefore, it is critical for school leaders, particularly of schools with newcomer programs, to consider how immigration and being a newcomer uniquely affect students. With this goal in mind, the present chapter discusses the study findings aimed at answering the research question: How does the leadership team of an elementary school with a newcomer program build a school culture that supports the diverse needs of newcomer students?

**Discussion of Findings**

After engaging in iterative and recursive cycles of data analysis (Yin, 2016), I identified four major themes based on the codes, patterns, and categories found in the data (Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt,1992). In the following sections, I discuss my interpretation of the identified themes.

**Theme 1:**

**Discussion**

The work of school leaders at any given point in time is shaped by the culture of the school. Effective school leaders understand the impact of culture on their leadership practices and work intentionally to shape a positive and inclusive school culture (Setiyaningtiyas & Hartutik, 2022). Several scholars highlighted the need to create school environments that are supportive and accepting and that promote inclusion and equity, including understanding and consideration of diverse cultures (Choi et al., 2018; Cook, 2023). The first theme identified in this study was that the school leadership made changes or restructured the newcomer program as part of the larger school routine to promote a culturally responsive learning environment by realigning the school mission and vision with the needs of newcomer students and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors. The CRSL framework, the conceptual framework for this study, supports the leadership practices that the team deemed necessary for promoting culturally responsive learning environments. Two of the four themes of the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) addressed school administrators who (a) develop culturally responsive teachers and (b) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments.

Pastoor (2016) emphasizes the importance of a whole-school approach to refugee education, which includes education policy, school structures, classroom practice, curricula, pedagogy, and teaching materials, as well as cultural awareness and refugee competence. School leaders can lead the development of school-wide practices and procedures that foster a sense of equity, inclusion, and belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020). Nadelson et al.

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(2020) found that school leaders foster a climate and culture of inclusion for all students by having a clear vision and mission and practicing the behaviors that promote cultural responsiveness. Similarly, other research emphasizes the role of the school leaders and teachers in refugee education (Arar et al., 2020; Koyama & Kasper, 2020), as they are the social actors who encounter refugee children early on at school. The school leaders can support refugee education by enhancing teacher agency to support refugee students and the staff who work with them (Rose, 2019). The findings suggest that by restructuring the program and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors, school administrators promote a culturally responsive learning environment for all students.

The efforts of restructuring the newcomer program to promote a culturally responsive learning environment had far-reaching benefits that extended beyond academic achievements. It created a nurturing space where empathy, understanding, and acceptance abound. When the team integrated these values into the school's mission and vision, the leadership team laid the foundation for a harmonious and enriching educational experience, empowering the newcomer students to succeed academically and personally while preparing them for the challenges and opportunities of an interconnected community. The findings in the study align with the prior literature Guo-Brennan et al., (2019) which emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments to facilitate the academic and personal success of newcomer students. This alignment reinforces the significance of the leadership team's efforts in promoting an inclusive and empowering educational experience for all students, regardless of their background or circumstances.

As the interviews and observation data showed, the leadership team in this school geared the newcomer restructuring efforts toward the needs of newcomer students by developing a diverse leadership team with various backgrounds and experiences. This effort was made to create a welcoming environment for newcomer families who may not have expected that there would be someone who would know their culture or probably the language they spoke. Most of the leadership team formerly worked with students from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as students who spoke languages other than English, and some had been through multilingual learner programs. This effort of the leadership team made it easier for the newcomer students to feel comfortable and not feel different because of their language or culture. These factors created a more inclusive atmosphere where newcomer students and families felt valued and understood, promoting their overall well-being and academic engagement.

At the same time, school leaders should also consider addressing the sociocultural contexts and structural obstacles that newcomer students face in US schools, as well as providing necessary support for special education services. By doing so, schools can create positive learning spaces that support the unique needs of immigrant students. In the current situation, where an influx of refugees is coming to new countries, it is important to change how we help them learn (Bruch et al., 2016). Making sure the program allows for the celebration of diversity, the fostering of empathy and understanding, and the creation of an inclusive space where all students can thrive is crucial (DeRiviere, 2019). This kind of program helps everyone appreciate differences, understand each other better, and makes a place where all students can do well. As DeRivere (2019) states, implementing a culturally responsive newcomer program has shown to positively affect

academic achievement for historically underrepresented groups of students. Moreover, by introducing culturally responsive practices into the newcomer program, educators can ensure that students from diverse backgrounds feel seen, heard, and valued in the classroom.

Dewitt (2016) indicated that many school leaders rely on instructional and transformational leadership but that a more holistic approach is necessary to make changes and incorporate all stakeholders. Therefore, at this site, as found in the sub-theme of restructuring, there was a shift in the staffing process. The school leadership team recruited staff members from different paths who had gone through various experiences that might resonate with some of the newcomer students' experiences. The literature also emphasized the role leadership plays in the shaping of school climate as well as an understanding for which leadership style is most conducive for helping change occur (Martin, 2009). At this site, the school leader chose to have a collective leadership team with multiple voices from different cultures that paved the path for more inclusiveness at the newcomer program.

**Theme 2: Discussion**

The findings from the interviews underscore the critical need for specialized professional development initiatives tailored to the unique challenges that leaders of newcomers face. Empowering these leaders through effective training and capacity-building initiatives is paramount for fostering inclusivity and enhancing teaching practices within newcomer programs (Saunders et al., 2021). Without effective professional development, newcomer school leaders may struggle to understand and meet the specific needs of their students. The absence of specialized training programs

specifically designed for newcomers is a significant gap, as revealed by the participants. They expressed the need for ongoing professional development opportunities for all staff, including school leaders, teachers, and administrators, to ensure the acquisition and implementation of knowledge and skills essential for promoting culturally responsive learning environments.

Cena et al. (2021), explain that newcomer students typically face substantial language barriers, social isolation, and difficulty understanding and adjusting to new teaching styles and academic expectations. In response, specialized professional development programs should provide newcomer school leaders with strategies to support students in overcoming these challenges. These professional development programs should focus on equipping newcomer school leaders and their teams with the necessary knowledge and skills to address language barriers, social isolation, and other challenges faced by newcomer students. These programs should also address the need for culturally responsive teaching practices and strategies for creating inclusive and welcoming classroom environments.

District reform efforts often include the establishment of new school-based, teacher-leader positions to work with principals and district consultants to provide professional development assistance (Anub, 2020). Furthermore, professional development initiatives should not only focus on the knowledge and skills needed to support newcomer students but also on leadership and change management skills specific to working with newcomer students. To effectively lead and navigate the complexities of serving newcomer students, school leaders must understand the unique needs and experiences of these students and their families. Specifically, professional development

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initiatives should foster new meanings about diversity and inclusion to create an inclusive school environment where people who came from different bitter experiences of life as refugees feel a sense of belonging.

