

**The Effects of Music on Refugee Childrens' Development,
Acculturation, and Wellbeing**

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MUSC 499C

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March 2, 2023

Although highly politicized in recent times, the long-standing practice of immigration shaped much of the modern world, forming entire cultures and even nations. Times have changed since ancient nomadic people relocated according to agricultural seasons, yet the basic needs for food, shelter, and safety continue to stimulate migration. Economic, political, and societal forces all influence current migration patterns and compel millions of individuals to leave their homes. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 2021, these people numbered 89.3 million worldwide and included refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum seekers.¹

REASONS FOR MIGRATION

The uncontrollable circumstances compelling individuals to leave their homes include natural phenomenon such as drought and severe weather patterns. Experts attribute these events to climate change and predict their occurrences will only increase in the near future. Other factors influencing migration include violence and war. Recent history provides ample evidence for this type of displacement. Begun in 2011, the Syrian civil war has uprooted millions of people. According to the 2021 UNHCR Global Trends Report, 27% of all refugees globally trace their roots back to war-torn Syria, making Syrians the largest refugee group in the world.² More recently, Vladimir Putin's invasion of neighboring Ukraine has displaced millions. By May 2022, over 5 million had fled the country; a number the UNHCR predicts will eventually reach 8.3 million.³

While war compromises the safety of many, others flee violence from militants, gangs, or oppressive governments, who often target victims based on their race, religion, or political affiliation. Individuals fleeing their home country to escape such persecution may apply for

refugee status in another nation and, if approved, receive protection. Governments recognize these individuals as asylum seekers.⁴ In spite of the distinction between the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker,” both refer to individuals fleeing circumstances beyond their control. Therefore, to eliminate unnecessary confusion, this paper will refer to both groups using the term “refugees” except when it seems necessary to do otherwise.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Though many refugees flee to neighboring countries, others traverse oceans and continents hoping to find safety. As of 2020, more were seeking asylum in the West rather than remaining close to their home country. Many affluent nations also function as resettlement countries by accepting individuals once housed in refugee camps.⁵ One of these countries, the United States, houses refugees from around the world. Though originally colonized through migration, the United States of today greets refugees with a capricious regard influenced by political powers and world events. The terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, prompted a shift in United States immigration policy attested to by the USA Patriot Act, which attempted to protect U.S. citizens from potentially dangerous migrants.⁶

Since that time, U.S. presidents have frequently employed executive action to enact immigration policy.⁷ For example, the repercussions of the Trump and Biden administrations’ executive actions affect refugees each day. Trump’s aggressive policies focused heavily on protecting current citizens, sometimes to the extent of violating foreign nationals’ human rights. His Migrant Protection Protocol program, (also known as the Remain in Mexico Policy), forced asylum seekers at the border back into Mexico to await processing. While there, asylum seekers languished in unsafe conditions, at times falling prey to further abuse and crimes including

assault.⁸ In addition, this administration even removed children from their parents in an attempt to deter immigration. Psychiatrist Noshene Ranjbar notes this forced separation traumatized families and may result in mental and physical health disorders in these children.⁹ Researcher Laura Alexander also examined the treatment of asylum seekers during the Trump and Obama administrations and concluded that it failed to meet even the standards international law requires for prisoners of war.¹⁰

Although the Biden administration promised immigration reform, its attempts to repeal various Trump era policies have been less than successful. For example, its early removal of the Remain in Mexico policy met with resistance. However, in the summer of 2022, the Supreme Court decided in Biden's favor,¹¹ and the administration is now free to pursue the termination of this program. The Biden administration has also worked to reunify several separated families.¹²

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES BEFORE AND AFTER MIGRATION

Before a host country can positively or negatively influence the migration experience, many refugees undergo devastating trauma and loss prior to resettlement. In a sample study conducted by Utrzan and Wieling, Syrian refugees described how they had gone from living happy, normal, and for some, even affluent lives, to facing hard choices due to escalating danger.¹³ One Syrian refugee saw the situation as so dire that he had no other option but to leave— “It is a decision that has to be made.”¹⁴

