Article

Coloniality and Refugee Education in the United States

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Abstract: In this paper, we demonstrate the ways in which the schooling of refugee youth in the United States reflects ongoing coloniality in education. Drawing on data collected in a case study, conducted between 2013 and 2016, as part of a larger ongoing ethnography of a Southwest United States District school's response to refugee students, we show how the enactment of policies, pedagogies, and practices within schools reinforce the government's control over refugee students and their families. In schools, the students are kept out of certain school spaces, marginalized in remedial courses, and denied academic opportunities and integrated support services. Using empirical data, we demonstrate how the restriction of the students' movement in and around schools is embedded within the larger limitations embedded in coloniality and assimilation. We situate our analysis within the tensions and interactions between coloniality, assimilation, and neoliberalism as articulated in studies within anthropology and sociology, migration studies, critical refugee studies, and cultural studies. We conclude with a call for the decolonization of education and offer a practical starting point in refugee education.

Keywords: assimilation; coloniality; refugee; United States; case-study

1. Introduction

Few words map humanity's evolution more clearly than colonialism. (Cohen 2023)

The promise of assimilation for U.S. nationalism, indeed is the eventual obliteration of the immigrant through "Americanization". The assimilation problematic, after all, rationalizes a series of mutations through which the alien difference of the immigrant gets incorporated as the ethnic and eventually must become "American". Thus, the hegemonic immigration discourse that subordinates the immigrant to the assimilationist demands of "Americanization" is the ultimate route through which one or another "native's point of view" may contribute to the continuous production of an "American" national identity. (De Genova 2005, p. 85)

For refugee youth in the United States (US), the demands of Americanization and contemporary colonialism, or what Quijano terms the "coloniality matric/pattern of power" (2007), are ever present in the daily enacted policies, norms, pedagogies, structures, and curricula of public schooling. In schools, coloniality, "the long-standing patterns of power that emerged from colonialism" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 243) becomes entangled with notions of assimilation "that assume an irreversible movement of immigrants over time towards the white middle class and, subsequently, their integration into US society . . . " (Khoshneviss 2019, p. 507). This is evident across the modern US education system through a regulation of the formation, production, and distribution of knowledge that delegitimizes indigenous and colonized cultured ways of knowing (Koyama and Turan 2023). In US schools, refugees are often situated, and treated, as outcast, precarious, unfamiliar, and unstable (Nguyen 2012). They are, in simplest terms, not (yet) American.

To study the experiences of refugee students in the US, we employ an epistemic concept of coloniality which is not limited to particular geographic locations or to historically

specific colonizers, but rather to a broader perspective that views coloniality as embedded within, and inextricably necessarily bound to, modernity. Yet, because we agree with Mignolo (2001) that "[t]he imaginary of the modern/colonial world is not the same when viewed from the history of ideas of Europe as when looked at from the perspective of colonial difference [through] the histories forged by the coloniality of power in the Americas, Asia, or Africa" (p. 26), we explore coloniality here in a unique US context only—the education of refugees. Coloniality and assimilation are both racialized and the racialized treatment of various populations in the US, including refugees from Southern Asian, the Middle East, and Africa, are bound to their colonial histories and current geopolitical factors through which, despite the absence of direct US colonial rule, colonial relationships are retained (Grosfoguel 2004). Further, as argued by Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), "racialisation may operate on grounds other than bodily stigmatisation, adding such factors as immigration and religion", where the category of immigrant can substitute for race (p. 20) and migration categories, such as refugee and asylum seeker, become part of contemporary forms of racialized categorization.

Historically and contemporarily, the US has exerted and continues to exert substantial economic and political power over Latin and South America, as well as some Asian and African countries, driving migration patterns, policies and procedures globally. Refugees resettled and living in the US are subjected to discourses, policies, and daily practices that reify American nationalism, and make normal the "colonial tendencies of neoliberalism" (Dei 2019, p. 41). Specifically, Dei asserts that:

> It is a fact that, within schools, colleges and universities, disciplining bodies and knowledge (through discourses and practices of regulation, deregulation, competition and standardization) have ensured that what is deemed "education"—and how such education is produced and delivered serves individualized, private, corporate market and industrial capital interests. (p. 42)

Further, neoliberalism, as a form of governmentality and hegemony in schooling, as in other institutions, promotes and supports individualism and meritocracy, aims to control/normalize an individual's conduct, and opposes collective responsibilities and practices of equity. In public schooling in the US, the contemporary articulation of neoliberalism is evidenced through the standardization and narrowing of curriculum, repeated high-stake testing, linguicism, subgrouping of students by various proficiencies, and the ranking of schools (Baltodano 2023; Koyama 2021). It is, as we demonstrate, especially apparent in the education of refugees.

In this paper, we demonstrate the ways in which the schooling of refugee youth in the US is an ongoing project of coloniality. Drawing on data collected in a case study of a Southwest US school district's response to refugee students and their families, we draw attention to the ways the enactment of policies and practices within schools reinforce the government's control over the students and their families. Specifically, we look at the racialized segregation of refugee students of South-Asian, African, and Middle-Eastern descent (who were 90% of the refugees in our study), the tracking of these students into remedial courses, the limited academic supports they are offered, and the narrow academic opportunities available to them. We demonstrate how these refugee students are literally and figuratively limited in their movement in the schools, and we analyze this within our understandings of coloniality and assimilation.