Professional development is a key factor in any program because to promote social justice and equity in schools with a large newcomer student population, school principals and administrators must take on four tasks (Hur, 2022): fostering new meanings about diversity and inclusion, creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment, promoting inclusive and culturally responsive programs and teaching, and building relationships with newcomers' families and other community stakeholders. Participants emphasized the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives and learning from dynamic speakers who can provide practical strategies for working with students from various cultural backgrounds. Based on prior research and participants' comments in interviews conducted recommendations for creating professional development for working with newcomer students. Study participants highlighted the value of real-life examples and situations that reflect cultural responsiveness, urging for professional development programs that delve into these practical aspects. Furthermore, participants stressed the significance of creating a supportive network among newcomer school leaders, both within and beyond their district, to share experiences and best practices. Professional development programs should also emphasize the importance of distributed leadership and inclusive decision-making processes (Hickey et al., 2022). Ongoing professional development opportunities and support should be provided to all staff, including school leaders, teachers, and administrators, to ensure the acquisition and implementation of knowledge and skills essential for promoting culturally responsive

learning environments. Professional development programs should provide newcomer school leaders with strategies to support students in overcoming these challenges and address the need for culturally responsive teaching practices. It is important to enhance understanding of the unique needs and experiences of newcomer students and their families to better support their academic and socio-emotional well-being.

The absence of a designated district-level staff member for newcomer programs further compounded the issue of a lack of support when needed, leaving leaders to navigate challenges on their own. Despite this, some proactive leaders sought external assistance; for example, James and Brooks reached out to leaders of newcomer programs in other states to learn from what they have done to enhance their newcomer program. They tried to learn from their experiences and practice some of what the other states had tried and thought were helpful for their newcomer students as they adjust to US schools. These initiatives highlighted the determination of these leaders, emphasizing the potential of a collaborative, nationwide newcomer school network to foster mutual learning and support. However, this also illustrates the lack of support from the district, where no particular attention was given to the newcomer program beyond the culturally responsive education (CRE) training that was provided to all school officials and teachers.

This study also underscores the transformative power of continuous engagement with diverse students, indicating that experiential learning played a significant role in shaping cultural competence. However, this practical knowledge, while invaluable, was not a substitute for structured, targeted professional development. Effective school leaders, as the findings suggest, require a combination of hands-on experience and specialized training to bridge cultural gaps, promote inclusivity, and enhance teaching

practices within newcomer programs. The study underscores the urgent need for educational institutions and districts to recognize these challenges and invest in comprehensive, tailored professional development initiatives to empower school leaders so they can effectively implement newcomer practices that will enhance students' learning.

**Theme 3: Discussion**

Reimagining support systems for newcomer students and their families is crucial in response to the global influx. Both students and families endeavor to adjust and integrate into the communities where they settle. Ayoub and Zhou (2022) emphasize the importance of understanding how newcomer students navigate their identity and forge connections with others. According to Kim and Diaz (2013), newcomers often grapple with self-discovery and determining their aspirations for the future.

Migrant children commonly encounter a cultural divide between their school life, representing their primary exposure to the host culture, and family life, which reflects the culture of their home country (Chartonas & Bose, 2015). As Lauren and Lisa shared in their interviews, the adaptation process brings forth significant challenges, with anxiety stemming from meeting the expectations of new teachers and adjusting to a different school environment. Additionally, establishing friendships becomes a crucial aspect, especially when mastering an unfamiliar language (Hamilton, 2013a). Their friendships and social connections play a significant role during this confusing time, particularly at school. Most of the time, newcomers do not have a community of their own, and they really want to be a part of a society and connect with others who share similar backgrounds and experiences.

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School and, most importantly, the relationships formed within the school setting can serve as incredibly stabilizing, positive, and nurturing experiences in the lives of children or students, aiding them in overcoming challenging times (UNHCR, 2019). For refugee students, adapting to the expectations and culture of formal education is a formidable task (Ferfolja et al., 2010). This challenge is particularly daunting, considering that many may have been away from educational environments during their time in refugee camps or while traveling globally to reach the destination where they are offered a safe haven.

Consequently, newcomer students—in addition to adapting to their new environment, schools, teachers, and current students—require support systems to facilitate this transition. It is imperative for school leaders and their teams to understand the most effective ways to prepare teachers to meet the needs of newcomers and to establish support systems that cater to those needs (Hamilton, 2003). As Bourgonje (2010) highlights, schools bear the responsibility of promoting community cohesion through positive and encouraging policies implemented by school leaders, fostering the integration of newcomers into both society and the school. Moreover, achieving the integration of schools, teachers, students, and society with newcomers is a significant and attainable goal.

Supporting newcomer students and their families, especially refugees, is a crucial aspect of creating inclusive and equitable education systems. The newcomer students and families face unique challenges including language barriers, trauma from their experiences, limited access to healthcare, housing, being new in a different environment around different people, and many more aspects of life (Patterson, 2022). As soon as the

newcomer arrives in a new place they settle in, school, in most cases, is the first place

they feel a sense of belonging. To be able to facilitate such a sense of belonging, the

leadership team at this site provided care and a supportive environment for all students.

Throughout the study, based on interviews and observations, the leaders at this

school have consistently endeavored to cultivate a welcoming environment for newcomer

students, aiming to enhance their learning experience. Newcomer students find

themselves in a unique position as they navigate a developmental period characterized by

experimentation and exploration. This phase involves integrating into a new schooling

system while simultaneously grappling with the need to reorganize their identity and

sense of self due to migration (Walsh et al., 2005).

To effectively address these challenges and ensure that newcomer students

receive the necessary support, the implementation of key interventions and policies is

crucial through collaboration between school districts and government agencies.

According to Reynolds and Bacon (2018), newcomer programs within schools are often

the primary resource-seeking avenue for newcomer families. Consequently, the

leadership of the newcomer school must have access to a diverse array of resources that

cater to the specific needs of newcomer families.

To integrate these students effectively, the school leadership team needs a

comprehensive approach that goes beyond basic language support. This approach

includes culturally sensitive counseling, community engagement, and collaboration with

external resettlement organizations, healthcare, legal support and changing aspects of

schooling that might not be normal. Both James and Brooks emphasized the importance

of partnerships with community organizations, understanding the unique challenges of

newcomer families, and hearing their needs and involving them in the decision-making process. By fostering these connections, this site leadership tapped into valuable resources and expertise, ensuring a holistic support system for newcomer students that is further explained.