The traumatic experience of witnessing violence and death acts as the compelling force for some.¹⁵ In Hyojin Im's interviews of Hmong refugees, one woman described her close encounters with death at the age of nine during the war in Laos. “I was running from bullets. I

felt the bullets zoom over my shoulders and passing the side of my head.”¹⁶ Another refugee from Syria told researchers he repeatedly suffered beatings in his home country.¹⁷

Once a family or individual decides to relocate, they can encounter many hardships and traumas embedded in the migration process as their lives quickly and drastically change. Utrzan and Wieling document these difficulties including the separation that may occur when a father leaves his family behind until he becomes established in a new country. Others wait in camps where they may fall victim to disease and violence¹⁸ or lack adequate resources.¹⁹ Since many refugees are forced to abandon valuable resources in their country of origin, they must look to others for basic support. This sense of helplessness may continue for some time and foster greater risk taking in the pursuit of ultimate safety.²⁰

Throughout the migration journey, many refugees bear the emotional weight of change, trauma, and loss. Utrzan and Weiling describe their burden as “intense emotional discomfort,” which has physical and mental ramifications that can include increased anxiety, depression, emotional numbness, PTSD, and self-isolation.²¹ Im also notes the mental impact from the profound losses that mark their lives, some of which are tangible, others psychological like the destruction of normalcy.²²

Unfortunately, arrival in a host country does not signal the end of these physical and emotional stressors. Im even notes that, for the majority of Hmong refugees in her study, “resettlement was the most stressful event and provoked enormous psychosocial distress.”²³ Some of the challenges of integration reverberate from the collision of cultures. The process by which refugees navigate through a variety of cultures is known as acculturation. Im mentions that this process involves both the “maintenance of cultural tradition and contact and adoption of the culture of the host society.”²⁴ However, not all refugees experience acculturation to the extent

of accepting both cultures. While some do maintain their connections with each, others reject one or both with differing mental health consequences.²⁵

Refugees may feel isolated and lonely during resettlement and lack social support.²⁶

Utrzan and Wieling note that past trauma can act as a barrier to deep relationships, and state that during resettlement, refugees find it difficult to cultivate relationships with old and new friends.²⁷

Im adds that refugees frequently experience marginalization “due to their legal status and political labeling.”²⁸ This may be a contributing factor in many of the Hmong refugees she interviewed finding their social support from only a few people within their own ethnic community. Maintaining this limited network can lead to a strain on available social capital and material resources.²⁹

This scarcity of resources may further challenge the assimilation process. Utrzan and Wieling report that some Syrian refugees struggled to find adequate housing in the U.S. Other refugees cannot work traditional jobs because of hindrances including childcare responsibilities.³⁰ Elise Witt, a teacher at a refugee school, notes the employment challenges faced by some, who are forced to work below their level of education because they lack English language competency.³¹

For many refugees, this language barrier compounds an already challenging situation. It can derail opportunities for socialization, employment, education, and health care.³² Ehsue Moo, a refugee from Burma (Myanmar) now living in the United States, summarized all these challenges, “We have nothing ... like a plain slate. Like we have nothing on our plate, right? That's how we start our life here with no English, with no friends.”³³

REFUGEE MINORS

According to the UNHCR, there are globally over four and a half million people seeking asylum with another twenty-seven million confirmed refugees. Of the latter, about 50% are minors,³⁴ who are sometimes even more vulnerable than the refugee population as a whole. According to Im, children often occupy a “less empowered” position within their families³⁵ and therefore face unique challenges. For example, difficult circumstances sometimes push refugee children into parental roles at a young age.³⁶ Witt mentions that her students often prepare meals for their families and complete necessary applications because of their superior English language skills. She says, “They're ending up being kind of the grown up in the family... they have to do adult things pretty quickly.”³⁷ However, both Witt and Andrés Ballestros, who teaches at an after-school music program for immigrant youth, emphasized that their students also face the ordinary dimensions of adolescence. “They're also teenage girls,” Witt said of her students, “they're just as silly and you know wacky and all of that as teenage girls are.”³⁸