1.1. Brief History of Policy and Discourse Associated with Refugee Education

The United Nations, in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, cites education as one of the rights. Article 26 of the Declaration reads:

> Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available

and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (United Nations 1948)

Further, Article 26 states that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Similarly in UNESCO's Education 2015 report, written more than 60 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, education is again, and necessarily, situated as a human right as one of the global sustainability goals. Of this, the summary of the report reads:

> Education is a human right and a force for sustainable development and peace. Every goal in the 2030 Agenda requires education to empower people with the knowledge, skills and values to live in dignity, build their lives and contribute to their societies. Today, more than 262 million children and youth are out of school. Six out of ten are not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy after several years in school. 750 million adults are illiterate, fueling poverty and marginalization. Ambitions for education are essentially captured in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of the 2030 Agenda which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. (UNESCO 2015)

There have also been attempts to include refugee education as part of national education systems through the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018), demonstrating that the UNHCR, as a UN institution, does more than track refugee education and share statistics about the schooling of refugee children worldwide.

As a UN institution, it also contributes to the discourse and framing of refugee education globally and encourages sovereign countries and local governments to implement their paradigm. In 2012, for instance, UNHCR changed their framing of refugee education from one of a separate education system, paralleling nation-state public education to one that promoted enrolling refugees into existing public school systems. Examining the UNHCR Education Strategies through a lens of colonialism, as we do here, one can recognize the risks associated with imposing a centric model of education on refugee communities. This can perpetuate colonial patterns of power and knowledge dissemination.

The historical context of refugee education policies and paradigms, deeply knotted with the legacies of colonialism, reveals a nuanced relationship between assimilation practices and the suppression of refugee knowledge, culture, and bodies. The UNESCO report's emphasis is on education as a basic human right, foundational for peace and sustainable development, urging a reimagined future where education transcends colonial legacies towards inclusivity and equity (2021). Yet, this is an aspiration, not a reality. Chimni's (2008) critique of assimilationist refugee-education approaches can be seen also in the UNESCO report's advocacy for pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity, where solidarity can be also interpreted as assimilation. Still, this report, informed by global consultations, stresses pedagogical approaches that foster intellectual, social, and moral capacities, emphasizing the need for an education system that is responsive to the challenges of sustainability, knowledge equity, and the cultivation of democratic values in the face of growing inequalities and climate crises. In these ways, the UNESCO report includes both notions of coloniality and more progressive (not necessarily decolonial) ideologies.

At the local level, Arizona's legislative changes in 2019, as detailed by Kaveh et al. (2022), mark a significant policy shift towards accommodating bilingual education by reducing Structured English Immersion (SEI) requirements. Parallels can be drawn with the need for refugee education paradigms that prioritize integration while respecting cultural identities. Such policy shifts illustrate the possibility of moving beyond assimilative education models towards those that empower refugees as agents of change within their communities and beyond, echoing UNESCO's call for a new social contract for education that mends injustices and transforms futures. However, as we discuss in our findings, in practice, refugee

students labeled as English learners are still segregated from the larger student population in two-hour SEI blocks and then in "integrated instruction" in content areas that include an emphasis on English learning, as well.

1.2. Literature: Refugees and Schooling in the United States

Education for refugees illuminates a gap between the promise of universal education as a human right and the reality of educating migrants globally (Dryden-Peterson 2016). According to the UNHCR's (2023) Education Report, which compiles data from 70 countries for the 2021–2022 academic year, the number of school-aged refugees increased nearly 50%, from 10 million to 14.8 million (UNHCR 2023). Among these, more than half, or more than 7 million youth, were not enrolled in formal schooling. The enrollment patterns for those attending school followed previous trends, with the greatest enrollment at primary level, as educational opportunities are severely limited after this level. According to the UNHCR's (2023) report, 38 percent were enrolled at the pre-primary level, 65 percent at the primary level, 41 percent at the secondary level, and only six percent at the tertiary level. In the US, an estimated 1.2 million resettled refugee students attend US schools, with an even distribution across K-12 grades.

What we know about the schooling of refugee students in the US, however, is limited.[1] Drawing on data reported by Child Trends, Moinolnolki and Han (2017) state that refugee and immigrant youth have higher rates of school dropout and lower rates of high school graduation than their peers. The reasons for these rates are several, including the reality that many refugee/(immigrant) students have suffered violence and extended trauma, as well as long periods of time out of formal schooling (Hos 2020). Yet, studies on the long-term effects of the trauma on the schooling of resettled refugees has yielded mixed findings. Halcón et al. (2004), for instance, find that Somali and Oromo refugees continue to suffer after resettlement in the US from issues associated with violence and war, while others adapt more easily to education and to their lives in the U.S. In their quantitative study of 184 newcomer immigrant and refugee youth, Patel et al. (2017) find that the youth who were exposed to war experienced greater self-reported anxiety, more behavior issues, and lower academic achievement in schools than those who were not exposed. Based on the survey findings, the exposure to trauma may have mediated some youths' ability to navigate school-related acculturation stressors.

