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Social Capital and Refugee Mothers:
How can schools provide opportunities for increased social connection within their community?

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Acknowledgements

"It's you. You have to know everything. Don't stay at home. Go!"

-Sinobar, research participant

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List of Acronyms

ESL – English as a Second Language

FY – Fiscal Year

ORR – Office of Refugee Resettlement

PTA – Parent Teacher Association

RCUSA – Refugee Council USA

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees

US – United States of America

Abstract

Through a case study of refugee mothers and school staff in Houston, Texas, this study aims to show that critical social connections can be made for refugee mothers by building social capital through their children's schools. Refugee mothers are more likely than men or children to encounter challenges to making new connections in their resettlement community due to linguistic barriers and duties in the home. Therefore, schools are one of the first places where refugee mothers may find opportunities for building social capital. Using Bourdieu and Coleman's approach to social capital as obtained by individuals, this study assesses the challenges that refugee mothers experienced after their initial arrival and how increased social connections may have eased their transition to living in the US and understanding a new educational system. By looking at practices of schools in providing opportunities for refugee mothers to access bonding, bridging, and linking social capital opportunities, this study found that Houston area schools needed to assess their inclusivity and make structural changes to parental involvement and leadership approaches. Expanding the theory of social capital in relation to schools beyond students and to parents is especially critical for underrepresented groups such as refugee mothers.

Relevance to Development Studies

Social capital of refugees has been studied in the context of flight and resettlement but tends to focus on the utilization of social capital and not how it is built. Relating to women, development texts generally lump them with children and do not give enough attention to their experiences as adults. By addressing refugee mothers in the context of resettlement, this study aims to expand the development canon on refugee social capital to include their stories and experiences.

Keywords

Social capital, refugees, mothers, schools, social connection, community

Chapter 1: The importance of social connection for refugee mothers through schools

Tens of thousands of refugees are resettled annually in the United States through official mechanisms in partnership with the United Nations, federal bureaus, national nonprofit agencies, and local offices (RCUSA, 2019a). The local resettlement agencies assist refugees with their children's school enrollment or show them around their new apartment complex, but this is the extent to which they are mandated to connect refugees to their new community (US Government, 2011). Families and individuals must find their own way to become part of their new community, and this can be especially difficult for refugee mothers who are less likely to know the language or, due to a number of factors, have the ability to leave their home regularly (Abdulle, 2019; Chambers, 2019; Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Shirdon, 2016). Under these circumstances, refugee mothers may have a harder time building social capital in their communities.

Outside of their apartment complex or family and friends that they may have been resettled with, schools are one of the first points of contact for refugee mothers with members of their community. This is why schools are a critical resource for refugee mothers to build their social capital. However, while refugee mothers are the primary contact at school and usually the primary caregivers for their children, they are largely left out of the school community and leadership positions (Chambers, 2019). I have worked with refugee communities in the United States (US) through organizations that focus on resettlement and youth-centered mentoring in after-school programs, respectively. Through my own interactions as a service provider in these settings, individuals and families from around the world allowed me into their homes and spoke with me about the many challenges they encountered in the process of resettlement and adjusting to a new culture. While this gives me a deeper understanding of refugee livelihoods in the US than your average person, I cannot fully comprehend the weight of being displaced and uprooting my family. However, the relationships that I built with refugee mothers revealed how disconnected they were from their children's schools, no matter how involved they wanted to be. Their questions and concerns about their children's education and school experiences were warranted but likely could be assuaged by talking to someone from the school, whether it was a staff member or fellow parent.

These interactions led me to research why refugee mothers were experiencing this disconnect from schools. Through the course of my

interviews, it became clearer that social capital theory was a beneficial framework to analyze how schools were or were not incorporating refugee mothers into their existing community. The networks that the participating refugee mothers made through other organizations, such as a women's empowerment group, had given them the opportunity to expand their social capital through each other, the volunteers, and the broader community.

This research will therefore address the following question. How can schools increase the social connectedness of refugee mothers by building their social capital? I will break this down by looking at three intersections of social capital with refugee mothers and schools through a case study in Houston, Texas.

- What needs do refugee mothers have, and how can expanding their social connections by building social capital help to meet them?
- In what ways do schools already have or build social capital for parents?
- How can the promotion of trust, networks, and norms−the foundations for building social capital−at schools, benefit refugee mothers?

I focused the study on the experiences of Arab mothers due to the targeted discrimination of refugees from Muslim majority countries by the Trump Administration. It is critical to state that refugees are individuals whose cultures, upbringing, and life experiences are unique to each person. This study attempts to distill common themes in the stories told by the participants but does not equate that opinions and experiences are homogenous amongst this group, even if they are from the same region.

The study will be prefaced by a chapter contextualizing the current situation for refugees and schools in Houston. The third chapter reviews what refugee mothers identified as their needs, related to schools, after they first resettled and how building social capital helped them in their transition. The fourth chapter assesses the ways schools already have and build social capital for parents. Finally, the fifth chapter discusses how the promotion of trust, networks, and norms−the foundations for building social capital−can benefit both refugee mothers and schools. By analyzing the role social capital can play in connecting refugee mothers to the school community and beyond, I hope to provide a basis for schools to recognize the importance of connection and critically evaluate ways in which they can build social capital with and for refugee mothers to assist in their transition to living in the US and promote inclusivity in their community.

This study employs the definition for social capital given by Schuller and his colleagues (2000) as "social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals" (p.1). This definition follows the mutual thread of understanding between Bourdieu (1997), Coleman (1990), and Putnam (1996)—the founding scholars of social capital theory—that social capital is a resource which can be tapped into through connections made between individuals and groups of people. As this study is focusing on building social capital for individuals and smaller communities, it is important to note that Bourdieu (1997) and Coleman (1990) define the benefits of social capital for individuals either through collectively held resources, family relations, or community social organizations.

One of the biggest critiques of social capital theory is that, unlike economic or human capital, it is more difficult to quantify or track (Schuller et al., 2000). Social capital can relate to the accrual of human and economic capital as connections help expand educational or professional opportunities, but this study will not be looking at those implications for refugee mothers due to lack of resources. Consequently, some scholars praise social capital for its heuristic qualities in that it can provide analysis or prescription while allowing the user to view nonmonetary forms of power and influence (Portes, 1998; Schuller et al., 2000). Therefore, I will be taking a heuristic approach to social capital as I aim to apply it to refugee mothers and schools who wield different levels of power within their community.

Coleman's (1990) theories on the functions of social capital are helpful in conceptualizing its value for refugee mothers. Broadly, Coleman claims that the value of social capital is how different aspects of social structures can be used as resources for individuals to realize their interests (Coleman, 1990, p.305). Those aspects may be in the form of information sharing, which for refugee mothers is extremely valuable as they are learning about a new culture, language, and system (Coleman, 1990; McGonigal et al., 2007). Coleman (1990) also discusses how organizations may be founded for one purpose but may end up fulfilling others, and this allows for further creation and use of the social capital it offers. The expansion of schools' objective from educating students to also connecting parents to social capital resources will be addressed in this study. However, Coleman (1990) also warns that social capital is not infinite and must be maintained or it can depreciate without attention, which relates to the necessity of schools to implement continual policies and procedures to build and maintain social capital.

These functions can then be seen in the multiple types of social capital that Putnam (1996) describes as bonding, bridging, and, as Woolcock (1998) later added, linking. Bonding social capital is found between members of groups with similar characteristics, such as school classes, families, or ethnic groups, in order to promote solidarity of their shared values (Allan & Catts, 2014). Portes (1998) similarly defined this as family support. On the contrary, bridging social capital is between individuals from different groups who may want to find a common bond or learn from one another (Allan & Catts, 2014). For Portes (1998), this was seen as social capital's function through extrafamilial networks that could broaden the perspectives of individuals from that of their close circle of contacts. The final form of social capital, linking, focuses on the power dynamics between individuals and allows those with less power the opportunity to increase their capacity for involvement in the network by building social capital connections with those of higher rank (Allan & Catts, 2014; McGonigal et al., 2007). Each of these forms of social capital can be found inside of schools and through relationships with parents. Chapter four will develop how these relate to building the social capital of refugee mothers.

Lastly, social capital is built on a triad of networks, norms, and trust which are the means by which objectives can be achieved (Putnam, 1996; Schuller et al., 2000). Networks can be seen in the descriptions of bonding, bridging, and linking capital as each individual within a person's network creates a node and may have ties throughout. Coleman's (1990) theory of closure describes how social capital can be created and maintained. Closure is realized the tighter and closer bonds are between a certain number of people, which establishes trust and norms more easily (Coleman, 1990; Portes, 1998). With the foundation of trust, social capital can then have elements of social control that encourages certain behavior through its established norms (Mawhinney, 2002; Portes, 1998). Networks, norms, and trust will be used as a framework in chapter five to illustrate how schools can build and maintain social capital for refugee mothers.

By examining how social capital theory and its components play out in the experiences of refugee mothers at schools in Houston, I aim to prove that critical social connections can be made for refugee mothers through building social capital at schools. However, this is incumbent on schools intentionally assessing the integration of refugee mothers into their community and creating long-term policies and practices of inclusivity.

Chapter 2: Refugees in the United States/Houston and current school approaches

In order to understand the experiences of Arab refugee mothers in Houston, I will first contextualize the issues surrounding refugee resettlement in the US and Houston and the current approaches schools take to engaging refugee mothers. The history of resettlement within the US and Houston is rich and complex, but this chapter aims to distill the key aspects of past and current situations in order to further explain how various factors have converged to create the current discourses, policies, and programs surrounding refugees.