One major challenge schools face is the high mobility of newcomer families arriving in a new country. These families often come throughout the academic year, posing difficulties for traditional enrollment procedures. James and Maryam's interviews highlighted this challenge, emphasizing the need to adjust the practices and policies to accommodate newcomer students at any time they arrive and wish to enroll in the program. In addition, flexibility in class size, curriculum, and teaching style is crucial for newcomer programs. The leadership team at this school worked toward accommodating and welcoming students regardless of their educational background. Orientation and hands-on support during the enrollment process were vital to ensure families understood the education system and felt supported, as demonstrated by James through his welcoming processes, introducing families to newcomer teachers, and providing school tours.

According to Ayoub and Zhou (2022), one effective approach in supporting newcomer students is to provide targeted educational support addressing gaps in their education. This may involve specialized English language learner programs and additional resources to help them catch up with their peers. Moreover, comprehensive training for teachers and school personnel is essential to better understand the experiences and needs of newcomers (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). When the leadership team restructured the program, they introduced classes with multiple grades and smaller class
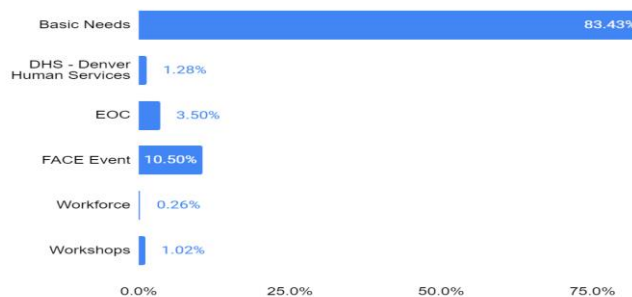
sizes. Additionally, they implemented the use of paraprofessionals who could support newcomer students in their native language until they learn English.

One sub-theme in the findings highlighted challenges posed by school boundaries in the education system for newcomer students. This is due to the absence of newcomer programs in all schools, despite the district having a choice policy. Many newcomer families faced challenges because they were unaware of school choice and newcomer programs. The leadership team in this study advocated for policy changes and convinced the school district to expand the newcomer program boundary. This expansion aimed to simplify the transition process for families with multiple children attending different grades at the same school. It was a significant policy change, as it was the only elementary-level newcomer program in the district. Many newcomer families attended neighborhood schools that were not designed for their needs, primarily serving typical American and mainstream students.

Creating an inclusive environment required policy changes prioritizing newcomer families' needs. The leadership team also collaborated with the school district's transportation to increase the number of buses, ensuring better accessibility for most students. Additionally, they established a partnership to provide rides for newcomer students, a valuable resource appreciated by many families. As per the observation and as shared by Brooks in his interview, this newcomer school had 10 buses and many other transportation services such as Hopskipdrive, which functions like Uber but for school-age children. Looking at other elementary schools or K–8 schools, the maximum number of buses in other districts is equivalent to half of the number of buses that service this district.

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Another crucial resource that was very important and had several programs was the community hubs. Community hubs, a partnership between the district, the city, and local community organizations, emerged as a vital solution to bridge the gap between schools and newcomer students and their families. Hubs provide services that support the social, emotional, physical, and academic needs of adults and children so that all students will have an equal chance to learn and thrive. These hubs provide essential resources such as language classes, job training, food, and clothing, fostering a sense of belonging for the families. By proactively connecting families with available services, schools empower newcomers to thrive in their adopted communities, creating stronger and more resilient societies. One of the leaders, James, as per his interviews, asked the district and pledged to bring the community hub to this site because many of the families who came here needed these resources. In addition, since the services offered at community hubs vary depending on the area in which they are offered, the data for this particular site shows that many of the families (83%) who came to this site used the basic services most frequently among the many that were offered.

**Figure 9**



Basic Needs — 83.43%
DHS - Denver Human Services — 1.28%
EOC — 3.50%
FACE Event — 10.50%
Workforce — 0.26%
Workshops — 1.02%

*Figure 9: Community Hub Services provided at site*

**Figure 10**
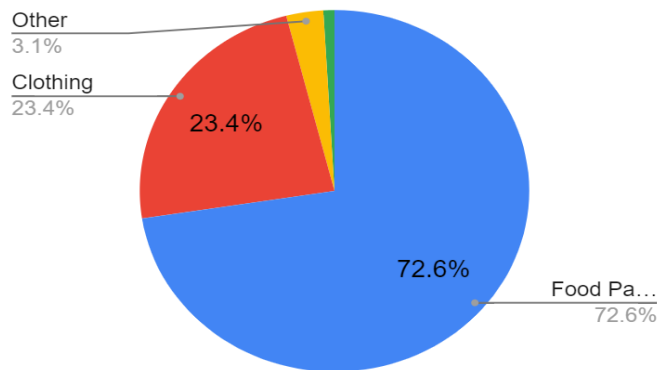


*Figure 10: Details of Basic Needs from Community Hubs*          Among the basic needs, as

shown in Figure 12's pie chart, most of the needs were food and clothing. After the

leadership team brought the community hub to the newcomer site, not only the children

but also the families received more support to study. This was clear in the interviews of

Maryam and Lauren. Newcomer students and families choose to adapt and blend in with

the culture around them, which helps them create a new social identity (Berry et al.,

2006; Kim & Diaz, 2013). The interviews with Brooks, James, Maryam, and McKenzie

spoke to this when most of their encounters with newcomer families was about trying to

get resources from school and to connect with similar communities. The figures above

show the importance of community hubs at school so that families not only get the

education they need but also, they get access to the resources they require.

The leadership also placed emphasis on the importance of open communication

and meaningful relationships between school staff and newcomer families in fostering

culturally responsive learning environments. Administrators need to be aware of the

needs of students, staff, and the community to create an inclusive atmosphere (Newcomer

& Cowin, 2018). This aligns with Gordon and Ronder's (2016) research, where effective

leadership practices for promoting inclusion and cultural responsiveness include open communication, building student relationships, involving families and the community, and adjusting hiring practices to cater to the diverse learning community. To establish culturally responsive learning environments, administrators must cultivate meaningful connections with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and communities.

In conclusion, creating an effective support system for newcomer students involved understanding their unique challenges, implementing holistic approaches, fostering community connections, and advocating for inclusive policies. Through transparent communication and meaningful relationships, schools can create environments where newcomer students feel valued and supported, contributing to the academic success and well-being of all the students.