THE PERSPECTIVE OF HOPE AND HONESTY

Though the situation of refugee children can appear bleak and the challenges endless, there remains great hope. Individual activists must operate through this hope while maintaining honesty in their assessments if they wish to see progress in any sphere of injustice. Though honesty and hope may not at first appear compatible, each are essential for igniting change. Without an accurate view of the problem, advocates cannot innovate an appropriate solution. However, a sole focus on the gravity of a problem may lead to despair rather than change. Paulo Freire, who extensively researched education, states that “in the domain of socioeconomic

structures, the most critical knowledge of reality ... does not itself alone effect a change in reality.”³⁹ Individuals must maintain a hopeful vision of what the future could be.

Freire says of hope that “alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly.”⁴⁰ Researchers Bishundat, Phillip, and Gore add that “loosing hope causes us to become stagnant ... takes away our sense of agency to act as leaders, and widens the gap between espoused and actualized values.”⁴¹ When hope and honesty fuse together however, change becomes possible. This union, known as Critical Hope, “reflects the ability to realistically assess one’s environment through a lens of equity and justice while also envisioning the possibility of a better future.”⁴² This paper attempts to offer just such a perspective in its discussion of refugee children globally and specifically in the United States. Though refugee children in the U.S. face tremendous hindrances in adjusting to a new country, culture, and life, through a critical hope framework, advocates can recognize and employ available resources including music and music making that can mitigate the negative effects of the relocation process.

MUSIC TO AID EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In order to observe the effects of music in action, the author visited The Global Village Project located in Decatur, Georgia. Created in 2009 by a group of volunteers to meet the needs of a few newly arrived refugee girls, The Global Village Project (GVP) now includes a team of dedicated staff members, about a hundred volunteers, and several dozen students mainly from Asia and central Africa. The organization exists to prepare refugee girls, some of whom have no formal education or English language skills, for high school in the United States. In a single year, students advance through several grade levels in a variety of subjects including language,

science, and math. Teachers work together to make learning an interdisciplinary process with some viewing music class as “the heart of the school.”⁴³

One of the aspects that makes GVP music classes so unique is how they are used to fill students’ educational deficits in a variety of subjects. If students struggle to grasp a particular concept, they write or learn a song about it. Ehsoe Moo, a GVP alumnus, cites one example when math teacher Linda Smiley set the mathematical order of operations to the popular children’s song “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes.” Under the leadership of music director Elise Witt, this song came to music class as well. After learning the song, Moo would use it to help her complete math assignments. She says this song helped her and fellow classmates “work out ... math problem that we don’t understand.”⁴⁴ According to Witt, this reinforcement of academic knowledge through music catalyzes learning because “once you learn something in a song, you’ll never forget it, right?”⁴⁵

In addition to assisting with difficult academic concepts, GVP music classes help students develop English language skills. A secure grasp of the native language will allow them to communicate with the broader community thereby expanding their limited social network. Furthermore, English language competency can help them succeed first in school and later within the competitive job market. At GVP, this process begins simply with the many songs Witt teaches containing English words and phrases that gradually become internalized as students see, hear, and repeat them. Witt, herself a multi-linguist, states, “For me music is the easiest and best way to learn language.”⁴⁶