2.1 Refugee resettlement at the federal and state levels

After the devastation of World War II, the United States Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 which allowed 400,000 displaced Europeans to resettle in the US (RCUSA, 2019a). The government continued to allow other groups affected by displacement into the country on humanitarian grounds, largely advocated for by private ethnic or religious groups, which created the public-private partnership that to this day holds up the resettlement structure (RCUSA, 2019a). In 1980, the Refugee Act was approved by congress and included, for the first time, the definition of refugee decided upon by the United Nations (UN) (RCUSA, 2019a). The UN's definition stems from the 1951 Refugee Convention Related to the Status of Refugees—modified by the 1967 Protocol to the Status of Refugees to broaden its geographical scope to the globe, and states that refugees are persons who have a

> "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country"

 (UN General Assembly, 1951; Barnett, 2002). This study uses the UN's definition when referring to refugee mothers, though the general findings could apply to other newcomer and immigrant populations.

The 1980 Refugee Act remains the architecture for the modern-day resettlement structure in the US and includes mandates for various federal agencies. One critical component is the right of the president to determine the number of refugees who will be able to enter the country each year with the ability to place caps on entrances by region (RCUSA, 2019a).

With this executive power, President Obama expanded resettlement of Syrian refugees to the US by 10,000 individuals in 2016 (Hersher, 2016). This caused an uproar from conservatives across the country who had been demonizing refugees from Muslim-majority countries and conflating them with the threat of terrorism, crime, and national decline (Nagel, 2016). Responding to President Obama's decision, then-candidate Donald Trump increased sentiments that Islam is a violent religion. Due to his rhetoric, 74% of voters in South Carolina's presidential primary election agreed that there should be a ban on all Muslims entering the US (Nagel, 2016).[1]

In Texas, state government officials responded to Obama's proclamation by removing the state's Department of Health and Human Services from its role in refugee resettlement (Tilove, 2016). This was after failing earlier that year to sue the federal government and International Rescue Committee, a prominent resettlement agency, to halt any resettlement of Syrians within Texas (Hersher, 2016). Texas' governor, Greg Abbott, claimed that these measures were taken to "prioritize the safety of all Texans and urge the federal government to overhaul this severely broken system" (Tilove, 2016). However, neither of these measures prevented refugees from being resettled in Texas and only re-routed the funding for resettlement to private organizations (Tilove, 2016).

The Trump Administration used the executive determinant power to decrease the number of refugee allowances in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 to 30,000 individuals, far below President Obama's final determination of 110,000 (RCUSA, 2019b). While less than .002% of the global number of refugees were resettled in 2018, the US took in the smallest number of refugees since the determinations made immediately after September 11th (UNHCR, 2019).
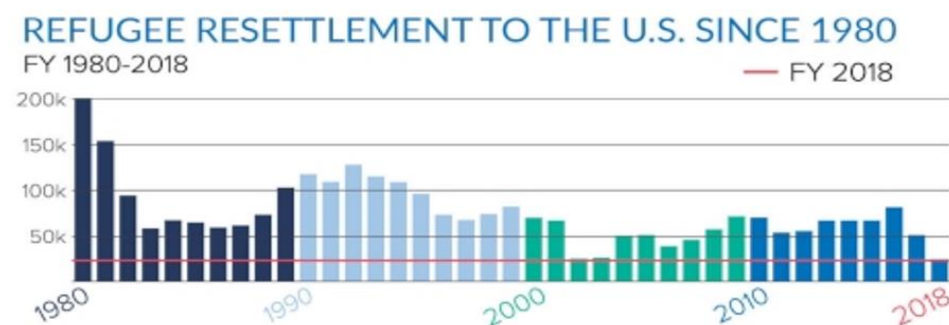
Figure 1: Tracking of refugee allowances by year in the US from 1980-2018 by UNHCR, 2018.

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[1] Conducted through exit polling

One Syrian mother in this study expressed that her family was lucky to be accepted into the country. While this sentiment relates to the aforementioned national and state-level policies, it most directly derives from President Trump's agenda to keep people from Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. Just one week after his inauguration, President Trump signed an executive order effectively banning Syrian refugees from entering the country through any mechanism and temporarily suspending people from seven Muslim-majority countries (Shear, 2017). After a number of court battles, the ban was lifted, but it severely affected the ability for refugees from the Middle East, who were already in the pipeline to be resettled (Chishti & Bolter, 2019). Halfway through FY 2019, only 7% of the allotted 9,000 individuals from the Middle East had been resettled (RCUSA, 2019b). In comparison, roughly 1,350 more people had been resettled from Europe than the Middle East over the same period (RCUSA, 2019b). The "travel ban" not only impacted those trying to get into the US but also increased instances of discrimination for Muslims, or those perceived as Muslims based on their appearance or language, already living in the country (ACLU, 2019).

2.2 Houston, Texas – Home to thousands of refugees

Houston, Texas is the fourth largest city in the United States and the most diverse metropolitan area in the country (Capps et al., 2015). It is one of the premier cities for migrants from around the world and is also home to thousands of UNHCR refugees who have been resettled in the area since the federal program began after the Vietnam War in the 1970s (Capps & Ruiz Soto, 2018). In FY 2018, Texas resettled the highest number of refugees in the country (UNHCR, 2019). Harris County, which encompasses the Greater Houston Area, resettled 2,248 refugees in FY 2016 with 43% of those arriving under the age of eighteen years old ('Harris County…', 2016). The largest refugee populations that year were from Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Myanmar ('Harris County…', 2016). With such a large number of individuals and families from very diverse backgrounds, schools struggled to keep up with the influx of new students. However, the current lull in refugee arrivals presents an opportunity to

better assess schools' services and approaches to refugee mothers.

# of Refugees Resettled in Harris County FY 2016 - FY 2019

Figure showing a bar chart titled "# of Refugees Resettled in Harris County FY 2016 - FY 2019". The y-axis is labeled "# of Refugees" ranging from 0 to 3500. Bars: FY16 Actual approximately 2950, FY17 Actual approximately 2420, FY18 Actual approximately 1000, FY19 YTD approximately 950.
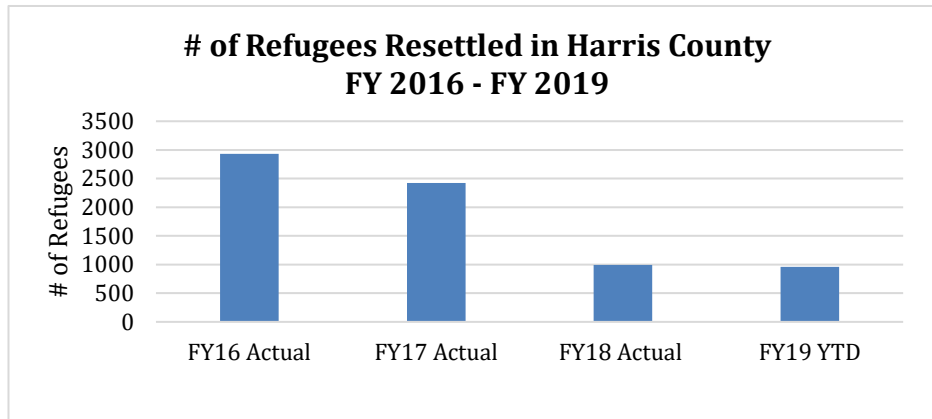
Figure 2: Number of refugee arrivals in Harris County FY 2016-FY 2019 by Interfaith Ministries, 2019

While refugees, especially Muslims, have experienced bigotry in the past, the overwhelmingly negative sentiment towards anyone perceived to be from a Muslim-majority country empowered bigoted individuals to act. With the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric of President Trump promulgated through his policies, speeches, and Twitter feed, there has been a rise in these sentiments in the greater population, including in schools. There are at least three publicly documented instances of blatantly Islamophobic rhetoric used by educators in the Houston area: a middle school teacher called a 12-year-old a terrorist because he was Muslim; an elementary school teacher made insidious slurs against Muslims on local television programming; and a high school teacher who, in a lesson on religion, described Islam as an "ideology of war" and had a section on "what to do if taken hostage by 'radical Islamists'" (Barajas, 2016). Whether Muslim or not, refugees are subject to many of the same discriminatory and hateful behaviors because of their status as others, the conflation of refugees and Islam, and the general ignorance of the American population about who refugees are and why they are living in the US (Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). For these reasons, this study focuses on refugee mothers who were resettled in Houston from Iraq and Syria.

2.3 School approaches to refugee mothers

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is the federal agency which provides funding for state and local programs, involving social services or language training, in which the primary goal is for refugees to reach economic self-sufficiency within the first year of their arrival (ORR, 2018; RCUSA, 2019a). One of the program's key principles is to focus on newly

arriving refugees (ORR, 2018). Resettlement agencies receive funding from ORR and other offices to provide certain services which can include "familiariz[ing] refugees with available services" in the area and social adjustment programs (US Government, 2011). Because resettlement agencies primarily focus on adults and very new arrivals, ORR setup the Refugee School Impact Program to fund programs which promote academic performance and integration of refugee youth and families into the educational system even after their first year in the country (Lloyd, 2018). The funds can be used to support programs that help families learn through "school-specific orientation, navigators/cultural brokers, language access" and to train and educate school staff around the "unique and varied needs of refugees" (Lloyd, 2018).

While the goals of other ORR programs more closely link to economic self-sufficiency, the School Impact grant focuses on both the human and social capital of students, parents, and teachers. Its goals provide the foundation for increasing social capital of refugee mothers through school systems by helping to provide opportunities for further understanding and interaction between parents and school staff. School Impact grant funds have been allocated to Houston area schools and districts in the past, though the following examples are not necessarily funded through these monies (ORR, 2019).