Other studies (e.g., Bajaj and Bartlett 2020; Bajaj et al. 2022) focus on the effects of school contexts, programs, and practices on the schooling of refugee students. These studies illuminate the ways in which curricular, programmatic, and pedagogical approaches can marginalize the youth. For instance, they are often systematically placed/tracked into isolated areas of school campuses where English Language Development (EDL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses are taught, and thus have few interactions with the larger student body (Golden et al. 2014). As noted by Dryden-Peterson (2015), this aligns with current UNHCR policy, which advocates for refugees to be integrated into national education systems, which "by necessity . . . means adopting the language of instruction of the host country" (p. 8). Further, being isolated in English Language learning courses is part of, and compounded by, many teachers' lack of cultural responsiveness toward the students and the overall deficit framing of them (Betancourt et al. 2015). This can lead to unsafe and non-engaging school spaces in which refugee students do not feel they belong (Patel et al. 2017). Contrastingly, centering the voices of refugee students, Picton and Banfield (2020) offer suggestions for creating spaces where the students feel they belong, and the authors argue that these are not only within ESL classes.

In their work, Bajaj et al. (2022) offer multiple ways for teachers and school staff to create curricular, pedagogical and assessment processes that avoid tracking, segregating, and isolating refugee students. With empirical examples, they argue that these students' languages and experiences can be utilized as resources and integrated throughout the school learning. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) also suggest that refugee youth can benefit from a critical transnational curriculum and out-of-school teachings that pro-

vide important academic, language, and social supports to the students. More broadly, Bartlett et al. (2017) recommend that all schools avoid deficit framing and discourses regarding refugee students and their families by being more inclusive and culturally responsive. Koyama and Bakuza (2017), in their ethnographic study of a New York State District school's response to refugees and their families, demonstrate similarly that when refugee parents and families are invited to be authentically involved with the school in decision-making positions, their children remain in school and are more engaged.

1.3. Theory: Coloniality's Impact on Contemporary Refugee Education

The discussion of how colonization intersects with refugee education reveals a complex, multi-layered field that examines how colonial histories continue to affect the educational pathways and opportunities of refugees. Many of the current conflicts forcing people to seek refuge are rooted in colonial-era borders, ethnic and racial divisions, and power disparities. These historical factors not only underpin the reasons for refugee movements but also influence the educational backgrounds and requirements of these groups. In postcolonial nations, the remains of colonialism are evident in educational systems through the languages used for teaching, the content of curricula, and teaching methods. These elements often differ markedly from those in the countries where refugees resettle, creating significant power dynamics in the school environment. Existing power structures and the practical segregation within schools manifest colonial legacies within the educational experiences of refugee youth in the US.

The literature or discussion around the impact of colonialism/coloniality on refugee education is somewhat new to the US context, but more developed in European studies. In a recent piece, Dovigo (2023) discusses the influence of colonialism on refugee education, highlighting how colonial education has perpetuated Eurocentric assumptions that continue to shape educational practices and curricula. However, the author's approach to conceptualizing colonialism in refugee education suffers from providing only a historical analysis that substantiates its claims about the persistence of colonial legacies in educational strategies. While Dovigo advocates for decolonization, he narrowly critiques Eurocentrism, omitting other critical dimensions, including linguistic imperialism and socio-economic factors that perpetuate inequalities in refugee education. Moreover, by limiting the scope of refugee education to the context of Western host countries, Dovigo overlooks the broader geopolitical and historical forces driving mass migration, including the role of Western policies in creating conditions that necessitate migration. We aim to extend Dovigo's work through offering empirical examples and situating them within broad understandings of the profound and pervasive influence of colonialism within the context of refugee education.

We start our exploration of coloniality with the concept of the coloniality matrix/pattern of power, which refers to how colonial power structures and systems of oppression continue in societies after colonization. It involves the reproduction of institutionalized forms of oppression (Quijano 2000). As well-argued by Maldonado-Torres (2007),

> ... [C]oloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples. In aspirations of self, and in so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday. (p. 243)

Here, we show specifically how coloniality operates in the education of refugee students of Asian, Middle Eastern, and African descent.

One aspect of coloniality of power is that it introduces a classification based on race, which replaces dominance hierarchies with naturalized notions of inferiority and superiority (Balaton-Chrimes and Stead 2017; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000). This power model revolves around two aspects—the coloniality of power and modernity and Eurocentrism or, more recently, Americentrism. Coloniality—or the lasting power dynamics that emerged from colonialism and continue to shape aspects of culture, labor, relation-

ships between people, and knowledge production after direct colonial rule has ended (Quijano 2000)—position some, including refugees, as lesser. This influences processes related to identity and belonging, creating tensions and struggles.