MUSIC TO FOSTER COMMUNITY

While GVP music classes are decidedly educational, they also create community and a sense of belonging for a group of students vulnerable to isolation and loneliness. At GVP, music became a force that drew Ehsue Moo into relationship with her fellow students. She indicated that the multilingual songs especially brought the girls together. Witt and her students created these songs together by taking words or phrases and translating them into their various languages. After Witt combined these translations into songs, Moo describes how her class “would sing them together so we would all feel like we were part of the school.”⁴⁷ Though multilingual lyrics can play an important role in building community, Witt indicates that music is not tied to language. She says it enables the students, who come from different countries and linguistic backgrounds to “be together without language barriers.”⁴⁸

Another way music can foster community is through the creation of a shared repertoire. This was the case for Kareem, a newly arrived migrant student who used a common song to connect with a researcher before entering into a place of greater vulnerability and sharing one of his own.⁴⁹ Güney et al. discuss this benefit as seen in music therapy sessions. They note that in these instances, music became a tool for children to use in their interactions.⁵⁰

MUSIC TO DEFINE AND MAINTAIN IDENTITY

In addition to promoting community among refugee students, music may help them make sense of their diverse cultures and multifaceted identity.⁵¹ Because of migration, refugee students are exposed to and required to function within cultural systems that differ from their or their parents’ native worldview. The process of assimilating these various cultures into one identity may prove disorienting for students and lead them to question who they are. Ballesteros mentions this conflict in relation to his native-born students whose parents immigrated to the

U.S. He says, “They are in a lot of cases trying to define themselves... for themselves” in the face of two different cultures.⁵² Throughout this challenging process, music may act as a tool that helps refugee children establish and maintain a multicultural, multifaceted identity. Kathryn Marsh, who conducted extensive research regarding musical play, argues that immigrant children can explore their “multiple, complex and fluid cultures” through music.⁵³ Music educator Sidsel Karlsen also acknowledges the link between music and identity, describing it as a “medium through which identities and frames for action are negotiated.”⁵⁴

One type of music that may be particularly important in identity maintenance and formation is homeland music, which according to Karlsen may help children “maintain a continuity of self throughout the life-span.”⁵⁵ For refugee children born outside their country of origin, a parents’ ethnic music can provide a link to their cultural roots. One student who had never seen his parents’ home country of Sri Lanka expressed the necessity of maintaining connection with one’s roots even in a new culture. He said, “it is important to *be* from Sri Lanka,” and identified Sri Lankan music as one way to maintain this part of his heritage. Other students in this study expressly tied cultural identity to their ethnic music with one student declaring, “It is part of who we are.”⁵⁶ In another study, a group of refugee students in Norway shared songs from their homelands, some of which were associated with absent family members.⁵⁷

Music classes also provide opportunities for students to explore various aspects of their identities. In both the Global Village Project music classes and in a music therapy session for Syrian refugee children, students take turns conducting a group of their fellow classmates. In the latter case, Güney et al. report that children grew in confidence through conducting their peers and were more “decisive and assertive” in the subsequent conducting exercise.⁵⁸ Another project

in a Palestinian Refugee Camp allows students with a higher skill level to instruct younger less experienced musicians. In this program, several older students selected to be assistant teachers take on certain teaching tasks, such as leading a rehearsal, while still learning from their own instructors.⁵⁹

For another young refugee student, music became an opportunity to expand his identity. Newly resettled in Norway, Kareem attended specialized classes to prepare him for the larger education system. One day Kareem spontaneously requested to sing a romantic ballad for an upcoming schoolwide assembly. His highly praised performance changed his reputation, which had previously been marked by a lack of language ability and volatile behavior. It also prompted the school staff to see similar students in a more positive light.⁶⁰

Music programs may also increase self-esteem and agency among refugee students who generally command a lesser degree of influence within their communities.⁶¹ One music program located in Baltimore Maryland, seeks to assure participants of their worth in the community by giving them a voice through music— specifically composition. Originally launched in 2018, Desea Soñar began as a one-time outreach for a group of nine unaccompanied minors. Since then, the program has grown to include refugee, immigrant, and first-generation Latino youth. Part of its mission, as outlined by lead teacher Andrés Ballestros, is to communicate to participants that, “you may be new here, but your voice is important ... and it’s valuable and it’s worth being shared.”⁶² A similar goal guides a music project among refugees in Lebanon which seeks to “provide channels and arenas where the participants can become visible.”⁶³ Storve et al. argue that this program may foster empowerment and a feeling of mastery among its refugee students.⁶⁴