Some area schools claim to support refugee parents through monthly parenting meetings about student improvement and achievement, access to language interpreters, general parenting classes, and workshops on topics such as gang and drug awareness (Baez, 2017). While Baez (2017) states that urban schools with diverse populations can only be successful by working in tandem with parents and the community, there is no mention of how the experiences of refugee mothers is brought into the creation of their interventions. Another local middle school held an orientations for refugee parents to explain the systems at the school as well as their expectations for the parents (Jones, 2016). The reporter who covered the meeting claimed that the tone echoed the welcoming speech that the Houston mayor had given only a few days before (Jones, 2016). However, these are the only publicly documented interactions that the schools have with refugee parents.

Another method that both districts represented in this study used to educate parents about their school systems is a handbook that outlines parental rights and responsibilities (HISD, N.D.; SBISD, 2019.). These handbooks mention the importance of parents who actively participate in their child's education and tout parent involvement as a district-wide core value (HISD, N.D.;

SBISD, 2019). They state that parents have the right to become a school volunteer, participate in parent organizations, or obtain leadership roles at the campus or district level (HISD, N.D.; SBISD, 2019). While their rights and responsibilities as parents are declared in these documents, it is their responsibilities that are critical to positive engagement with school staff. If refugee mothers do not know the responsibilities of communicating regularly with teachers and staff, attending conferences, or making sure their child is doing their homework, then the school staff will view this as a breach of trust or even a lack of parenting skills (HISD, N.D.; SBISD, 2019). Access to these documents will be critiqued in chapter five, but there is also a surprising lack of any other district-wide documents specifically for refugees. One of the districts provides a document for specific guidance to teachers on how to assist English language learners and culturally diverse families, but the only document for refugee parents is an explanation of offerings for linguistic programs in the district (HISD Multilingual…, 2018; HISD Multilingual…, N.D.).

The current environment surrounding refugees in the US is not overwhelmingly welcoming and can often be the opposite. By focusing on mothers from Muslim-majority countries, I was able to see how this has affected their ability to form social connections at the schools. Houston provides a great setting for this study because of schools' various experiences working with refugee families and the history of refugees resettling in the city.

Chapter 3: Challenges faced by refugee mothers in Houston and the role of social capital

This research is based on reflections of the lived experiences of refugee women and school staff within two school districts located in the greater Houston area. These individuals were chosen based on their location in areas of the city with relatively high refugee resettlement. In District A, resettlement has taken place for many years, while it is a newer phenomenon in District B. The research was conducted over a six-week period during the summer of 2019.

I conducted qualitative interviews with each of the participants and used coding content analysis to distill the experiences of refugee mothers and their interactions with school staff. This chapter focuses on their stories and explores how their experience relates to social capital.

3.1 Qualitative interviewing of refugee mothers and school staff

The refugee mothers who participated in interviews were selected from a women's empowerment group for refugees from Arabic-speaking countries, run by one of the local resettlement agencies. This group was selected due to the relative ease of contacting them in the short time available for fieldwork and that they had been in the US for at least two years. Resettlement staff who run the program gave me access to these women, but I introduced the study and requested their permission to participate. In total, five refugee mothers participated, including:

Rima,[2] who resettled from Syria with her husband, daughter, and son. She had another son after their arrival. At the time of our interview, her two oldest children were in elementary school. She had recently began sewing as part of a program for refugee women to learn how to create cottage businesses within their home. Since resettling in the US, she had learned to drive and obtained her license. She spoke minimal English, so her interview was conducted with an interpreter.

Sinobar, who resettled from Iraq with her husband, son, and daughter. She had another daughter after their arrival. At the time of the interview, her two oldest children were in elementary school. In Iraq, she worked as an English teacher, so she arrived having a stronger grasp of the language but was not confident in her speaking skills. Her husband did not speak English and had

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[2] This participant opted to be given a pseudonym within the study. All other participants wanted to go by their own names.

a full-time job, so she spent most of her time doing errands for the family that required English. She had recently started a part-time job at Walmart.

Zainab, who resettled from Iraq with her husband, son, and daughter. She had another son after their arrival. At the time of the interview, her oldest son had just begun middle school, and her daughter was in elementary. She and her family had recently moved to a suburb of Houston in order for her son to go to a better middle school. She had heard rumors from other parents about bullying and bad behaviors from the school her son was initially zoned to. Her husband worked full-time, and she stayed at home with her mother-in-law to raise their youngest son. She had been learning English, but she felt more comfortable conducting the interview with an interpreter.

Elaf, who resettled from Iraq with her husband, two daughters, and son. At the time of the interview, her oldest daughter was attending a middle school magnet program for healthcare, and her younger two were in elementary. Both she and her husband had worked in the medical field in Iraq. She was finishing a certificate in sonography from a local community college. She studied English prior to resettlement but was still learning more vocabulary and conversational English.

Dayana, who resettled from Syria with her husband, son, and daughter. She had another son after their arrival. At the time of the interview, her two oldest were in elementary. She had worked part-time for a nonprofit in Houston as a tutor for refugee students but was currently caring for her infant son. She studied English prior to resettlement but was still learning the differences between British and US uses.

Six staff members who worked either at the school or district-level also participated in interviews. They were anonymized in order to give them the full ability to openly discuss their roles, experiences, and opinions. Their responses do not directly reflect the stances of the schools or districts in which they work(ed). They will be referred to by their occupational title.

Occupational Title	Level	District
ESL Specialist	District	B
Outreach Worker A	District	A
Outreach Worker B	Multiple assigned schools	A
Outreach Worker C	Multiple assigned schools	A
Teacher A	School	A
Teacher B	School	B

Figure 3: Table of school staff participants

Having formerly worked with a refugee-focused nonprofit in Houston schools, there are ethical considerations of my prior relationships with both the resettlement staff who connected me to refugee mothers and the school staff who I knew through my former job. I did my best to maintain ethical boundaries by only interviewing mothers with whom I had no prior contact. I also explicitly stated to school staff that the interviews were conducted for research and had no relation to my former capacity as a community partner. All participants were given the opportunity to review the data after our interview and time to remove themselves from the study if they chose. As a white researcher with no refugee background, I recognize that my own lens influences my interpretation of the data. While I cannot speak directly to the experience of being a refugee mother in the American school system, I have striven to reflect on my own positionality throughout each step of this research and elevate the needs of refugee mothers so that educators across the US and other countries can reflect on their interactions with this population.

Content analysis was used to code and categorize the data. The analysis was carried out in relation to interactions with the school system described by both the mothers and school staff. The data was first analyzed from the mother's perspective which then led to finding related themes in interviews from school staff. The predominant themes included: challenges experienced by mothers, opportunities and obstacles in interactions between both parties, and how connection can enhance existing agency. These themes facilitate a better understanding of how social capital in the school setting can benefit both refugee mothers and school communities.

3.2 Challenges upon arrival in Houston for refugee mothers

In order to establish how building social capital through schools could potentially help refugee mothers in their transition to living in the US, we must explore what challenges they face. Responses from the participants were collated and distilled to four primary challenges: language barrier, transportation, cultural differences/ understanding the system, and mental health.

The literature establishes that refugee mothers are especially hindered in their access to schools and other services due to language barriers, which is exacerbated by their relative lack of access to language learning services due to various factors including taking care of young children (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). The inability to speak in English could severely impede opportunities for making social connections in a linguistically-diverse community where English is the shared language. As one of the mothers in

Deng & Marlowe's (2013) study explained, her lack of connections and language capabilities left her without the ability to understand what services were available to her. She stated the more we know, "the more we will trust and welcome [the services]" (p.422).

This also rang true for the participants in this study. While some do speak English, each of them reflected on how language barriers affected their relationships with the schools when they first arrived. In some instances, it prevented them from going to the school and in others it caused issues in the enrollment process.

Zainab[3] stated, even though interpretation at the schools could have been provided,

> "Because of my language, I didn't go a lot [to the school]. I went maybe one or two times without an appointment, but they wouldn't let me see the teacher because they said I need to have an appointment."

Rima[4] was also troubled by her inability to speak the language. It was one of the most difficult parts of moving to the US and interacting with the schools. She said,

> "I always cried because the school was far away from me. I was pregnant with my son. I don't know how to take them or to bring them. The most scary thing is the language. When you don't speak the language, you feel like you're lost."

Dayana reflected on how the nuances between British and American English confused her at first in her interactions with school staff. She knows other mothers who would like to go to the school or become more involved but were fearful due to their lack of skills or confidence in English. Sinobar remembered how she did not know as much English when she first arrived. But because she was able to speak and understand most things, her resettlement caseworker left her to handle most of her own appointments which was still very difficult. She described,

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[3] All quotes from Zainab were translated from Arabic to English through the interpreter and therefore may not constitute her exact wording. However, attention and care were used to ascertain the closest meaning.
[4] All quotes from Rima were translated from Arabic to English through the interpreter and therefore may not constitute her exact wording. However, attention and care were used to ascertain the closest meaning.

> "[The caseworker] could help me register [my son] at school…but she didn't…So if you speak English just a little and your partner cannot help, it's exhausting."

When she tried to enroll her son on her own after their arrival in November, she was told that the school was already full. Even though she spoke English, she was not confident enough to contest them and received no support from her caseworker.

Transportation was seen by school staff as one of the primary hurdles for refugee mothers' access to schools, and this was also reflected in discussions with the participants. Houston is a very large city with poor connection via public transit, so most individuals in the city rely on cars for personal transportation (LINK Houston, N.D.). However, it is rare that refugee families can afford to purchase a car soon after their arrival and therefore use the bus as their primary mode for travel around the city.

Rima's children were initially enrolled in a school that was almost an hour away from their home by bus. She was scared to ride the bus not only because she did not know the city well enough to know where she was going or how to navigate the bus system, but she could not speak English to ask for help. Because the school was so far and her family did not yet have a car, she rarely made the trip. Sinobar stated that this was also the case for many of her friends who were fearful of learning the public transportation system or learning how to drive. Because of their lack of access to transportation or even knowledge of how to get to the school from their homes, they were kept from engaging at the schools as they would like.