As argued by Ghandi (2022): "... [R]esettlement is vexed when refugees resettle in settler colonial states" as their resettlement is already "predicated by the disposition of Indigenous peoples" (p. 2). Once resettled, coloniality influences how refugee communities are viewed and treated across multiple contexts, including those in schools. From this viewpoint, the education provided to refugees often takes a deficit-based approach, focusing on their traumas, shortcomings, and needs, rather than recognizing their capabilities, aspirations, and rights (Dryden-Peterson 2016). This approach is not so removed from the viewpoint that those who were colonized were lacking, and thus in need of "civilizing". One example can be seen in the school curriculum, which frequently lacks connections to refugee students' cultures, histories, and values. Instead, it tends to prioritize the culture and history of the host nation—in our study, the US—while disregarding or dismissing the histories, cultures, and identities that the students bring with them.

Moreover, the power dynamics within refugee education in the US often mirror those embedded in the larger system, which is replete with power differentials and hierarchies of authority over knowledge. In schools, refugee studies—and, by extension, their families—are the least Americanized and hold little official decision-making power. Because of this, refugee students and their communities are often marginalized when it comes to making decisions about their education. We can see vestiges of colonialism, as colonizers also assumed they knew what was best for those they colonized (Mignolo 2007; Narayan 1995). Part of this is reflected in the purposeful linguicism, which elevated/elevates the language of instruction in schools—or, as Delpit (2006) terms it, the "language of power", which is English. Quijano (2000) highlights how language has historically played a role in establishing power relations, within contexts. These practices and power dynamics in the education of refugees perpetuate cultural hegemony and contribute to the marginalization and erasure of their cultures, languages, and ways of knowing.

So too, do elements of coloniality emerge in the form of paternalism, persistent during colonialism. As written by Narayan (1995),

> In general terms, the colonizing project was seen as being in the interests of the good of, and as promoting the welfare of the colonized notions that draw our attention to the existence of a colonialist care discourse whose terms have some resonance with those of some contemporary strands of the ethic of care. Particular colonial practices were seen as concrete attempts to achieve these paternalistic ends. Coercive religious conversion was seen as promoting the spiritual welfare of the "heathen". Inducting the colonized into the economic infrastructures of colonialism was seen as conferring the material benefits of western science, technology and economic progress, the cultural benefits of western education, and the moral benefits of the work ethic. (pp. 133–34)

In the US schooling of refugee students, paternalism undergirds a discourse of responsibility and obligation to give refugee students the education they "need"—one that can only be offered by the teachers and staff, who "know best" because of their experiences living in the US/being US nationals and citizens.

2. Materials and Methods

Data in this paper were collected as part of ethnography which included an embedded case study, between 2013 and 2016, of one large school district in the Southwest US, by the first author and three other researchers. The case study was driven by a broad question: in what ways does a school district respond to refugee youth and their families? During the case study, there were between 771 and 1104 students, labeled as refugees, enrolled in the district, with approximately 48,000 students, 62% of whom were identified as "Hispanic". The refugee students came from 52 different countries, with the majority hailing from either Bhutan, Somalia, or Iraq. Of the 89 schools in the district, all but 10 had at least one refugee

student. Two high schools had the greatest percentage of refugee students; 22% of the total refugee students attended one and 10% attended the other. At the time the study began, 38 percent of the total population of refugees had been attending a school in the district for three years or less.

The district had a Refugee Services Department. Its aim was to integrate refugee youth into schools and help refugee families' transition to living in the US. During the study, the department was comprised of a director, ten full-time student-family mentors (referred to as mentors in this paper) and one part-time administrator. All the 10 mentors and the director of the district's Refugee Services Department completed a 10-question, 20 min survey, participated in semi-structured interviews, and were observed across 10 different schools. In total, nearly 50 pages of observational fieldnotes were collected in the district. Five teachers and five principals who worked directly with refugee students in their schools and ten refugee parents and their sixteen children who attended these same schools were also interviewed. Interviews were conducted in English or in the chosen language of the participants, using interpreters from a local refugee resettlement agency. Each interview lasted between 31 and 58 min. Interviews in English were transcribed first with Dragon Naturally Speaking, an online program, and then manually, for accuracy. The interviews in other languages were transcribed manually by the interpreters.

Data for the case study were managed, coded, and analyzed primarily by the first author and the project manager of the case study. First-level a priori coding was carried out, using the program NVivo, according to a set of codes developed by the authors. These etic codes were developed from the initial survey data, and emic codes added after the first few interviews were transcribed. Codes were also made to denote descriptive identifying information, such as demographic information, policy, names of documents, and agency information. Secondary and tertiary inductive coding were created as needed. The authors reached an 80% intercoder reliability. Other research team members, who had spent substantially less time with the mentors than the first author and project manager, provided feedback on the analytic codes and confirmed the patterns in the data identified by the two authors. The second author on this paper, who has expertise in migration and decolonizing refugee education, was invited to co-analyze the data, frame them within colonialism, and co-write this paper. The authors have shared responsibilities in developing and writing this piece.

The limitations of the study from which this paper emerged center on the singular context of the research. The research was conducted in only one school district in one US state. In this paper, we also draw exclusively on data on refugees from South Asian, North African, and Middle Eastern decent. They comprised the vast majority of refugee students in the district and in the study. In hindsight, it would have been interesting to compare the experiences of the students included in this paper with those of refugees from other regions, including Central and South America, who often became connected to the state's large Mexican-descent population and thus, might have had substantially different experiences. Also, the study took place prior to the influx of refugees from Ukraine, who have been admitted to the US in large numbers much more quickly than other refugees. It would be interesting to assess their experiences. Additionally, the study is limited in its lack of articulation and comparison between gendered experiences of the refugee students. Still, the data do not contradict those resulting from related studies on refugee education in the US, and thus can be useful in similar US contexts.