Along with the powerful effects music programs can have on identity formation, they also provide a reprieve from everyday roles and responsibilities. Due to the circumstances of migration, refugee students may experience burdensome familial roles that extend beyond age-related norms. Storsve et al. describe how students in a music program for Palestinian refugee children find relief from these obligations and experience “free time” while music making.⁶⁵ When discussing a group of former students, Ballestros also notes how they looked forward to Desea Soñar’s weekly meetings, which he considers a sufficiently worthy outcome for the program.⁶⁶

MUSIC FOR EMOTIONAL RELEASE

Music making has also been used to provide refugee students with the opportunity to express emotions and promote trauma healing. In a multimodal program for Syrian refugee children, the majority of students “had never been given a chance to express their feelings about their experiences.”⁶⁷ One way the program addressed this deficit was through song writing. During the creation of a particular composition, the children decided on an upbeat melody paired with lyrics that “reflected their mixed emotions” including sorrow.⁶⁸

The act of playing music can also release emotions associated with trauma. In one study involving a group of soldiers diagnosed with PTSD, loud drumming became a means of releasing anger and tension. After this drumming, participants reported feelings of relief and empowerment. Although these percussive creations also caused traumatic war memories to resurface, by the end of the study these associations no longer intimidated participants.⁶⁹

Kathryn Marsh describes another situation in which music making provided emotional release. For two young refugee girls, the song “My Dear Iraq,” became a means of expressing

grief and longing after the loss of their father and homeland. Every night one of the girls sang and cried through the lyrics which express sorrow, pain, and exile.⁷⁰ Güney et al. conclude that for children with past trauma, music therapy acts as an aid “to express their emotions and feelings in a safe manner.”⁷¹

GROUP MUSIC PROGRAMS: DIFFICULTIES AND BENEFITS

While refugee students can benefit from solitary and one-on-one interactions with music, certain effects may be difficult to achieve in these settings. For example, if students are to engage in leadership roles, they must have fellow classmates to guide and teach. Furthermore, in all the above examples where music fostered community, more than one individual was involved. For these reasons, group music programs seem to offer greater value for refugee students than individualized lessons. However, simultaneously teaching music to multiple students with varying backgrounds and experiences often proves to be challenging.

For music groups with multiple skill levels represented, instructors must find or create material that is appropriately challenging for each student. Teachers need music “that engages ... offers challenges and possibilities for everyone ... is enduring ... and even suitable for a concert performance.”⁷² Students may also have differing levels of English language competency which can hinder communication. If the music program seeks to develop participants’ language skills, teachers like Witt may have difficulty finding repertoire that is “musically complex and satisfying and linguistically simple.”⁷³

Tensions can also arise when students’ cultural backgrounds interact. Cultural conflicts occur even among Ballestros’ students who share the same ethnicity yet grew up in different countries.⁷⁴ Some of these representative cultures may even clash over music itself. For example, certain Muslims believe music may be harmful to children.⁷⁵ Teachers of these students would

have to carefully navigate through curriculum and activities so as not to offend their cultural values.

In addition to addressing the varying needs of students, group music projects must also remain flexible and centered around the students they seek to serve. Storsve et al. note that their music program among Middle Eastern refugee students is always changing. They even suggest that this flexibility may be “what the Palestinian refugees are missing in other arenas or communities of practices.”⁷⁶

While representing formidable challenges for group music interventions, these difficulties must be weighed alongside the tremendous benefits of collective music making for refugee students. In addition to being the best model for creating community and allowing for leadership opportunities, group music making increases students’ motivation.⁷⁷ As a result, they may be more invested in music making and ultimately become better musicians than if they studied in isolation. Finally, group music classes allow more students to experience the developmental and healing power of music than would otherwise be possible.