The differences in culture and educational systems were also foundational to the challenges that the participants faced when they first arrived. Lauglo (2000) explained that because children are immersed into their new culture, immigrant parents tend to be less integrated, in comparison, which can cause them to feel even more lost about how to keep track of their child's education. The gap in understanding both major and minor differences caused stress for participants and directly related back to how the mothers interacted with their children and the schools.

While she had a good grasp of English, Elaf found it difficult to navigate the cultural differences within the new school system in Houston. Her two older children had been to schools in Iraq, but the nuances of enrollment and parent-teacher relations were slightly different. Much of the system was online, which took some time to learn and comprehend. She claimed that the first year was the hardest, but she says,

> "This year, yeah, I understand, but before that, no, I did not understand…most of our systems back home are on pen and paper. But no, here almost everything is online."

Zainab and Dayana both commented on how the curriculum and methods of learning were different from what they had experienced, either as students themselves or in their children's schooling in their home countries. There are more subjects and activities that their children undertake in American schools. There are also discrepancies in the ways that parents understand the role of homework–how it should be done, what their child is learning, and what they need to do to support it. Zainab commented,

> "Every year it's different. For each teacher, also it's different."

This impacted her ability to feel like she understood the expectations of teachers from year to year.

Broader cultural differences also affected the way mothers interacted with their children and the schools. Houston has residents from over 78 countries, and many of them live in the same neighborhoods and attend the same schools as the participants (Capps & Ruiz Soto, 2018). For Sinobar, this meant that she was having to learn about many new cultures and talk to her children about respecting their classmates who may think or do things differently. When speaking about the women's empowerment group, Dayana described how,

> "All the ladies were very afraid to get out, like especially with hijab, because they said maybe someone will do something bad with us."

All of these factors culminated in affecting the mental health of the mothers, especially in the first few months to a year after their arrival. A study of Sudanese families resettled in New Zealand showed that due to the lack of (extra-)familial connections in their host country, parents struggled to adapt to child raising without these extended networks (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). These challenges were exacerbated by the past traumas, nuclear family separation, and other resettlement hurdles that the families faced (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). Shirdon (2016) wrote about how newly resettled refugee mothers in the US are isolated because of lack of connections to family or friends that you had before and most of the time may be spent at home.

The mothers in this study faced similar struggles. The inability to connect to many people–due to language barrier, time, fear, or mobility–left many of the participants feeling isolated at the beginning of their resettlement

process. This brought up feelings of sadness, irritation with their children, anger, stress, depression, and exhaustion from the many responsibilities they had on top of establishing their lives in a new country. Elaf provided a snapshot of how her mental health was personally affected when she stated,

> "Especially in the first year when I came here, I changed because you know stress, depression, a lot of change in my life...I became isolated. I became angry. I became nagging, really. Sometimes I make a small problem from nothing. Why? I don't know."

Terrion (2006) claims that in order to avoid crises, vulnerable families must know that they have social support networks and that they can come to others for help in managing their stresses. There is also importance in bonding social capital from family relationships (Portes, 1998), and some of the mothers mentioned how their husbands supported them by watching their children in order for them to participate in activities outside of the home. While the importance of family is critical, I was not able to include a focused discussion on these relationships for the mothers since I was focusing primarily on how schools could step in and build the social capital that refugee mothers need.

3.3 Overcoming initial obstacles through perseverance

While the challenges at the beginning of resettlement may have felt insurmountable, there were two themes that emerged in the process of the interviews that showed why mothers felt a general sense of improvement over time. First, their own agency and perseverance was seen in many of their stories. It was clear that they would not be in the positions they were at the time of our interviews without their ability to individually find solutions.

Zainab, who did not speak any English upon her arrival in Houston, started using Google Translate to understand the school's enrollment forms. She described,

> "I didn't have anyone to help me at first, so I had to go by myself. I used my phone for translation. I filled out the application without knowing the language. I used the phone to translate the words that I don't understand on the application, and when I translate, I start to memorize those things. So now it's easier for me to go and fill out the application online."

Elaf and Sinobar would make appointments with teachers at the school when needed or ask the school directly about questions they had. Sinobar

also found driving courses on her own and was able to get her driver's license and purchase a car to help her get to the school, work, errands, and other appointments.

One story directly related to school was from Rima who, with minimal English, advocated for her daughter who was having issues with her reading and writing. She explained,

> "My daughter, she is suffering [with] reading. So, I went to the school and told them about that. They saw that I was insisting on helping her, so they keep calling me and following my daughter. Neither me or my husband speak English, so we need [the school] to do all the things…They call me even when I don't call them. They see me that I'm interested…Even the school principal, she was so happy with me. Because she sees me following my daughter step by step to reach her to this level…The school paid attention to this problem with my daughter, but I'm the one who pushed them to do the right thing. It would take a long time if I didn't speak...I'm the one who noticed the problem."

These are all instances of these women finding their inner strength to overcome their fears or anxieties related to the challenges mentioned in the section above. Some of the participants stated they received hope from others who had similar experiences which encouraged them to push forward. They advised other mothers to be brave to go to the school and ask for an interpreter if they needed it. The sentiment, "Be Strong" echoed throughout Sinobar's interview as she spoke about how she had found the strength to go out of her house and take control of her life. The advice that she wanted to impart to other women who came from similar refugee or immigrant backgrounds was that

> "We can do whatever we want. Just not to be scared. I know it can be difficult, but you can do anything you want."

3.4 The importance of social connection in facing challenges

The importance of the connections that the mothers made, through the women's empowerment group and elsewhere, was the second theme that arose from the mothers' interviews about their perceived improvement over time.

How could building social capital, especially in relation to the school, have helped these refugee mothers adjust more easily and understand differences in the culture and system? While they found solutions on their own, they also described how their social connections gave them more support than they would have had without those networks. Their faces brightened as they talked about the connections they had made with people both in the greater community and through the school. The overwhelming sentiment was of gratitude and love for the people who had taken time to know them and help them. Some of them, they said, had even become like family in the absence of blood ties that they did not have in Houston.

As previously mentioned, the mothers participated in a women's empowerment group that met regularly at a community center. The program was facilitated by a staff member of one of the local resettlement agencies, who started the group as a volunteer. There were also a number of other female volunteers who attended and formed relationships with the refugee participants in order to be there to answer questions or assist in other ways outside of the meetings. This relationship building was an important aspect of the program because the refugee women felt like it allowed them to interact and make friends with American women. Dayana stated,

> "You see the Arabic (sic) ladies [are] very, very happy when they see the American ladies sitting with them…when they come and stay with them and try understanding them, it makes them very happy and very excited to come more and more."

Dayana and Elaf both explained how the group helped them and other members with various issues of settling into their new homes and lives. It gave them confidence and understanding of how to meet their goals. In describing the volunteers, Elaf claimed,

> "I like them. They are so nice…They help me a lot. They support me."

In almost every interview, the program's leader was also mentioned as someone whom the mothers felt highly supported by in their times of need, from interpreting at the schools to bringing people to the meetings that helped them better understand the systems at schools. Rima said,

> "I'm so thankful for [her]…I love her, and I hope for her all the best. If I can do anything for her, I will."

It is also beneficial for refugees to be resettled in a city that has many of the same places of worship, grocery stores, and people from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds because it eases the initial culture shock (Loizos, 2000). Many studies that assess the use of social capital for refugees focus on the bonding connections that occur between members of the same group who fled their homeland (World Bank, 2018). Rima found that her Arab neighbors were able to tell her about their experiences with the school which encouraged her family and made them hopeful. However, the women had also made supportive friends outside of their ethnic groups. These were friendships which made them feel happy and encouraged them to do something for themselves and others. Elaf made friends with a woman who initially volunteered with her caseworker. She said that

> "She helped me a lot. Now, we are close friends. She came and picked me up to take me to the school. Because I didn't know anything here, in US especially, in the first few days. Yeah, she helped me a lot."

Sinobar befriended a woman whom she met regularly at the same bus stop and described their friendship as,

> "She's from a different country...We were speaking every morning we were meeting. I convinced her to go to the [community college], and she was so happy that she met me. So, I feel happy when I see women and encourage them or do something for them. Because I know we need help you know."

The mothers also spoke of social connections they made at the school that made them feel more welcome and included, both as parents and individuals. Zainab's son had a teacher who encouraged him to keep up his grades and explained to her how this could one day help him to receive a scholarship for college. Her son's teachers included her on communication about his coursework and guided them throughout their time at the school. Sinobar also had close relationships with her children's teachers and could call them to ask questions. One of the teachers would even help her with specific English questions.

Elaf made friends with the principal at her children's school. She said,

> "The principal of the school is from Lebanon. He is so nice and so cooperative. So, if I need anything, I could ask him. He helped me a lot, really."

He recognized that Elaf would be beneficial as a volunteer at the school

because of her ability to speak both Arabic and English, so he approached her about this opportunity. When her daughter was not yet old enough for school, her husband would help to watch her so Elaf could volunteer.

Dayana also volunteered at her children's school full-time for a year in various capacities. She wanted to volunteer because

> "…this makes me closer to my kids, their teachers.
> And I know what my kids are doing in school, how the
> teachers are with them."

Zainab and Sinobar stated that they would love to volunteer at the schools but were unable to do so at the time of interviewing because their youngest children were not yet in school, and they did not have someone they could leave them with regularly. It is crucial to consider how the intersectionality of Arab refugee mothers as women of color and relatively low socio-economic status affects their ability to build and access social capital through parental involvement at schools which is biased toward white, middle class women who are expected to have the time and the resources to give to their children's schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Refugee mothers may not have the ability to be as involved in their children's schooling due to economic factors, the need to work, duty of watching younger children, or potentially not knowing that they have the ability to be more involved. However, Zainab expressed,

> "I want to volunteer to watch my kids and also
> learn the language."