**Theme 4: Discussion**

According to McCarthy (2018), in today's world inflicted with mass displacement and refugee crises, there is a need for assessing political dynamics and milieu regarding the education of refugees. Although forced migration and the presence of refugee groups in society is an increasing phenomenon, more research is necessary (Cerna, 2019; Dahya et al., 2019; Pinson & Arnot, 2007; Ramsay et al., 2019), and this reveals the necessity of rethinking refugee education. The leadership team at this newcomer site illustrated tension between the district and the school, which is reflected in the difficulties faced by school leaders and teachers with newcomer centers. The leadership seemed clearly frustrated, despite not explicitly labeling it as tension; the frustration among the leadership team was palpable. They indicated that the district needed to help them effectively shape the newcomer program, especially in areas where they lacked

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experience. The existing literature emphasizes the role of schooling in refugee education (Arar et al., 2019; Rah, 2013). Schools have the potential for a significant impact on the lives of students with a refugee background (Miller et al., 2018); however, the necessary system of support needs to be present or provided.

According to Deane (2016), an appropriate education policy response to the refugee crisis can reduce the risk of stigma, isolation, intra-community tensions, marginalization, and even radicalization. However, in this case, the district lacked not only appropriate and relevant policies but also practice while failing to provide the required support to the newcomer site. The leadership team, particularly James and Brooks, expressed a need for support from the district in shaping and redesigning the newcomer program. They have referred to areas where they lacked expertise, such as multi-grade practices that were new, and they did not receive the required support. For instance, James emphasized the lack of assistance in designing the small group model and connecting with successful newcomer centers. The absence of a dedicated newcomer program specialist and the struggle to find experienced individuals further exacerbated the situation, hindering the school's efforts to enhance its program. Taylor & Sidhu (2012) emphasized that educational institutions play a more active role in facilitating transitions to citizenship for refugee youth through an inclusive approach. Schools, and especially the relationships established at schools, can provide an incredibly positive and supportive experience in the lives of refugee children helping them to overcome difficult times.

Another major source of tension was the district's approach to professional development. While the district emphasized equity and cultural responsiveness, the

leaders felt that the support provided was insufficient. The leaders, including James, Brooks, and Lisa, pointed out that the district's professional development offerings, mainly focusing on culturally responsive education (CRE), lacked specificity and relevance to the newcomer program. They expressed a need for practical pedagogical approaches, instructional materials, and resources tailored to their unique challenges. The misalignment between the district's written goals, such as those outlined in the universal improvement plan (UIP), and the lack of tangible resources created a gap that left educators ill-equipped to effectively meet the needs of their diverse student population.

Furthermore, the leaders highlighted the growing number of newcomer families in the community, especially those seeking asylum, and emphasized the urgent need for culturally sensitive guidance. They suggested the creation of resources, such as one-pagers and videos, to provide school staff with practical insights on engaging with diverse communities. Lauren, the community liaison, emphasized the importance of bridging this gap between the district's aspirations for equity and the actual support provided on the ground. The lack of comprehensive professional development programs tailored to the newcomer program's unique requirements has exacerbated the tension between the newcomer school and the district.

In conclusion, the tension between the newcomer school and the district is rooted in the mismatch between the district's aspirations and the practical support provided to the school. The frustration among school leaders arises from the lack of expertise, resources, and specific guidance necessary to enhance the newcomer program effectively. Addressing this tension is crucial not only for the school's success but also for the district to fulfill its commitment to equity and cultural responsiveness. Comprehensive and

tailored professional development programs, coupled with tangible resources and support, are essential to bridge this gap and empower educators to create an inclusive and supportive environment for their diverse student body.

**Limitations**

Recognizing the limitations or weaknesses in the design of a fundamental qualitative study is crucial for the sole researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). Limitations are inherent in all research studies and have the potential to affect the transferability and dependability of a study; however, it is not applicable in a qualitative case study since we are not generalizing but rather shedding light on potential challenges for future research of a similar nature (Burkholder et al., 2016). The limitations of this study were (a) potential bias, (b) limiting the sample size to a small number of participants at a single site, (c) choosing semi-structured interviewing, short periods of observation, and looking at a limited number of artifacts as the data collection method, and (d) not including newcomer students and community members.

There is a distinction between subjectivity and intentional bias. Subjectivity occurs when a researcher is not objective in their findings. After subjecting the data to rigorous scientific processes, I interpreted the results through a lens tinted with my values, beliefs, and experiences. Subjectivity is defined as "the personal, subjective way people perceive and respond to social experiences... the unique way a researcher's mind constructs the meanings of action, reaction, and interaction" (Omasta & Saldaña, 2018, p. 142). One could argue that no social science research can truly be objective in the sense that people cannot be fully controlled, and a person with thoughts and feelings of their own (Chase et al., 2001) will always influence the researched findings. The researcher's

unique perspective, as documented in their positionality, reflects the ways their subjectivity may manifest in the research. Acknowledging the limitations or weaknesses in the design of a basic qualitative study is crucial (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016), especially for the sole researcher.

This research is intentionally subjective in that the researcher is living through it. It is interrogating and "pointing out the bias and subjective formulae of the majoritarian story" (Yosso, 2006, p. 4) and is based on personal experiences. Freire (1970) finds it imperative, however, that "there is a dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective" (p. 15). To this end, the researcher continuously ran all data through rigorous systems of data processing with member checking. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results. Data are returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences in order to ensure that any subjective frames are also grounded in the data.

This subjectivity does, however, create a challenge to the research in that through critique and reflection with individuals and by purposeful sampling in the study, the researcher's voice cannot be eliminated. Therefore, no matter how much mitigation occurs, the researcher's voice as an Afghan man and having lived this experience continues to be part of the developed study and the findings of this research.

Limitations are found in all research studies and may affect the transferability and dependability of a study while also flagging potential problems related to future research of a similar nature (Burkholder et al., 2016). Another limitation of this study was the limited sample size of a small number of participants at a single site. Limiting this study's sample size to six participants was a weakness in obtaining data representative of a

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school's leadership practices in a large urban district. However, in qualitative research studies, a sample size of 1–10 participants is expected and can result in a vast amount of data (Boddy, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The perceptions and experiences of the participants may not reflect the leadership team practices of different school leaders.

The final limitation of this study was narrowing the data collection method to semi-structured interviews, short periods of observation, and looking at the limited artifacts that were present at school buildings and in some electronic communications. Semi-structured interviewing allows participants to provide in-depth responses but also limits the data to participants who choose to self-report their behaviors, experiences, and perceptions through interactions with the researcher (Yin, 2016). I conducted semi-structured interviews using the same interview protocol and the same interview questions to be consistent. I collected data from each participant regarding the perceptions, practices, and challenges of using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. Collecting limited data over a short period of time (not many interviews, short periods of observation, and limited artifacts) is a methodological limitation.