3. Results: Restricting Movement, Limiting Access to Knowledge, and Denying the Construction of Cultural Knowledge

Formal schooling propagates the coloniality of knowledge, and then also reifies it and expands its power. "Managing and controlling knowledge means managing and controlling subjects" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 177). While beyond the scope of this paper, we know that the coloniality in schooling, including the control of movement and knowledge, is an inextricable interrelated element of historical, economic, and political

coloniality, which relies upon the racialized and gendered configurations of those who are dominated in global hierarchies. In the subsections that follow, we offer empirical examples of the ways in which this operates in one school district—and, when appropriate, make analytic connections to what Mignolo and Walsh (2018), following Quijano (2000, refer to as "the colonial matrix of power (CMP)"), which acknowledges the reliance of modernity on coloniality.

3.1. Limited Movement in Schools

Throughout the study, where refugee students were encouraged or even allowed to go in schools, was limited. Omar, a student, described it well. When asked where the advanced biology lab was, he replied:

> Oh. Uhm. I don't know. [Pointing down a hall], it can be there. I don't go there ... It can be there. Those classes are [pointing in the same direction again] there. The American students are there. The smart ones. We don't go there.

When asked further about who does not go there and why, Omar said that the kids in his classes [Structured English Immersion or SEI] do not go there because they cannot take advanced biology. A refugee mentor, Kai, confirmed later that they do not encourage the refugee students to go into several corridors of that school, including the hallway Omar had identified, for two main reasons. They, according to the mentor, become lost and are bullied by other students. Kai explained that several of the refugees who had gone into the areas where advanced mathematics and sciences were taught had been told by other students to "get out" and that they did not belong there. Kai reported this, but he prefers just to tell the refugee students with whom he works that they cannot go there. As Kai explained, it was for the refugee students' "own good" that they just not venture down the science halls. Paternalistically, Kai, other mentors, and additional school staff decided that restricting the refugee movement was the right and responsible thing for them to do. However, Omar interpreted that the restriction of his and his fellow refugee students' movement was because he was not among the "smart" students taking advanced science courses, a serious and harmful narrative.

The limiting of places where refugee students could/should go was also extended to the schoolgrounds. In the mornings, the refugee students were instructed to line up outside together in at least four of the schools, including two high schools, in the study. Then, with a refugee mentor or an SEI class aid, they would be walked into their SEI morning courses. "It just prevents confusion and keeps them safe", said one principal. An assistant principal of another school also noted that keeping all students, but especially the refugee students, was important, and that limiting at first where they could go in and around the schools, helped. In an interview, he recalled:

> We had a kid from Iraq get lost last year, or sorta lost. He had gone into the wrong hallway and ended up where we keep all of the off-season sports equipment that we weren't using ... No one was really going down there since it was tennis season so that kid was there for hours, wandering around. Sadly, his [SEI] teacher didn't realize that he was missing for hours and by the time she reported him, we had to call the police ...

For this assistant principal, limiting the refugee students' movement reduced the dangers. It kept them out of harm's way. Rather than address why the teacher had not been aware of the student's long absence, the assistant principal chose to create a school entry policy that specifically targeted and regulated the movement of refugees. This signified further their differences.

For refugee students, who may already be dealing with traumas and displacements, the physical barriers in educational environments can further hinder their ability to develop a sense of safety and belonging. Restricting where the refugee students went at school may have been a preventative safety measure implemented to prevent some harm coming to the students and carried out by adults who had good intentions. In this way, it could

be understood as, at best, benevolent othering of the refugee students or some version of paternalism. However, restricting their movement was a form of control, an exertion of power over youth—refugee students—who already had limited choice and freedoms in the schools. Further, limiting the movement of the students was harmful and not so far removed from the restrictions under which the movement of refugees is controlled through international, national, and state policies. Although assigned a legal status by an international governing body, they are not allowed to move freely globally, and, once resettled in a country, their movement is also restricted by policies and practices, as well as by linguicism and economics. One important component of coloniality at play here is the one of classification, in which the classifications of refugee students are constitutive of coloniality. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) note that such classifications are based on what are cultural differences, but in fact, are categorizations of (usually racialized) colonial differences. Of this, they state: "Colonial differences established and still establish hierarchy and a power differential . . . " (p. 179). Restricting the movement of the refugee students' bodies became part of the parcel of such colonial differences.