And as a former teacher in Iraq, Sinobar wants to volunteer because

> "I want my certificate to be a teacher, and I
> think this will help."

The connections the mothers had outside and through the school show how increasing social capital can help refugee mothers to ease into their new lives and feel more included at schools. The people they met gave them access to resources, language skills, information, and meaningful relationships. However, it was rare that the school made a strategic effort to build the social connections of these mothers.

Chapter 4: Analysis of schools' current methods of building social capital for refugee mothers

Schools have embedded power in their ability to create and transfer social capital from the micro level with individuals to the meso and macro levels through the school, community, or district (Mawhinney, 2002). Especially in communities with relatively lower socioeconomic status, it is critical that schools develop social capital for parents so that they are able to make use of the value of that social support (Jack & Jordan, 1999). Whether connecting students, parents, staff, or community members, the way that schools approach these interactions could create many new linkages in which the actors in those systems could draw resources (Mawhinney, 2002). Through a study conducted on participants in a school-based program focused on building social support systems for vulnerable families, Terrion (2006) found that increasing social capital helped the families extend their network to needed resources outside of the school and promoted better relationships with school staff.

McGonigal and colleagues (2007) discussed the various ways in which schools engage in bonding, bridging, and linking social capital through their study in Scotland. They claim that schools utilize bonding social capital to promote their own shared values as a school, within classrooms, or in departments. They conceptualized bridging social capital at schools to be between different development groups of teachers who may work in cross-disciplinary curriculum building or in mentoring programs for vulnerable students. For the purpose of this study, bridging social capital at schools will look more at connecting parents to one another or to the broader community external from the school. Linking social capital is rarer as it requires schools to involve parents (or students) in a way that gives them power, for example requesting parents' involvement on significant issues at the school instead of trivial tasks (McGonigal et al., 2007).

This chapter uses McGonigal and colleagues' (2007) framework of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital in the school setting to analyze current approaches to building social capital for refugee mothers in Houston schools. I also incorporate the idea from Allan & Catts (2014) that increased social capital at schools can lead to "a more effective engagement with diversity" through "better recognition of and responsiveness to others" (p. 217).

4.1 Bonding connections between refugee mothers and school staff

Bonding refers to groups of people from the same background making connections and thereby increasing their social capital. For Coleman (1990) and other authors, schools are seen as institutions where bonding social capital takes place because school staff, parents, and students act as a community with the common goal of education (Allan & Catts, 2014; McGonigal et al., 2007). For the purposes of this study, I use the term bonding social capital to reference relationships between refugee mothers and school staff—including teachers, counselors, front office staff, administration, and so forth. Coleman's (1990) theory of closure is important to these connections because a strong and closed relationship between parent, teacher/staff and student promotes trust. This section considers the ways in which schools utilize bonding structures to assist refugee mothers and where more could be done.
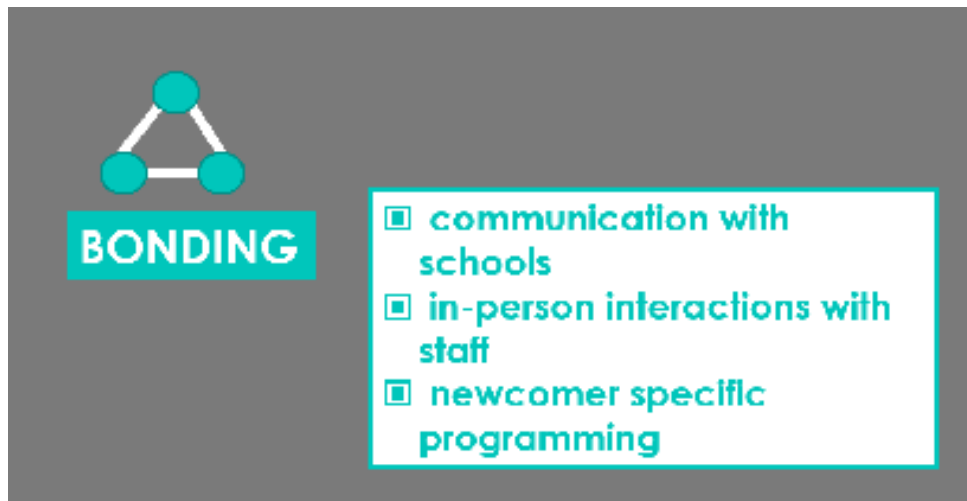
Figure 4: Summary of findings for bonding social capital

For the mothers, one of their primary forms of bonding with school staff was through the communication streams that were setup to regularly provide feedback about what their children were doing in class and their progress. This was either through email or papers that were sent home. The key to making this communication meaningful to the mothers was consistency and the ability to understand the information. Zainab was able to use Google Translate to interpret the information she was receiving from the teachers. This made her feel like she had a better understanding of the educational system and a connection with the teachers.

However, not having formal interpretation in meetings or translation of crucial documents was also very frustrating for the participants and made them feel less a part of the school's community. Language, while not an absolute, is critical to relationship building—especially for meaningful connection. Respondents said that translation services varied from school to school. Sinobar aired her frustrations about the lack of Arabic interpretation at her school for required parent meetings. She lamented,

> "Every time [the school] holds this meeting, they describe the
> school program…all the translators are Spanish, but the
> school has lots of Arabic (sic) students. They don't translate
> in Arabic. When I went there to the meeting, my friend kept
> asking, 'Sinobar, what do they say? What do they mean?'"

She was left to interpret on their behalf which lessened her ability to participate in the meeting as a parent.

Martinez and colleagues (2008) found that, when schools use siblings as translators in discussions with parents, they put an intense amount of stress on the child and undermined the parents' authority. Multiple school staff participants in this study brought up the use of older siblings or other students to provide interpretation in parent-teacher meetings While they recognized that this was not ethically responsible and could cause issues of power dynamics or purposeful misinterpretation, it was still used when needed. Interpretation and translation are expensive services, but they are critical to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all families—especially for refugee mothers who are less likely to speak English or have access to ESL programs (Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Martinez et al., 2008). It is therefore necessary to provide these services to promote bonding between them and staff.

Another, less direct, form of communication that affects the social bonds between refugee mothers and school staff is staff members' negative rhetoric about refugees. In research conducted in Minnesota, a Somali woman recalled overhearing a teacher complaining about how, "these Somalis and their parents don't understand our education system" which made the woman feel unwanted and othered in her own school (Abdulle, 2019, p. 142). None of the refugee mother participants in this study mentioned this or felt that there were any negative stereotypes about them at the schools. However, 2/3 of the staff members interviewed mentioned negative commentary that their colleagues said about refugee children and families. In District B, the ESL Specialist described that while there was never

> "…anything Islamophobic that I'm aware of. Sometimes, there's a general something like 'Oh, those refugee families' or something to that effect. But I think that was more when they were first here because it was a shock."

In both districts, teachers have made comments about how refugee kids smell due to bad hygiene or not doing their laundry often enough. Outreach Worker B, who works with newcomer[5] students in multiple schools with high refugee populations, claimed that there were many ignorant stereotypes about refugees that made staff misunderstand their life stories and trajectories which impacted how they interacted with them as staff members. Even if any of these sentiments had never been directly said to a refugee student or parent, these discourses color how staff interact with refugee families and individuals and impacts how well they will bond.

Overall however, the refugee mother participants felt respected and welcomed at their schools, exemplified by Rima who referred to the staff at her children's school as "very respectful people." Outreach Worker A, who handled many parent-teacher meetings for refugee families, talked about the importance of teachers' in-person interactions with refugee mothers; it helps them better understand external factors that might be affecting their student's classroom behavior or performance. This bonding experience is beneficial for both sides, and staff are reminded that parents also make efforts to attend these meetings which helps to solidify their bond. In relation to other school staff, Teacher B remarked,

> "Our counselors are fantastic with our refugee families. I know our nurse's assistant has a relationship with the parents…because that's where they need their immunizations… [The school] was getting a Communities in Schools worker that would be housed at [the school], and that is directly their response to working with our students that need that extra support. And their families need that support."

Making refugee families feel welcome at the school was a priority which every staff member interviewed commented on. This went even beyond the school's walls as they all shared how outreach to refugee families, especially mothers, at their homes was critical to building those

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[5] Newcomers for District A are defined as any student who moved to the US in the last two years, not just refugees.

relationships. Teacher B had been working in the district for many years and had never done home outreach before she had her first class of refugee students. They saw an immediate effect in their relationship with refugee parents and understanding of their backgrounds through this form of connection. They reflected,

> "I'm your kid's teacher, but I'm also your neighbor…best practice as a teacher would say to connect with your families and make sure that they feel comfortable coming to you."

ESL Specialist A used home outreach as a tool to connect deeper with families and found that it was one of the best ways to interact with mothers who may not be able to go to the schools as often. At the time of interviewing, Outreach Worker B was working with administration at one of the local high schools to offer programming specifically for refugee mothers in their apartment complex to teach them about security in their neighborhood, public transportation, and budgeting and planning. These are all issues that the refugee mothers in this study could have benefitted from had someone from the school reached out with this information earlier in their resettlement.

Staff participants' chief concern about relationships with mothers, especially from Arab backgrounds, at the schools was their perceived cultural differences in meetings where fathers seemed to dominate the conversation. Teacher A, a first-year teacher who received no training on working with refugee populations prior to the start of school, recalled how

> "I noticed with some of our families that if the two parents were together the entire conversation was directed toward the male. And then in other instances…a male administrator was asked to speak on my behalf so that it could be a male-to-male conversation."