**Implications**

Newcomer students and their families require various supports to integrate and adjust to the US school culture and language. School districts must support newcomers with a welcoming environment, high-quality academic programs, social-emotional support, and encouragement. While numerous urban cities offer policies and programs designed to facilitate the integration and success of newcomer students, these initiatives have not yet become standard practices within the broader education system and schools

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(Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2018, 2019a; Leblanc, 2017). For many newcomers, the use of a second or foreign language to navigate various aspects of school life, including curriculum content, policies, learning expectations, and social interactions with peers and educators, introduces significant ambiguity and stress as they transition to a new school environment (Koch et al., 2015; McManus, 2018). The provision of academic support and resources plays a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging and support for newcomer students, ultimately contributing to their success. The implications for practice and policy stemming from the leadership of a newcomer school are substantial and multifaceted, with a focus on accommodating the unique needs of newcomer students and propelling the program toward fostering their success. Looking at the following figure, in order to have a school system for newcomer students to be successful, there are various aspects that should be taken into consideration. Data collected in this study reveal the important factors and seven cyclical dimensions to guide the process of building welcoming and inclusive schools for newcomer students, as shown in Figure 12.

I assert that each of the elements in this cyclical process is an integral part of any newcomer program. If one of the circles is present, it requires the next one. For instance, if there is a leadership team, they must have a shared mission and vision that is inclusive. If the vision and mission is there, they also need professional development that goes beyond academics; there should be professional development for school staff around the social-emotional and well-being practices of the newcomer students.

**Figure 11**

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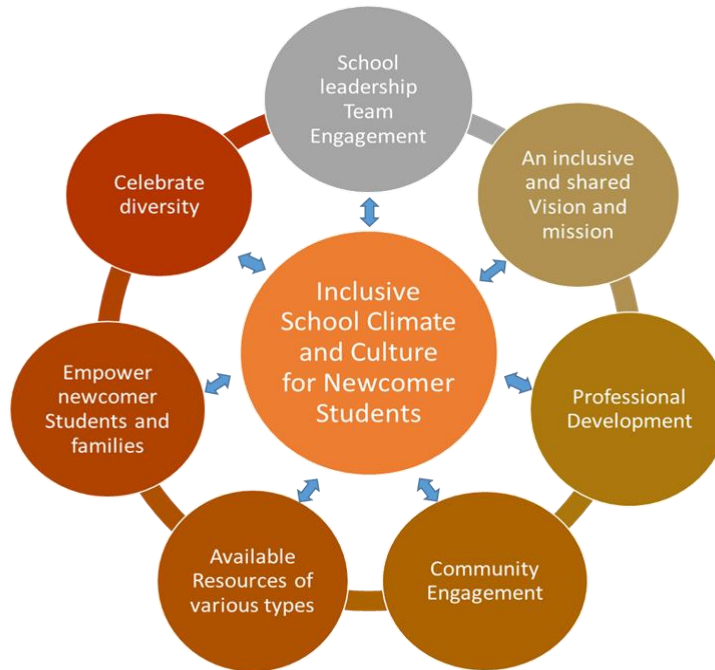
*Figure 11: Cyclical process of the how a newcomer program functions*

If we have community engagement and the resources that the community needs are missing, that creates a gap in the community engagement. As per Chartonas & Bose (2015), conflicts between school and newcomer students' families may arise, which can exacerbate children's adaptation problems if parents feel that the school is not culturally sensitive and supportive enough. Adverse experiences at school (e.g., bullying) can also aggravate tensions if the school does not respond appropriately, and such experiences can mediate the link between acculturation stress and mental distress (Chartonas & Bose, 2015). Like this example, all the circles in this cyclical process are crucial and connected: if we pull one string, the others are going to come along with that, and if one is missing, there will be a malfunction in the academic, social-emotional, and inclusive climate of the newcomer program.

Another implication for school leaders based on the findings of this study is that principals and assistant principals need to engage in required professional development to

increase their understanding of cultural responsiveness and the specific leadership practices necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Culturally responsive school administrators are necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse populations of students in public schools (Ezzani, 2021; Spikes, 2018). However, culturally responsive practices are not widely taught in leadership preparation programs (Barakat et al., 2019; Brion, 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). Many school leaders have not received formal training on culturally responsive practices either; therefore, some school leaders demonstrate a lack of knowledge, skills that are crucial in implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments (Brooks et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Sutcher et al., 2018). Because many school leaders do not receive training on cultural responsiveness either from the district or in school leadership preparation programs, in-service professional development is vital for promoting culturally responsive learning environments.

## Recommendations

The findings of the study revealed specific practices and strategies that school leadership teams use to promote culturally responsive learning environments as well as challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. In order to have more effective newcomer programs at many districts, including the site that I studied, I provide some recommendations for practice as well as policy. Considering the limitations of this study's small sample size, interviews only with the leadership team and not students' voice.

### Clear Definition of Newcomers

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Developing a precise and applicable definition of newcomers is crucial for operational efficiency. This involves creating a district-specific description that considers the distinctive characteristics of the local community including factors like language proficiency, recent arrival, and educational background. To ensure ongoing relevance, it is essential to establish a systematic process for regularly reviewing and updating the district's definition of newcomers. This process should engage district administrators, educators, community leaders, and relevant stakeholders collaboratively. The definition should be designed with flexibility in mind, allowing for adjustments based on changing circumstances such as global events, migration patterns, and the unique challenges faced by newcomers in the district. This ensures that the definition remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving demographics and needs of the community.

**Recommendations for Policymakers**

*Clear Definition Development*: Developing a clear and district-specific definition of newcomers is essential for effectively addressing the needs of this student population. When there is a clear definition, it can help educators better understand the unique challenges and requirements of these students. In addition, it is important to advocate for the development of a clear and district-specific definition of newcomers, considering factors like language proficiency, recent arrival, and educational background. With a well-established definition in place, educators can implement targeted interventions and support strategies to facilitate the academic and social integration of newcomer students in the district.

*Regular and Flexible Definition Design and Review:* Establish a systematic process for regular review and updating of the district's definition of newcomers,

ensuring ongoing relevance. This process should involve collaboration among district administrators, educators, community leaders, and relevant stakeholders. Design the definition with flexibility, allowing for adjustments based on changing circumstances such as global events, migration patterns, and unique challenges faced by newcomers. This flexibility ensures adaptability to evolving demographics and community needs.