3.2. Structured English Immersion (SEI)

Refugee students who are labeled as English learners (EL) are taught English in two-to-four-hour blocks of time, depending on how their English proficiency has been categorized. These classes, which are in the aggregate referred to as Structure English Immersion (SEI) are held in classrooms often at the edges of schools. In fact, at many of the high schools, they are taught in small buildings, called portables, separate from the larger school structure. They are there for up to two-thirds of their day with other students labeled as English learners. Isolated from most of their peers in the schools, the refugee students do not receive opportunities to learn informally with them, through interaction and play. They also do not learn with them formally in courses other than English, as the time they spend in SEI also limits the times they can take math, biology, and other subject-matter courses. In practice, the students in SEI mostly stay together in all their courses throughout the day and the week, and, for those who are labeled as Limited English Proficient (LEP), the year.

During interviews, two refugee students, Amir and Mahmoud, told me that they wanted to see more of the school. Mahmoud told me how he had become lost in part of the school because he had never been there before. It was the section of the school in which biology classes were taught. He was, in his own words "surprised at the museum things". Amir said that he had heard there were rooms full of "microscopes and science experiments that were only for the Americans". When asked why Amir thought those rooms were not for students like him, he quickly replied, "because they don't trust us, miss". In this case, Amir could see that the paternalism exhibited by school staff was undergirded by protectionism, developed not necessarily for safety, but rather as a means of control for those who were not implicitly trusted. This was not particular to Amir, but rather a colonial approach to all the refugee students. Deeply embedded in coloniality is the distrust of those positioned as having less power and less knowledge—and fewer rights to freedom.

Isolating refugee students in this way troubles us, not because they are not "integrated" or, in colonial terms, "assimilated", into the schools, but rather because they are isolated for the sole purpose of restricting the distribution of knowledge. While learning English as one among many languages is important when living in an English-predominant country like the US, it should not be the only focus of learning, nor the main knowledge shared and managed. Being labeled as an English learner should not be used to restrict movement or knowledge within a school. One SEI teacher expressed her concern also about the lack of movement for refugee students in SEI. She said:

> I worry that these kids come from the world. They've been in several countries and speak parts of all kinds of languages. Their worlds have been hard and dangerous, but they have also been expansive in a weird way . . . . Now, their lives are not scary or dangerous in the same ways, but they are narrowed, small even . . . I want to offer them more experiences, but I am bound by policy and time.

The teacher continued by noting how much and how many, in her words, "cultural knowledge and life experiences" the refugee students had, which were being disregarded or dismissed.

Other teachers, though, were securely situated in coloniality thinking. One asserted

> Well, they need to speak and write English if they live here. They came here because they wanted to be American .... Being, part of being American is speaking English. I'm not saying I like that, but it is what it is.

The teacher—perhaps benevolently, but, nonetheless, effectively—"others" the refugee students, which legitimizes discriminatory practices supported by English monolingualism as a policy. It renders the refugees who speak multiple languages as speechless, and thus, as passive.

Further, the teacher's assertions reflect several assumptions integral to coloniality and assimilation. First, everyone does not strive to be like or to be kindred with those in power—or even be, in this example, an American. Of course, as Fanon long ago explained, some may because they have internalized the colonial prejudices, and he refers to this as the "colonial alienation of a person" (Leonardo and Singh 2017). However, most refugees would prefer to return to their home countries rather than be resettled in the US. They need, more than want, to become American so that they can have greater safety, rights, and opportunities. Second, speaking English is not the equivalent of being American and key to assimilation. In fact, it is one of the limitations of our education system that multilingualism is not supported. We discuss this throughout this paper. And third, this is just how it has been and shall be. Colonialism is assumed to have happened in the past, in a certain time, and must be accepted. Coloniality is thus, in such thinking, naturalized as a commonly accepted result. We may be too finely dissecting the teacher's comments, but without such interrogation such sentiments become widely accepted, and are integral to the unquestioned continuation of colonial power.

Equally, if not more, important, with respect to the effects of being isolated, in the SEI courses refugee students are not allowed to use, or are explicitly discouraged from using, the languages they know to enhance their learning of English. During most of the study, dual bilingual-education programs, were not allowed. When allowed, the bilingual programs combined English with either Mandarin or Spanish. No program encouraged the use of multilingual integration or translanguaging, the dynamic and variable use of all linguistic assets, in defiance of the political and geographic boundaries of official institutionally sanctioned languages. In the US, a country that lacks an official language but relies heavily on English monolingualism in its schools and other institutions of education, encouraging and rewarding translanguaging as knowledge building is one way to decolonize formal education for refugee students. Yet, for now, there are only minimal steps toward moving away from English-only policies in Arizona public schools. The dissolution of Proposition 203 in 2019, and the dismantling of the four-hour SEI block did not make the refugee students' school days less isolating. So far, it has not changed their social isolation, as they continue to take other subject classes, such as Mathematics, with their SEI classmates. One portion of these classes is directed toward learning English within the content areas. This reliance on and requirement of English reflects what Meighan (2023) has labeled "colonialingualism", which privileges dominant colonial knowledge. Colonialingualism, according to Meighan, "covertly or overtly, upholds colonial legacies imperial mindsets and inequitable practices . . . and can perpetuate an imperialistic and neoliberal worldview" (p. 146). It endangers multilingualism and elevates a colonial worldview.