Outreach Worker A commented that

> "Once the father starts working, I will say that mothers do show up at the school. And especially if you get them to come one time, they realize this is really important."

This perceived difference in culture should be explored more and potentially discussed with other parents from similar backgrounds who are more active in the school. By learning from established parents[6], schools could further

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[6] Established parents refers to parents who have lived in the community for at least a few years and have existing social capital at the school.

develop their bonds with all parents every time they have the opportunity to see them in person. It should be noted that none of the mothers described this dynamic in their interactions with school staff, but it was not explicitly asked.

As discussed above, having formal translation at events or meetings is important to forming meaningful bonds between school staff and refugee mothers. When families first arrive and are learning the ins-and-outs of the new educational system, it is also highly beneficial for the school to host newcomer-specific orientations so that expectations and processes can be explained in detail and without impediment to interpretation. The majority of the mothers who participated stated that they had some form of orientation like this which helped them at the beginning, though it was not enough because it was so much information at once. All of the staff members mentioned that their schools or districts held these sorts of events. Teacher A worked where a newcomer program was embedded in the larger school, so they would have smaller meetings for newcomer families to make it less intimidating. ESL Specialist A hosted meetings throughout the school year with parents to inform them about requirements at the school but also took them on a field trip to the local park, library, and food pantry so that they would know what resources their neighborhood offered. These newcomer-specific programs allowed for a safe environment for refugee families to learn and build relationships with school staff.

However, staff from District A mentioned that there had been cutbacks in newcomer-specific programming due to a restructuring of the budget within their office. This has also impacted professional development for staff and teachers related to learning about refugee families or working with diverse student populations. Five of the six staff participants wanted to see more training for staff, both working directly with the refugee population and throughout the school, to have a better understanding of the life journeys of refugees and increased cultural sensitivity. Teacher B stated that refugee mothers also may want to teach staff about their culture or language. Increased awareness could affect the negative refugee rhetoric that is sometimes perpetuated in the schools and potentially expand the capabilities and interests for school staff to create stronger bonds with refugee families.

By intentionally engaging parental involvement at schools through these tightened relationships, staff can build parents' social capital by increasing direct contact with staff and other parents from the school, which could strengthen both bonding and bridging connections. However, there are several impediments to parental involvement that could suppress its potential for building social capital of refugee mothers. Family

circumstances such as work, single parenthood, number of children, and physical/mental/emotional capacity determine whether parents are able to become involved in available structures (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Mothers especially are burdened by the pressures to participate in their child's classroom or school while also being bound by labor market participation or cultural factors such as gender-based duties in the home (Abdulle, 2019; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Shirdon, 2016). It is the job of school staff to critically assess the parental involvement programs to determine whether they are inclusive of the various types of parents that make up the school's community. When programs do not conduct this inclusivity analysis, the practice of parental involvement tends to be less effective (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Staff participants mentioned small ways of increasing parental involvement such as including parents in graduation celebrations or making time to meet with parents about their child's progress in ESL. District B hired a consultant who specialized in expanding parental involvement. While this was a district-wide endeavor, they did see specific results in Arabic-speaking refugee mothers attending more meetings. A strategy that the consultant used was giving voice to the parents in meetings and having round table discussions. ESL Specialist A said that

> "[The Arab mothers] were impressed with [the workshop] because they felt like they were finally being asked to contribute as opposed to be told do this or that…so it was getting feedback from them…They felt so good that they were included and that they were asked for their input."

Teacher B also claimed that they felt there was more support from parents when they were given the opportunity to voice their opinions in a newcomer-specific meeting and speak with staff afterwards. They said,

> "The community has a low bar for what [refugee] parents are able to do and support. I think some of those parents said some of the most profound things in the meeting and were educating us about what to remember. So, giving the parents a voice, not just bringing them in to tell them what we need them to do, I think that was key."

Outreach Worker A, Outreach Worker B, and Teacher B, each discussed their perception that coming to the schools was intimidating or scary for refugee mothers. While Rima and Zainab both felt this way due to the language gap, the staff participants also attributed this to cultural differences. Outreach Worker B explained,

"I feel like a lot of them, in their culture, they feel like…all of these people [at the school] are highly educated, they're trained, they're professionals. So, I'm sending my child there, so they know what to do. So, they don't feel comfortable even to come asking."

The staff felt it was important to be direct about letting parents know that they can come to the school any time they have a question or concern and was critical for increasing parental involvement at the school.

4.2 Bridging social capital to other parents and community members

The study by Allan & Catts (2014) focused on refugee students and not parents, but it still provides valuable lessons of how the schools fostered bridging social capital. For example, school events were planned with bridging practices in mind, which for mothers could mean intentional mixing of refugee and established parents. Teachers also kept students from forming cliques or excluding refugee students. This conscious effort to promote diversity and respect towards differences could also be used for parental involvement programs.

One aspect of Portes' (1998) theory of social capital is how it can be used in extra-familial relationships to more easily gain benefits, such as important information or access to resources. This section reviews programs in which Houston schools are actively creating bridging connections. It also suggests other areas in which improvements could be made for the benefit of refugee mothers.
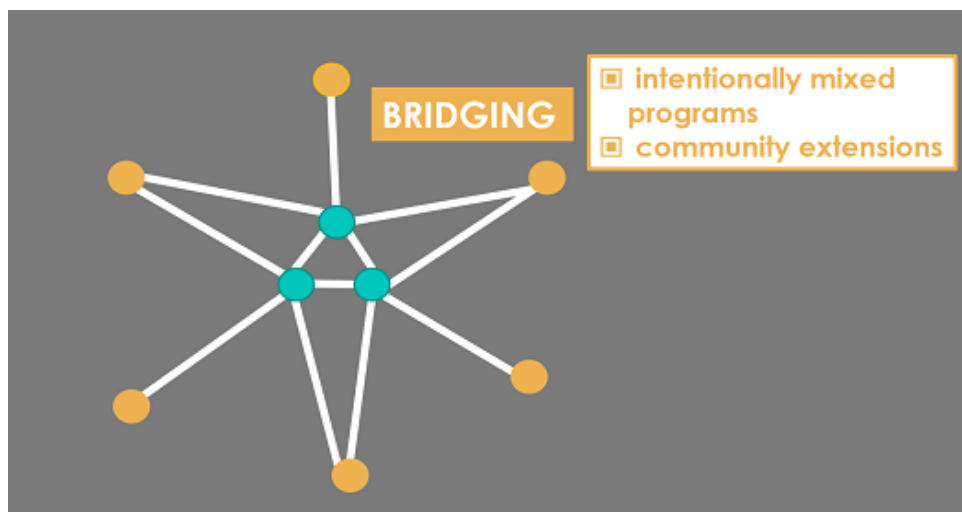

Figure 5: Summary of findings for bridging social capital

Not all events held at the schools that staff discussed were specific to newcomer families. Outreach Worker B and Outreach Worker C discussed parent nights held every semester in which all families are welcome, and interpretation is still provided—but it was rare at these events that newcomer and established parents would actually mingle. In order for schools to create bridging connections between parents that could lead to information sharing or meaningful relationships, there must be more intentionality behind the event or program to make this a priority. Bridging must occur for refugees to integrate into their new countries, and as integration is a two-way process, it requires the receiving society to also reach out (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). Social capital and integration are also deeply connected in relation to refugee groups, but for the purposes of this study we will focus on how dialogue and active participation of both groups are needed to create bridging social capital between refugees and established members of the society.

At one of the high schools in District B, Teacher B talked about a counselor who decided to make intentional connections after receiving complaints from established families that refugees were diverting classroom resources, such as the teacher's attention, away from their own children. They explained,

> "[The school] did a breakfast where they invited the parents of the refugees and the PTA moms…We just setup this to give [them] some time to get to know other community members...[the parents] said it was one of the most powerful things that [the school] had done at that point…now they're connecting as parents with each other."

Meaningful contact, including sharing personal experiences and forming relationships, is key to changing mindsets of people who do not yet promote inclusive norms (Downs-Karkos, 2019). The relationships that were formed at this breakfast meeting spurred friendships and other programs that continued even a few years later. Through meeting at the school, the rhetoric and sentiments towards refugees was flipped to a positive connotation.

After receiving similar complaints from parents at other schools, District B assisted one of the PTA mothers who had attended the breakfast in establishing an ESL program for refugee mothers in one of the apartment complexes where many lived. Teacher B went to this community to talk to the refugee mothers because they were feeling unwelcome in their neighborhood, and she encouraged them to attend the class. Other established parents became involved in this program or wanted to connect to refugee families in other ways, so the district partnered with a local community organization to create a mentoring program for families to connect. Teacher B described it as an opportunity for friendship,

> "When you have a friend that knows all of [the answers to your questions], you just need to call your friend…We need these moms and dads to have friends that they can call in the community with any questions that they can think of."

 I did not have the opportunity to interview someone involved in this group, but a local reporter talked to an Iraqi man about how the program who claimed it helped his family and made them feel more welcome (Jones, 2016). Like the women's empowerment group, these intentionally mixed programs gave opportunities for refugee women to connect with other mothers in their community who might be able to share information or resources with them.

All of the staff respondents also talked about the importance of partnering with community organizations to meet the various needs of their students and families. This was done through parent night events where members of community organizations come to inform families about their offerings. At one of these meetings, Elaf learned about the medical magnet program for her oldest daughter that she would not have known about otherwise. Outreach Worker C listed organizations which attend these events such as clinics, food pantries, furniture providers, after school programs, and more. By connecting refugee mothers to the people in these organizations, they are bridging connections to information or resources that they may not have known was available in their community.

According to staff, the biggest challenge to this mode of building social capital was getting refugee mothers to attend which was seen as an impediment to bridging connections. Outreach Worker A claimed,

> "I encourage parents all of the time to please come to the school, but it's an uphill challenge…it's the intimidation factor, the I don't know the language factor, it's a big system."