**Recommendations for Practice**

*Localized Definition Implementation*: To enhance the support and integration of newcomer students, it is imperative to implement the developed newcomer definition at the local level. All stakeholders within the district, as well as at the school and community levels, need to be informed and committed to the definition. Moreover, establishing robust feedback mechanisms is crucial to facilitate ongoing input from the community, educators, and stakeholders regarding the effectiveness and relevance of the newcomer definition. By soliciting feedback, districts can continuously refine and adapt the definition to better meet the evolving needs of newcomer students and their families.

In addition, creating a cohesive approach to supporting newcomer students within the district requires seamless integration of the newcomer definition with educational programs and services. This integration should encompass curriculum development, instructional practices, and student support services, ensuring that all aspects of the educational experience are aligned with the goals and principles outlined in the newcomer definition. Additionally, professional development opportunities should be provided to educators to enhance their understanding of newcomer needs and equip them with the skills and strategies necessary to effectively support newcomer students in the classroom.

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By implementing these recommendations, districts can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for newcomer students, promoting their academic success and overall well-being. Moreover, by actively involving stakeholders in the implementation process and prioritizing the integration of the newcomer definition into educational practices, districts can demonstrate their commitment to serving the diverse needs of newcomer students and their families, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within the school community.

**Community Engagement:**

Newcomer students, families, and community members play vital roles as key stakeholders and contributors to the establishment of welcoming and inclusive schools. Their involvement is valuable, drawing upon their expertise, strengths, and networks to actively contribute to the development of social capital for newcomers. It is important to actively engage with the local community, including refugee and immigrant advocacy groups, to gather insights and feedback on the district's academic approaches and the needs of newcomers. This collaborative approach will contribute to a more inclusive and effective program. This collaborative approach will contribute to a more inclusive and effective program that is geared toward their needs, and by implementing these policy recommendations, the district can establish a clear and adaptable definition of newcomers, promoting inclusivity and responsiveness to the unique challenges faced by these students and their families. It is necessary to leverage community partnerships to increase communication and engagement with newcomer families. Schools can improve communication with families by offering literacy classes and activities at school libraries

and increasing family involvement through events and classes with various local

organizations (e.g., art centers, religious groups, social services).

**Recommendations for Policymakers**

*Formalize Community Engagement and Program Development Policies*:

Policymakers should prioritize formalizing community engagement policies that

emphasize active participation with local immigrant and refugee advocacy groups in

order to optimally support newcomer students. These policies should be comprehensive

and detail-oriented, outlining the significance of gathering insights and feedback directly

from these community stakeholders. By formalizing such policies, districts can ensure

that the voices and perspectives of newcomer students and their families are not only

heard but also valued in the decision-making process. Moreover, these policies should

emphasize the importance of utilizing community feedback to inform district-wide

initiatives, academic approaches, and resource allocation strategies.

By actively engaging with immigrant and refugee advocacy groups, policymakers

can gain valuable insights into the unique needs and challenges faced by newcomer

students, allowing for more targeted and effective support measures. Formalizing

community engagement policies facilitates the creation of a more inclusive and

responsive educational environment that prioritizes the success and well-being of all

students, especially newcomers who are adjusting to their new school and community.

This policy-driven approach will contribute to the establishment of a clear and adaptable

definition of newcomers within the district.

**Recommendations for Practice**

*Community Literacy Initiatives*:  It is essential to establish community literacy initiatives to effectively support newcomer students and their families and cater to their unique needs. These initiatives should focus on developing and implementing literacy classes and activities at school libraries, targeting both students and parents within newcomer families. By providing literacy classes for students, schools can help improve language skills, comprehension, and overall academic performance. These classes can also serve as a platform for students to develop confidence in their language abilities and foster a love for reading and learning. Additionally, offering literacy activities for parents can empower them to actively participate in their children's education, enhancing communication between home and school and promoting a supportive learning environment. In addition, by engaging both students and parents in literacy initiatives, schools are able to strengthen their connections with newcomer families, foster a sense of belonging within the school community, and ultimately contribute to the academic success and well-being of newcomer students.

*Community Partnership Programs:* As a means of providing enhanced support and integration for newcomer students, it is highly recommended to institute robust community partnership programs that actively involve external organizations. This entails forging formalized and structured partnerships with local entities geared toward providing invaluable resources, support, and opportunities for the newcomer community. By establishing these partnerships, schools can significantly augment their communication and engagement with newcomer families. The aim is to create a bridge between the school environment and the broader community, offering families a deeper understanding of the schooling culture and fostering a sense of inclusion.

These community partnership programs should be designed to empower newcomer families with information about the education system and the means to actively participate in their children's education. This involvement is critical for the academic success and overall well-being of newcomer students. Through these partnerships, schools can tap into external resources, such as language support services, cultural orientation programs, and mentorship initiatives, that can provide vital assistance to both students and their families as they navigate the complexities of a new educational system and cultural context.

Moreover, these programs should be tailored to address the specific needs of newcomer students, recognizing the unique challenges they may face during their educational journey. By fostering collaboration between schools and external organizations, this recommendation envisions a comprehensive support network that not only welcomes newcomer families into the educational fold but also actively involves them in shaping their children's educational experience. Ultimately, the establishment of community partnership programs serves as a powerful strategy to create a more inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsive educational environment for newcomer students.

**Newcomer Program Collaboration across School Districts and States and at the Federal Level**

To comprehensively address the multifaceted needs of incoming newcomer refugee students and effectively support their success, collaborative efforts across various levels of governance, including school districts, state agencies, and federal programs, are imperative. Research has underscored the significance of such collaborative approaches in enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of newcomer students (Miksch et

al., 2020; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). By fostering collaboration, stakeholders can leverage collective expertise, resources, and insights to develop and implement robust newcomer programs that are responsive to the unique needs of this population.

At the school district level, collaboration entails establishing partnerships between schools, district administrators, and community organizations to coordinate services and support for newcomer students. This may involve sharing best practices in newcomer program implementation, pooling resources to address resource gaps, and coordinating professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their capacity to meet the diverse needs of newcomer students (Ngo, 2017). Similarly, collaboration at the state level involves coordination between state education agencies, refugee resettlement agencies, and advocacy organizations to align policies, allocate resources, and disseminate promising practices across districts (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018).

Furthermore, collaboration at the federal level is essential to provide overarching guidance, funding, and support for newcomer programs nationwide. Federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Refugee Resettlement play crucial roles in facilitating collaboration, disseminating research-based guidance, and allocating funding to support newcomer initiatives (Turner & Ngo, 2019). By fostering collaboration across these different levels of governance, stakeholders can collectively work toward creating a cohesive and comprehensive support system for newcomer students, ensuring their successful integration and academic achievement in the education system. There are several ways as pointed out by the literature and the following points are recommended for policymakers.