The experiences of refugee students in SEI are, however, not isolated to schools. It reflects a larger colonial conundrum; a main tenant of the US Refugee Act of 1980 is to integrate refugees as quickly as possible. It explicitly states that adult refugees need learn only enough English so as to become employed, usually in low-wage service positions that require little English. For refugee/(im)migrant students, English proficiency is used as a gatekeeper in limiting their movement, literally and figuratively, in schools. Further, because the goal is to help students to reach "proficiency" as quickly as possible, which

is part of the measures on which schools are evaluated, rather than to give newcomers the most rich and integrative learning experiences filled with an abundance of distributed knowledge, it is likely that even without Proposition 203, refugee students will be conflated with English learners and their cultural resources and experiences will be undervalued, or worse, unknown.

The emphasis on Western languages in global education systems is more than just a neutral decision; it continues the colonial tradition of valuing certain languages and cultures above others (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2005). This established hierarchy contributes to epistemic violence by sidelining indigenous languages and the knowledge they encapsulate. Refugee students, who bring assets of linguistic diversity, often face these educational challenges. Their mother tongues, which encapsulate stories of resilience, displacement, and hope, are frequently considered less important, and thus, less powerful, in conventional educational settings.

3.3. Afterschool and Summer Tutoring

In DUSD, there are multiple afterschool, summer, and weekend tutoring programs, athletic trainings, art lessons, and camps, and a variety of community and university collaborative programs. They are funded with federal, county, city, or district funds. Some are grant funded and specific to certain schools or programs. Some are high-tech, like the robot 4H series or coding bootcamp, others seemingly less so, like the mathematics, writing, and English tutoring offered by DUSD and staffed by DUSD teachers and teaching assistants. In theory, considering grade level, program specificity, program location, and any prerequisites, many of these afterschool, weekend, and summer programs should be available to the refugee students. For multiple reasons, including transportation, lack of communication with parents, and accountability metrics, refugees/(im)migrants participated only in afterschool and summer tutoring offered by DUSD's Refugee Support Department and, to a lesser extent, the twice-weekly drop-in tutoring offered at a center run by a resettlement agency already familiar to many of the refugee students and their families. Their limited participation in the multiple programs again narrowed, if not denied, their academic and social opportunities.

The staff in the Refugee Support Department offered afterschool tutoring throughout the year and held a six-week summer math academy at one of the DUSD schools. The enrollment in the math academy was low; an average of 40 refugee students inconsistently attended. Leonidis, one of the mentors, explained that despite the low and sporadic attendance, because the refugee students were so far behind, they needed the repetitive memorization exercises in arithmetic being offered at the academy. Observations made during the academy confirmed that the mentors used repetitive and didactic pedagogies, offered little in the way of real-world application, and handed out worksheets at the end of each session for the students to complete at home. Another mentor, Jan, remarked that no one else but the mentors could "help" these students, and commented that in the other summer programs, the students "would just get distracted by all the visiting and social atmosphere . . . and not pass their tests". Throughout the program, the mentors labeled the refugee students as the "neediest" and themselves as potential "saviors".

One could argue that the mentors were well-intended. Repeatedly, they did demonstrate they genuinely cared for and related to the refugee students. Nearly all of them had, themselves, been refugees. However, basing their teaching on an uncritical deficit perspective clearly embedded them within practices of coloniality. Valenzuela (2010) writes about "subtracting school" in US schools that limit the use of students' home languages and deny their cultural knowledges. We note that it is not only language that is being subtracted from the refugee students in the math academy. Beyond not engaging, the lessons were void of curiosity. They were singularly aimed at preparing the students to meet accountability measures and score well enough on high-stake tests, the metrics by which students and schools in the US are measured, ranked, and funded. The lessons reflected the enactment of coloniality "tucked away effectively within the discourse of

neoliberalism" (Leonardo and Singh 2017, p. 91). Through this discourse, the lessons were "what the students needed to succeed", according to the mentors.

When asked about his experience, one seventh-grade refugee student named Ram said that he thought the academy was a waste of time. He exclaimed: "We do the same problems everyday . . . with the same people . . . My parents make me come because my little brother needs to come. I don't really". When I talked further with Ram, he excitedly told me how he was also playing soccer with other kids from his school. He bragged that he was "schooling the white boys". I appreciated his use of slang and his enthusiasm. Mentors could think of ways to apply their mathematics lessons to soccer. When offered a few examples, Leonidis said the students needed more "remedial exercises". Later in the summer, Ram and his friend Raja admitted that they had both skipped the academy often to go play soccer and that they hoped to pass their math tests.

Although they did not speak directly about the control over their movement throughout their lives—first as forcibly displaced persons and then as refugee—the students recognized that schooling in DUSD also literally and figuratively restricted their movement, and thus also the people and the learning they could engage with. For most of the DUSD refugee students and their families, becoming part of and ultimately belonging safely in Arizona and the US was a long-term goal, albeit one that was saturated with coloniality thinking. Without the possibility of returning to their home countries or regions, they instead set their sights on creating new homes and places of being. However, two of the interventions, SEI and tutoring, which were offered to the refugee students at DUSD, in fact did the opposite, isolating them and rendering their multiple knowledges and languages invisible. Controlling not only the knowledge, but also how it was distributed/shared, was a clear factor across the practices of SEI and tutoring.