Some schools tried offering events on different days of the week and times of day to try and give families more opportunities to attend, but this was difficult with limited resources. However, one of the reasons the mothers said their friends did not attend events at the school was because they did not understand the information on the event flyer Once again, providing translated information upfront might also yield better turnout.

In Chapter 3, I discussed challenges that the mothers overcame through their own strategies, but could the schools have done more to assist with these obstacles through bridging social capital?

One of the critical barriers that the mothers discussed in their interviews was language and lack of formal interpretation in most settings. For schools that do have existing populations that speak refugee languages, more could be done to reach out to those established parents to request help with interpreting for meetings or translating documents. As Baez (2017) claimed, interpreters who were from the community made connections with parents even outside the school and served as a resource to answer the questions that families had in relation to the school or their child's education. It is also a tool to empower former refugees to transfer their knowledge to individuals or families who are in similar circumstances. These would still be considered bridging connections for the purpose of this study because the school is building social capital outside of its own staff.

Transportation was also a major challenge for the mothers because they did not have access to personal vehicles when they first arrived and did not understand the bus system. At a minimum, schools require that students have certain vaccinations which means parents must take them to a clinic. While resettlement staff will sometimes assist with this appointment, Sinobar, for example, did not experience this. If a volunteer from the school were available to drive families to these appointments, it would have been an opportunity for the school to build a bridging connection very early in its relationship with the family. A volunteer from the resettlement agency did take Elaf's family to the clinic for their appointment. She stated,

> "She helped me a lot. When I need anything, I call her."

Resettlement agencies will sometimes provide bus orientations to help refugees understand how to ride the bus and navigate the system, but this is not a guaranteed program. This is another opportunity that the school could provide to established parents to teach not only refugee mothers but the whole family about how to use the bus system which would increase their access to the whole community. Had Rima been given this opportunity to learn how to ride the bus from a fellow parent, she may have had the

courage to go to the school much earlier in her time in Houston rather than waiting for the family to get a car and her license.

Lastly, all of the mothers had either already experienced volunteering at the school or wanted to become involved. By finding more ways to get refugee mothers involved in volunteering–even if they have young ones at home or who need to come along–they are not only promoting potential bonding social capital by increasing interaction with school staff but also increasing the likelihood that they would meet other parents. It is possible that by implementing more ways that refugee mothers can volunteer at the school, they will feel more comfortable coming to other events or inserting themselves in leadership positions.

4.3 Non-existence of linking social capital in current school approaches

Linking social capital is the connections between people who have different levels of social power which gives those with less influence the ability to influence decisions (Allan & Catts, 2014). In the school setting, this can be done through structural changes at the school or even the district level (McGonigal et al., 2007). There is also opportunity for leadership roles in some parental organizations such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) (McGonigal et al., 2007).

The Whitings, famous psychological anthropologists, traveled the world to learn about parenting across different countries and found that women were active agents in changing their societies through multiple roles (Edwards & Bloch, 2010). Refugee mothers may have held this agency in their home countries, but it takes time to build the various forms of capital needed to create societal change, especially in an entirely new country. It is rare that refugees have power in addressing solutions to their challenges upon resettlement because there is a severe lack of linking social capital for this group (Nyers, 2006).
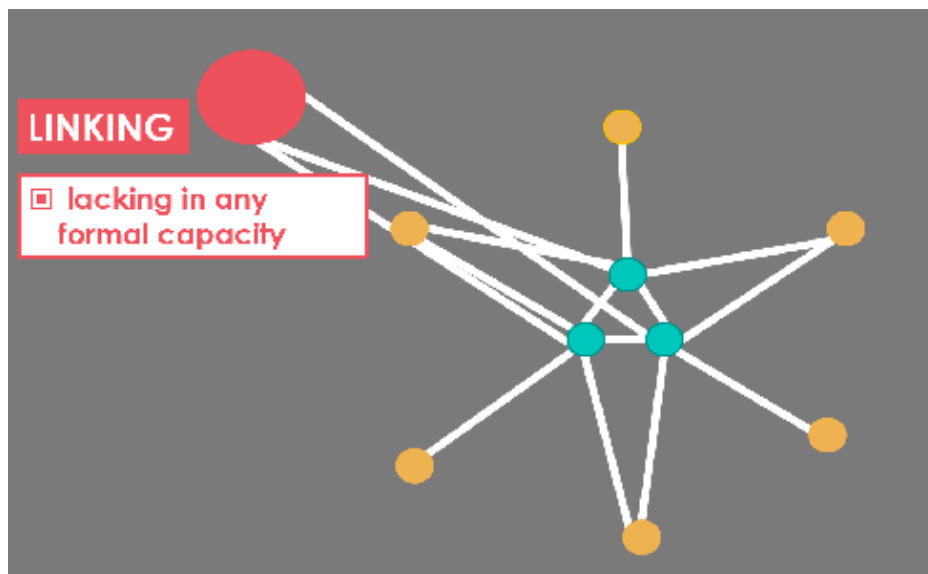
Figure 6: Summary of findings for linking social capital

In Columbus, Ohio, Chambers (2019) found that Somali mothers were the primary contact with the school for their family, which was limited, but more importantly observed that there was little to no participation in leadership positions at the school. Throughout all of the interviews, I did not come across any existing examples of linking social capital for refugee mothers in Houston schools. The closest example would be the expansion of parental involvement and amplifying the voice of parents at meetings, but this had more to do with increasing bonding social capital than making intentional ways to give power to refugee voices on a regular basis.

The parent handbooks for both of the districts mention the right for parents to be involved or serve as representatives in all activities at the district or campus level. Yet, refugee mothers require systemic changes in order to access these positions including the implementation of formal translation at all levels and strategic outreach to refugee mothers specifically to become active in leadership roles.

Linking social capital at schools can also be built between established and refugee families. Adler and Kwon (2002) argue that a dominant group will always emerge within a community when there is an unbalanced disruption of wealth, power, and association to people with power. Returning to the example in District B where established parents were voicing concerns over the redistribution of classroom resources because of refugee students, the situation could have resolved very differently. The established parents had acquired power as the dominant group and could have used their social capital to prevent refugee families from accessing the information, influence, and solidarity benefits they had accrued at the school over time

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(Adler & Kwon, 2002). However, the school took initiative to remove the power from the established parents and instead connected the two groups, which in turn gave refugee mothers access to the benefits of their social capital.

Finding ways to offer linking social capital to refugee mothers would require school and district leadership to be intentional about planning and implementing programs and opportunities for refugee mothers to voice their opinions on changes they would like to see in their schools. I did have the opportunity to ask the mothers what schools were doing that could be improved or expanded on. This might reflect some of the areas where leadership from this group would focus, but it is not exhaustive. Some of the topics they discussed were: to institute and/or improve tutorials, after school, and summer school opportunities; get funding for more comprehensive interpretation and translation services; have more orientation opportunities for refugees who come in the middle of the year; and create more inclusive volunteer opportunities.

Chapter 5: Creating schools rich in social capital for the benefit of refugee mothers and the school community

If schools took time to address how they approach social capital in their communities, it would most likely show that there is more that can be done to include and integrate refugee families into the school community. In order for social capital building efforts to be successful, there must be high degrees of closure, stability of relationships, reinforcement of inclusive norms, and continued maintenance of the bonds (Mawhinney, 2002). By restructuring systems, norms, and leadership towards socially and network rich schools, all persons will benefit, and refugee mothers would be able to tap into the wealth of information and resources that their schools have the potential to provide.

Recognizing how social capital can be used in the context of schools for refugee mothers is not enough without looking at what must be done to foster social capital creation. Schuller et al. (2000, p.35-38) listed a series of elements that are necessary for institutions to be social and network rich. These included: (1) focusing on patterns of relations, (2) examining micro, meso, and macro layers of relations, (3) promote multi and interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration, (4) reinsert values of trust, networks, and norms, and (5) explore complex issues. Coleman (1990) asserted that closure would also help in establishing trust and norms. With emphasis on the fourth element of this structure by multiple academics, this section will look at how schools can reinsert the values of trust, networks and norms into their relations with refugee mothers.

5.1 Children's safety and education are shared objectives of mothers and schools

If trust, networks, and norms are the means by which objectives are achieved through social capital, then it is necessary for schools to establish their objectives (Schuller et al., 2000). Most school have clear objectives for educating children and giving them a safe learning environment prominently displayed around the school (McGonigal et al., 2007). The mothers voiced similar goals for their children's education in their interviews, which is exemplified by Rima's statement,

> "[My kids] are my future. I see my future in my kids. I want the best for my kids."

The mothers' overall perception of education in the US was that the programs are good and, in some cases, even better than what they had experienced in their home country. Zainab said,

> "I even tell my kids I wish I can go back and study here."

She encourages her son to do well and graduate because his degree will be recognized across the world and will give him ample opportunities. Rima reflected how,

> "We left everything, families, jobs. Our hope is in our kids,
> so we want the best for them."

Therefore, she wants them to get the best education and to be safe and healthy. ESL Specialist A stated,

> "I think [Arab families] really supported the schools and
> wanted their children to learn…so that they can have a
> better life as they grew up."

though that is not to say that other communities do not. Outreach Worker A also commented,

> "Very often [mothers] are so happy to see their child at the
> school, and I think that's a positive…we've had several
> mothers who have asked if they can just sit in the classroom
> because they just want to be involved."

In order to meet these shared objectives and address some of the other elements for socially rich institutions listed by Schuller and colleagues (2000), schools must also equip parents to ensure their students' academic success, especially since this is mandated in their parent handbooks. For refugee mothers, this must account for barriers such as the gaps in language, culture, and understanding of systems discussed in earlier chapters. The following sections will discuss how schools can institute trust, networks, and norms to better include refugee mothers in order to reach this shared objective.