- *Inter-Agency Collaboration:* Encourage formal collaboration between school districts, state agencies, and federal programs to develop policies that facilitate the sharing of best practices, resources, and strategies for addressing the academic, social, and emotional needs of newcomer students.

- *Network Establishment:* Promote the establishment of a network or consortium among schools and educational institutions catering to newcomer students. This network can serve as a practical platform for continuous communication, collaboration, and professional development.

- *Centralized Information Hub:* Advocate for the creation of a centralized database or platform managed at the state level. This platform should be led by district and school-level leadership to facilitate the sharing of information, resources, and tailored curriculum materials for newcomer students.

- *Guidelines for Consistency and Data Collection Methods:* Develop and implement uniform guidelines or standards for newcomer programs across school districts and standard data collecting formats. This ensures consistency in the support provided to newcomer students, maintaining a high-quality educational experience. If there are unified data collection practices, this also helps practitioners utilize the data to inform their teaching methods and pedagogy and to modify their teaching methods based on students' needs.

**Recommendation for Practice:**

To effectively support newly arrived students in newcomer programs, practitioners should prioritize the provision of professional development opportunities tailored specifically to newcomer education. This can be achieved through the facilitation

of regular workshops, conferences, or webinars dedicated to addressing the unique needs of newcomer students. These events serve as valuable platforms for educators and school leaders to exchange experiences, learn from experts in the field, and collaboratively explore effective strategies for supporting newcomer students' academic and socio-emotional development.

- *Professional Development Opportunities*: Facilitate regular professional development workshops, conferences, or webinars focusing specifically on newcomer education. These events offer educators and school leaders valuable opportunities to exchange experiences, learn from experts, and discuss effective strategies.

- *Mentorship or Buddy Progra*m: Implement a mentorship or buddy program within schools, where experienced educators or students provide additional support and guidance to newcomer students during their transition period. This practice fosters a supportive environment for their integration.

- *Partnerships with External Organizations*: Encourage and establish partnerships with community organizations, refugee agencies, and other service providers. This collaborative effort ensures a holistic approach to supporting newcomer students and their families by enhancing the availability of resources and support systems. In addition, organize regular professional development workshops, conferences, or webinars focused on newcomer education, where educators and administrators can share their experiences, learn from experts in the field, and discuss effective strategies. Develop guidelines or standards for newcomer

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programs that can be implemented across school districts, ensuring consistency and quality in the support provided to newcomer students.

**Future Research**

The newcomer program is an understudied area, warranting further research to comprehend its various functions fully. Specifically, an exploration into how newcomer programs differ between elementary and high schools is essential. There is a distinct need for a comparative study addressing the implementation of newcomer programs across different educational levels, encompassing elementary, middle, and high schools. While the present study focuses on leadership and policy implications, further research is imperative to investigate newcomer programs from the perspectives of students and the community.

To broaden the scope of this study, a subsequent research inquiry could delve into how continuous professional development contributes to nurturing the specific leadership practices crucial for cultivating newcomer students in culturally responsive learning environments. This research might examine how district leaders can strategically utilize ongoing professional development to empower school leaders in obtaining pertinent, impactful, and timely support for implementing practices aimed at developing culturally responsive educators and fostering culturally responsive learning environments specific to newcomer students and programs. As emphasized by one participant, it is crucial that professional development initiatives focusing on cultural responsiveness undergo thorough scrutiny and evaluation.

Furthermore, additional research avenues could explore the long-term academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students who have undergone newcomer programs,

providing insights into areas of effectiveness and areas for improvement in these

programs. Analyzing the experiences of students and the community would contribute

valuable perspectives to inform the ongoing development and refinement of newcomer

programs.

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**Appendix A: Interview Protocols**

**Wisdom Elementary Principal and Assistant Principal**

Participant's Name Code: _____          Date/Time: _____

Interview code :_____          Interview location: _____

Interview start time:_____          Interview End time_____

**Research Question:**

How does a leader of an elementary school with a newcomer program build a school culture that supports the diverse needs of newcomer students?

**Purpose of this interview:**

There are two goals for this interview. First, establish rapport with the interviewee. Second, gain background information on the respondent's experience and actions that result in an effective newcomer school program for newcomer students.

**Review Consent Form and Obtain Signature**

Do you have any questions before we start?

**Interview Questions:**

1. Can you please tell me about your experiences leading at a newcomer school?
   Probe:
   a. Professional background
   b. academic training
   c. history of school (what this school and community were like when you began as principal?)
2. Please tell me about what kinds of programs and services PBA provides for newly arrived students.
   a. How do you promote inclusive and culturally responsive practices for diverse groups of learners?
   b. Meeting diverse academic, social, emotional and cultural needs of newcomer students?
3. As a current school leader, describe your level of preparedness in handling situations related to cultural differences in your school.
   a. Tell me more…
4. How do you determine the needs of the newcomer students?
   a. Probe: Who are the key people in this school who support this work?
   b. What support do you provide for them to be successful with newcomer students?

  c. How do you develop meaningful relationships with students from diverse backgrounds?

5. What guiding principles, progress monitors, and/or benchmarks do you use that leads you to call this work successful?

6. What support or resources, not currently available, do you think are needed for you and other school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

  a. Tell me more…

  b. What type of professional development or training do you wish you had?

7. What forms of capital do you see immigrant families demonstrating (e.g., navigational, linguistic, familial, social, aspirational, and resistance)?

8. PBA has experienced a significant increase in the number of newcomer students this year. Of what are you most proud relative to their arrival at your school?

  a. Probe: Do you have any examples or stories?

  b. Probe: Any other changes to the program specifically to meet the needs of recently arriving newcomer students'

9. What do you look for when you hire staff for this school?

10. If there is something that you could change about Place Bridge Academy, what would it be?

11. To sum things up, if you were talking with a group of principals, what steps would you suggest they take to lead a Newcomer program that also results in improving the newcomer students' academic achievement? Please list as helpful strategies as possible.

**Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

**Wisdom Elementary School Staff**

Participant's Name Code: _____          Date/Time:_____

Focus Group Code :_____          Interview location: _____

Interview Start Time: _____          Interview End Time_____

**Research Question:**

What can be learned from the experience of an elementary newcomer school principal about successfully leading an inclusive learning community for immigrant students?

**Purpose of this interview:**

There are two goals for this interview. First, establish rapport with the participants. Second, gain background information on your role in the Newcomer center, as well as the principal's actions that result in a successful newcomer school for immigrant children?, particularly Afghan students.