Several refugee adults in the students' lives noticed the restriction of materials and opportunities in the district. On behalf of seven families, one refugee father filed a formal complaint with DUSD. In it, the families claimed that their children's academic opportunities were being severely restricted by the long SEI block. They accused DUSD of preventing their children from taking advanced courses in the sciences and mathematics, which would ultimately limit their children's trajectories into higher education and careers. Additionally, they said they were insulted that their children were not seen as smart and resilient and were disappointed that the US, a country of such immense wealth and opportunity, would not want refugees to be integrated with those born in the US. Additional refugee parents and family members complained also at public meetings about the ways in which their children were being "mistreated". A man who identified himself as an uncle of four Bhutanese children attending DUSD schools, addressed a school principal at a Parent-Teacher Association event. He asked:

> Why do these children spend all day together studying English and nothing more? Why do you not see them as important? . . . How can you explain this that their children (waved his arm around the auditorium) are worth it and ours are not?

The principal assured the uncle that this was not at all the case and believed that he had misunderstood. She invited him to meet with her separately so that she "could clear up any confusion" he might have.

In coloniality, this is a tool used casually by those in power to insinuate that those whom they perceive as having less power do not understand the system that oppresses them. Maldonado-Torres (2016) points out that institutions, including education, aim to "silence the forms of questionings that emerge from the lived experience, creative work, and knowledges of the colonized" (p. 9). And again, those in power—namely, in our study, those who are working in schools—position themselves as knowing what is best for the refugee students. We note that denying families' ideas about what is best for their children in schools is not limited to refugees/(im)migrants; rather, it is a widespread issue that can often cause tension between families and schools. However, refugee families' initial lack

of familiarity and limited experiences with the American education system allows staff to position them as even less-knowing than other parents and families.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

We have offered a small glimpse of a system steeped in coloniality in a country built upon the displacement and dispossession of the rights of the indigenous inhabitants and chattel slavery. It is a country sustained by neoliberalism and capitalism. Throughout this paper, we have drawn attention to the precarious tensions between inclusion and coloniality, as it manifests itself in discourses, policies, and practices related to the integration of refugee students of South-Asian, African, and Middle-Eastern descent attending US schools. We believe that the evolution of refugee education policies and associated practices must navigate the delicate balance between integration and cultural preservation while disrupting the coloniality that preserves the current system. The growing recognition of the need to transcend colonial education legacies, as discussed in both the Kaveh et al. (2022) study and the UNESCO report (2021), highlights the importance of developing educational paradigms that champion mutual integration, cultural diversity, and the empowerment of refugees as contributors to societal enrichment and global sustainability. They should, as argued by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), include a multiplicity of potentially disruptive voices, views, and expressions—or what they refer to as "pluriversal and interversal paths" (p. 2)—which disturb our current common senses and programmed understandings to consider other ways of knowing and being and doing.

We know that decoloniality is a large project, but we can begin with education for all students, especially for refugee students, acknowledging the oppressive systems in which education is embedded and the ways in which formal schooling in the US (and elsewhere) contributes to and perpetuates them. And we cannot isolate and prefer knowledge in schools compared to other multiple knowledges and praxis. As noted by Maldonado-Torres (2016),

> Decolonial movements tend to approach ideas and change in a way that do not isolate knowledge from action. They combine knowledge, practice, and creative expressions, among other areas in their efforts to change the world. For them, colonization and dehumanization demand a holistic movement that involves reaching out to others, communicating, and organizing. (p. 7)

In this vein, schools should not be treated as separate from other histopolitical, economic, cultural, and societal institutions—and, further, schools should not be equated to the dynamic and fluid processes of teaching and learning that happen well beyond schools.

However, this paper specifically illuminates the complex dynamics of coloniality within the education system for refugee students in the United States. Through a detailed examination of the practices and perspectives of educators and administrators and the experience of students, it becomes evident that the structural and pedagogical strategies within schools continue to operate under a colonial matrix of power, where non-Western forms of knowledge and cultural expressions are undervalued. The findings highlight the importance of actively involving refugee families in decision-making processes within schools to foster a sense of belonging and engagement among students.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the critical importance of navigating the delicate balance between integration (not assimilation) and cultural preservation in the education policy of refugee students. To dismantle the remnants of coloniality in education, there must be a concerted effort to redesign curricula, teaching methods, and school policies to promote equity and inclusion. This must be carried out within larger reforms of immigration policy. And we must talk about race and racism as ways in which classifications and stratification persists. Moving forward, we need more research that looks beyond culturally responsive pedagogies, although these can be important, to interrogate and name the colonial elements in our educational systems and institutions.

In practice, to decolonize refugee education, we can begin by disrupting and dismantling the ways in which standardization, testing, and accountability drive our pedagogies

and curriculum. As exemplified in our paper, while learning English is important, it should not be carried out by dismissing other languages and cultural knowledge, which can and should be integrated into learning. SEI, as currently offered, is divisive and isolating. It would be a good starting place for change.

Note

[1]   While there are few studies conducted in the US, there is a larger body of literature on refugee education in Europe. For reviews, see de Wal Pastoor (2016) and Morrice (2021).

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