5.2 Reciprocal trust required for building social capital

Trust is a foundational component of social capital because it is built on reciprocity among individuals and groups (Coleman, 1990; Schuller et al., 2000). "Children's development will be best when members of the community foster trust… –as equal members–to promote strong associations and voluntary organizations for the common good" (Jack & Jordan, 1999). This trust is built between school staff and refugee mothers through the consistent communication streams which create bonding social

capital. The refugee mother participants who had regular communication with their children's schools trusted that their kids were receiving a quality education. There was also an expectation set by the districts' handbooks that parents and teachers treat each other with mutual courtesy and respect, which also fosters trust if carried through.

Because trust is reciprocal, there are also responsibilities that refugee mothers must uphold to promote trust with school staff. In order to ensure that their children are receiving what they need, parents must confer with their child's teacher about their progress and attend any parent-teacher conferences. They also have the responsibility to discuss any questions or concerns they have with the schools and actively participate in decisions related to the education of their child. If school staff know that parents are taking all of these steps, then they can trust that what is being developed at school is being reinforced at home.

It is critical that building trust between actors with different levels of power is part of the plan to further integrate social capital into schools' structure (Terrion, 2006). High degrees of closure can be met by promoting reciprocal relationships that go further than just the individual activities of parents but extend to the broader community (Mawhinney, 2002). Stability of relationships is important for refugee mothers who have experienced lots of movement and losses of social ties through their journey. While relationships with teachers are highly important, it is also crucial that they form trusting relationships with other staff members that they will interact with year to year, regardless of whose class their child is in.

These bonds of trust are important, but the expectations which reinforce them are only explicitly laid out in the districts' handbooks. I will cover this concern in the section on norms.

5.3 Extending networks for refugee mothers through schools

Networks consist of all of the nodes of connection an individual may have and use for different reasons (Schuller et al., 2000). For refugee mothers, their networks are small when they first arrive because they may not know many people outside of their resettlement agency or direct neighbors. Schools are one of the first places that refugee mothers will have opportunities to make connections with people from all backgrounds within their community. As can be seen from the example of the women's empowerment group, those early connections can be very beneficial to refugee mothers who need assistance in understanding new systems, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, and making new friends.

Schools can increase the networks of refugee mothers by providing more opportunities for them to interact with school staff, other parents, and external community members. A best practice held by community schools —schools which have "an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development"— is to "acknowledge and address issues of race and class and define diversity as a strength" (Berg et al., 2006). By being more inclusive through language offerings at school meetings, refugee mothers may be more likely to attend and also make meaningful connections with staff members or other parents because they have a mechanism to communicate. They may also meet more external community members who are present at these meetings. As mentioned in the previous chapter, schools can also promote bridging social capital by finding more ways for refugee mothers to volunteer that fits their diverse needs or explicitly asking them for help with specific volunteer tasks. Increasing the linking social capital of refugee mothers also extends their networks because they must come into closer contact with people in power such as school or district-level administration.

All of these are ways that refugee mothers can meet new people, expand their networks and therefore gain more social capital. These new points of contact may be the individual who can help them understand their child's report card, learn how to take the bus, enroll in community college classes, or access the local library for ESL courses.

5.4 Establishing norms through means other than parent handbooks

Social capital can be used to set norms that encourage certain behavior (Mawhinney, 2002). Teachers are familiar with norm-setting in the classroom, but it is also widely found throughout school campuses and even districts. Schools will sometimes place their norms as values on their website (Allan & Catts, 2014). Schools may use parent orientations to initiate these norms and reinforce them in parent-teacher conferences. In District A and District B, one of the only places where norms are explicitly outlined for parents is in the parent handbooks that the districts create each year.

Outreach Worker B claims that parents do not know their rights or responsibilities largely because of how inaccessible the handbook is to parents. It used to be given to every parent as part of their welcome packet for the year, but due to budget cuts, the district no longer has the ability to print out a copy for each parent. Instead, there is a letter that explains where the handbook can be found on the district or campus's website. The letter

also tells parents that they can request a printed copy from the school, but they have to understand this letter in order to know that these are the ways they can access the handbook. Additionally, District A only had translations available in Spanish and Vietnamese on their district website, and District B only had it available in English.

Teacher A and Teacher B discussed how staff were sometimes frustrated with refugee parents for not understanding their role in the school or in their children's education, for example not checking that their student was doing homework or looking for communications from the school that was sent home through the student. But when the handbook is not accessible to refugee mothers because of logistical and linguistic barriers, how can they be faulted?

Of the five refugee mothers who were interviewed, three of them had never received the handbook at all upon enrolling at the schools. The two who had received the handbook either found it unhelpful or could not remember anything that it covered. They were both offended that a handbook was used to tell them what their responsibilities were as a parent.

If norms are to be established through the schools, then there must be many other mechanisms used to include refugee mothers outside of parent handbooks. Trust and networks cannot be built if the norms that guide those interactions are not accessible and understood.

Of course, inclusive norms are important for refugee mothers who may experience discrimination in every other realm of their livelihood but seek a safe space to plug in at their child's school. These systemic changes cannot be made without alterations in the way schools are led. Leadership development in schools should shift to the inclusion model which prioritizes social capital by building up relational practices and increasing inclusion in all systems (Booysen, 2014). By promoting inclusivity through leadership, schools can develop their neighborhoods through "community engagement, shared leadership, and building community social capital" which should be core to a school's work (Beabout, 2014, p.562-563). This type of leadership would encourage linking social capital by enabling individuals to become part of the whole "through collaborative and respectful relationship practices" (Booysen, 2014, p.322). By addressing schools' leadership and further implementing some of the programs discussed in the sections on bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, schools can further establish norms and close the gap between staff and refugee families.

Lastly, these efforts must be maintained past refugees' initial arrival into the school or district and be cultivated for the entirety of the time their children are in the system. Coleman (1990) warns that social capital is not a stagnant

resource and instead must be cultivated and maintained by continuing to build upon existing trust, networks, and norms. Embedding the changes prescribed above will help address the sustainability of building social capital for refugee mothers throughout their children's academic career and hopefully beyond.

Chapter 6: Schools must undergo systemic changes to build social capital of refugee mothers

The refugee mothers in this study were resilient and active agents in their life course. However, the challenges that they faced after their initial resettlement in the US required incredible amounts of learning—language, culture, and systems—that could be alleviated through personal connections to information and other social capital resources. This study showed that schools can serve as connectors to these resources because they have existing mechanisms to produce bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. However, the interviews showed that access to these social capital resources was not always available to refugee mothers due to structural barriers including gaps in language and knowledge of systems and rights.

Especially for the refugee mothers who participated in this study, increasing their connectedness through schools could have helped facilitate their transition to living in the US. They were welcomed and inspired by the relationships they had established through the women's empowerment group and other settings. However, the schools needed to do more to recognize the importance of social connection for refugee mothers in meeting their shared objective and critically evaluate ways in which they can build social capital through trust, networks, and norms. This can only be accomplished through systemic changes in leadership style and acceptance and promotion of diversity.

Social capital theory provided a framework in which to assess how connections can be built between school communities and refugee mothers and why those connections could be useful resources. The works of Bourdieu (1997) and Coleman (1990) define the benefits of social capital for individuals either through collectively held resources, family relations, or community social organizations in the form of information sharing or expanding the purposes of organizations. By viewing the challenges that refugee mothers faced at the beginning of their resettlement through this framework, I assessed how increased social connections and building social capital could grant mothers access to crucial information and relationships. McGonigal and colleagues (2007) as well as Allan and Catts (2014) studied the issues of social capital intersections for refugees and schools with regard to inclusive practices but focused primarily on children. This study aims to expand on that knowledge and critically reflect on how building social capital can affect refugee mothers and how they are included in school communities. The inclusion and increased social capital of refugee mothers will in turn help schools reach their objective to educate students in a safe and supportive environment.

Schools, as a first point of contact for refugee mothers to their new community, need to address the issues of inclusivity in their norms, policies, and programs. Through literature, interview, and document analysis, it is evident that schools already produce social capital for community members. Therefore, schools can increase the connectedness of refugee mothers by building their social capital, but in order for refugee mothers to access these resources through the existing structures, intentional measures must be taken to make them more inclusive. This study suggests looking at best practices of community schools and inclusive leadership models to determine how schools can change their structures to build social capital for refugee mothers. As Coleman (1990) advised, these measures must also be implemented in a sustainable method that will continue to foster and grow social capital within the schools' community over time.

While this study attempted to prove that schools can increase social connectedness of refugee mothers by building their social capital, there were other aspects that should be further studied. Portes (1998) was concerned by the negative externalities that social capital might bring to individuals. The focus on Arab refugee mothers in this study did not lead to any significant findings on concerns of discrimination or Islamophobia occurring within interactions at the schools. However, this was a small sample size that cannot be fully representative of the population in this regard, so it is possible that discrimination occurs and could negatively impact building and sustainment of social capital. The study did not uncover any other significant negative results related to increased social capital. By expanding the number of participants and conducting ethnographic research that follows interactions between refugee mothers and the school for community at a closer level and over an extended period, this study could be improved to address these critical points.

The area of linking social capital for refugee mothers at schools was also lacking in data and significant discussion. In order for refugee mothers to fully access their agency and voice in their children's education, they must be able to influence or become leaders in educational institutions. It is imperative that further research is done on this aspect of building social capital for refugee mothers in order to hold schools and districts accountable for addressing the needs of their entire population.

Social connections are important to feel welcome in any setting. Recently resettled refugee mothers should be able to find these connections at their children's schools. It is imperative that school communities and leaderships begin promoting inclusive practices that can build the social capital of refugee mothers which will provide benefits to all.

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