**Review Consent Form and Obtain Signature**

Do you have any questions before we start?

**Staff interview Questions:**

1. How are new families treated upon their arrival at PBA?
   a. How do you initiate relationships with families?
   b. How do you continue to engage with parents of newcomer students?
2. What strengths do your students bring into the school and what are some of their greatest challenges?
3. What are some urgent needs/challenges that have been raised that are specific to the newcomer community, and how have they been addressed to help newcomers become successful students?
4. How does the principal promote inclusive and culturally responsive practices for a diverse group of learners? Can you provide examples or stories?
5. How does the principal ensure that different cultures are represented? Can you give us some examples or stories?
6. How different are the Afghan and Ukrainian students compared to other students in PBA? How do you shift your practices based on their needs?
7. What practices have changed in the school from the time that Afghan families have arrived in PBA?
8. What is one of the biggest achievements for you in the newcomer program meeting the needs of (Afghan) newcomer students?

      a. Student outcomes?
      b. Socio-emotional
      c. Belonging/inclusion

9. If you were to change one thing for your newcomer students, what would it be? And how would you get your support from your principal?

10. Have you noticed any changes in the leadership practice or policies specifically to meet the needs of recently arriving Afghan students' needs since August 2021? If so, what has been the change? Can you please provide some examples of that?

11. How do you know that the newcomer program is improving student outcomes?

Closing:

12. Is there anything else that you would like to share that we have not already discussed regarding the leadership actions needed to provide a successful newcomers school?

**University of Denver**

**Title of Research Study:** Inclusive Leadership for Newcomer Students: A Case Study of A Newcomer School Leader

**Researcher:** Fayaz Amiri M.A. and
**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Kristina A. Hesbol, Ph.D., University of Denver

**Study Site:** Place Bridge Academy

**You are being asked to participate in a research study.** Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. It is up to you. You can say okay now to be in the study and change your mind later. You may quit at any time with no penalty. All you must do is tell us when you want to stop. You can take time to think about being in the study before you decide. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision as to whether or not you may want to participate in this research study. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision on whether or not to participate. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission. You are being asked to join the research study because you are a Denver Public School (DPS) Leader, or an administrator and you are fluent in English. Approximately 6 other people will be in this study.

## Purpose
The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the role of an elementary school principal, whose school has a newcomer program, related to the success of newcomer students, and requisite changes in school practices. This case study will provide an in-depth description of how leaders develop school contexts in which the newcomers succeed as they experience the stressors, for which social support is necessary on several fronts. School leaders and their decisions impact newcomer students and their families. Therefore, it is critical for school leaders, particularly with newcomer programs, to consider the unique implications of immigration and how being a newcomer affects a student.
If participants agreed to take part in this study, they will be asked for a date and time at their convenience to participate in an interview for about 45-60 minutes.

Participants' permission will be asked if they are okay for the interview to be audio recorded. Upon their agreement, the interview will be audio recorded. If they do not want it to be recorded, they will be notified that the researcher will take extensive notes while interviewing them and will check back with them for some answers.

### Voluntary Participation

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. If you participate in this research study, you will be asked to provide background information about yourself (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age). Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to participate in or continue individual interviews for any reason without penalty or other benefits to which you are entitled.

### Risks or Discomforts

Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include the releasing of partially identifiable information that may cause you emotional distress due to its rich description of your thoughts and experiences. Though this information may be partially identifiable, only the researcher will know the true identity of any participant Pseudonyms will be used to identify all formal identifiable data obtained and portraits developed. Should you experience emotional distress from participation in the study you may text 741741 to be connected with a crisis counselor at Crisis Text Line, a non-profit based in the United States and serving the US, Canada, and Europe that provides free, 24/7 support from trained crisis counselors and who can provide resources to address your mental health concerns.

### Benefits

Possible benefits of participation include that you may feel good from having an opportunity to reflect on your experience, and knowledge. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

### Incentives to participate

You will not be receiving any compensation for participating in this research project.

### Confidentiality of Information

Data in this study will be kept confidential. The researcher will use pseudonyms to identify all formal identifiable data to be obtained. Any formal identifiable data will be kept in a password protected file on the researcher's computer to keep your information safe throughout this study. All formal identifiable information will be destroyed or deleted after three years. Your individual identity will be kept private when information is presented or published about this study.

However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Some things we cannot keep private and must report to proper authorities. If you disclose information about child abuse or neglect or that you are going to harm yourself of others, we have to report that to social services as required by law. The research information may be shared with federal agencies or local committees who are responsible for protecting research participants.

### Questions

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact Fayaz Amiri at 804-200-2742 or fayaz.amiri@du.edu or Kristina A. Hesbol, Ph.D. at 303-871-8479 or kristina.hesbol@du.edu at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing IRBAdmin@du.edu or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

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**Options for Participation**

Please initial your choice for the options below:

___The researcher may audio/video record or photograph me during this study.
___The researcher may audio record me but NOT video or photograph me during this study.

---

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below.  You will be given a copy of this form for your records. Participants under 18 must have a legal guardian also sign unless the minor is legally emancipated.

_____  _____

**Participant Signature** **Date**

_____

**Participant Printed Name**

# Appendix D: Key Terms

**Asylees**: Individuals who, on their own, travel to the United States and subsequently apply for/receive a grant of asylum. Asylees do not enter the United States as refugees. They may enter as students, tourists, businessmen, or even in undocumented status. Once in the U.S., or at a land border or port of entry, they apply to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for asylum (DHS, 2022). To qualify for a grant of asylum, the person must meet the legal definition of a refugee. Asylum status permits the person to remain in the United States. Individuals granted asylum are eligible for ORR assistance and services.

Refugee status or asylum may be granted to people who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of their race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion. Refugee status is a form of protection that may be granted to people who meet the definition of refugee and who are of special humanitarian concern to the United States. Refugees are generally people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.)

**Refugee**: Any person who is outside of one's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (8 USC 1101 (a) (42); INA Sec. 207). (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.) https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/who-we-serve - refugees

**SIV**: An Iraqi or Afghan who has been employed by, or on behalf of, the U.S. government who is now in danger and is granted Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status. Families may also be granted SIV status. Iraqi and Afghan SIVs are Legal Permanent Residents (LPR) upon admission to the U.S. ((U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.) https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/ immigrate/siv-iraqi-afghan-translators-interpreters.html#references)

**Successful School**: A school is perceived to be successful by its teachers and students when the principal is focused on creating a climate conducive to that success (McNeil et al., 2009).