CONCLUSION

Though an underappreciated subject at times, music education may profoundly alter the experience of refugee students. Children immigrating to the United States face many challenges from their tumultuous past, disorienting present, and uncertain future. Without support through the acculturation process, children may become marginalized— disconnected from their cultures and facing increased mental health challenges. Im mentions that this marginalization may create “inequalities and stereotypes that spread throughout the culture.”⁷⁸ Refugee students may be

forced into a lower class with fewer opportunities⁷⁹— their gifts, talents, and experiences squandered on a culture that failed to encourage their participation and development.

Though creating group music classes is only one strategy for fostering refugee childrens' inclusion and wellbeing, it is an achievable course of action that several organizations are taking. These institutions, some of which are discussed in this paper, do not ignore the needs of refugee students and refuse to allow present problems to define the future narrative. In doing so, they follow the spirit of critical hope and its mandate to enact positive change. As the United States' refugee population continues to grow, local communities should begin considering if a similar group music project could mobilize their assets to meet student needs. These emerging music initiatives can learn from the examples of The Global Village Project, Desea Soñar, and other structured music classes and create their own programs that can profoundly influence the lives of some of America's most vulnerable children.

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² UNHCR, 2022b, p.17

³ Treisman, 2022

⁴ UNHCR, 2022c

⁵ Hatton, 2020, p. 76-7

⁶ Donato & Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020, p. 7

⁷ Donato & Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020, p. 8

⁸ Miro, 2022

⁹ Ranjabar, 2019, p. 325-9

¹⁰ Alexander, 2020

¹¹ Miro, 2022

¹² Shapiro, 2021

¹³ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 216-222

¹⁴ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020 p. 219

¹⁵ Im, 2021, p. 55; Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 220

¹⁶ Im, 2021, p. 56-7

¹⁷ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 220

¹⁸ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 221

¹⁹ Im, 2021, p. 57

²⁰ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 219

²¹ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 212-221

²² Im, 2021, p. 50

²³ Im, 2021, p. 60

²⁴ Im, 2021, p. 51

²⁵ Im, 2021, p. 51

²⁶ Im, 2021, p. 50

²⁷ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 211

²⁸ Im, 2021, p. 51

²⁹ Im, 2021, p. 58-62

³⁰ Im, 2021, p. 58

³¹ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, pp. 220-3; Witt, 2022

³² Im, 2021, p. 53

³³ Moo, 2022

³⁴ UNHCRa, 2022

³⁵ Im, 2021, p. 52

³⁶ Utrzan & Wieling, 2020, p. 212

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- ³⁷ Witt, 2022
³⁸ Witt, 2022
³⁹ Freire, 1994, p. 30
⁴⁰ Freire, 1994, p. 8
⁴¹ Bishundat et al., 2018, p. 94
⁴² Bishundat et al., 2018, p. 91
⁴³ Witt, 2022
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⁴⁹ Rinde & Kenny, p. 627
⁵⁰ Güney et al., 2018, p. 100
⁵¹ Marsh, 2017
⁵² Ballesteros, 2022
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⁵⁴ Karlsen, 2013, p. 63
⁵⁵ Karlsen, 2013, p. 167-8
⁵⁶ Karlsen, 2013, p. 167-68
⁵⁷ Rinde & Kenny, p. 626
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⁶² Ballesteros, 2022
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⁶⁷ Güney et al., 2018, p. 107
⁶⁸ Güney et al., 2018, p. 102
⁶⁹ Bensimon et al., 2008, p. 40-4
⁷⁰ Marsh, 2017
⁷¹ Güney et al., 2018, p. 100
⁷² Storsve et al., 2010
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⁷⁵ Storsve et al., 2010
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⁷⁸ Im, 2021, p. 52
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