

Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Through Intersectionality

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Welcome

- Welcome to the Community of Practice session on **Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families**
- Focus: Using **Intersectionality** and **Funds of Knowledge (FoK)** frameworks
- Goal: Foster collaboration and shared learning among professionals



Objectives

- **Understand key concepts:**
 - Intersectionality as a theoretical framework
 - Funds of Knowledge as a strength-based approach
- **Explore challenges** faced by refugee and immigrant families while navigating special education services in the US
- **Identify practical strategies** for building family-professional partnerships
- **Promote inclusive practices** that value families' cultural and experiential knowledge

Positionality & Reflexivity

My positionality is influenced by being a non-native English speaker, a person of color, a woman, new to the U.S. higher education system, and a teacher in early childhood settings in the US and in India.

This helped me to understand some of the immigrant and refugee families' experiences and their intersectional identities.

Furthermore, I have lived experience of having family relationships with individuals who were refugees. Growing up seeing how educational experiences of these individuals' children were affected, due to their individuals' intersectional identities, motivated her to understand how educators can support refugee families and their children.

Who are Immigrants?

- Immigrants refer to individuals who were not born on U.S. soil (or were born abroad but cannot claim citizenship via a U.S. parent).
- Foreign-born persons need a permit (visa) from the U.S. government to live in the United States, unless they have become U.S. citizens via the naturalization process.

(Batalova, J. (2024, October). Explainer: Who are immigrants in the United States? Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/who-is-us-immigrant>)

Who are Refugees?

- A refugee is an individual who is not able or willing to return to his or her home country because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to race, belonging to a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin (American Immigration Council, 2021).
- Children represent half of refugee population.
- Trauma experiences are common.



Challenges Refugee Families Face

- Many families experience **violence or natural disasters** before resettlement (*Newcomer et al., 2021*)
- Struggle to adapt while **maintaining language and cultural heritage**
- Educators often **lack preparation** to partner with refugee families, especially those with children with disabilities (*Hurley et al., 2011; Paris, 2012*)
- **Systemic barriers** hinder effective support:
 - Discrimination, poverty, lack of resources
 - Bullying and trauma from displacement
 - Educator bias
- Raises concerns about **social justice and inclusion** in U.S. schools

Partnering with Families

Family-professional partnerships (FPPs) improve:

- Children's educational outcomes across school years
- Accurate disability diagnoses
- Effective intervention implementation (*Francis et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2019*)

FPPs are critical for refugee families with children:

- With disabilities or at risk for disabilities (*Haines et al., 2013; Haines et al., 2015*)

Refugee children face complex challenges:

- Limited access to quality education (*UNHCR, 2021*)

Educators often lack preparation for families with multiple identities:

- Race, class, immigration status (*Baquedano-López et al., 2013*)

Refugee mothers report need for:

- Resources and strategies to support children with disabilities at home (*Beatson, 2013*)

Importance of exploring

- Early educators' perceptions of partnerships with refugee families

Barriers to Partnerships

Language
barriers

Limited
interpretation
services

Educator bias

Educator Perspectives

Need for
understanding
intersectionality

Insufficient
diversity
training

Some Quotes

“I do not think it is always coming from a bad place, but I think teachers get nervous to, to talk to someone who does not understand them. And so, they only do it when they have to... So, I think you just have to do a little extra work to make sure you are catching those families...” (Participant 9)

“I think just in general, it is harder to build relationships with them, not because they don't want the relationship, but that like, just like having interpreters available. You know, those informal meetings like you when they come to this school just to stop by and see what their child is up to, I don't have the ability to communicate with them. Besides saying “hello” and “goodbye” and “thank you,” “you're welcome.” (Participant 5)

School System Challenges

- Many schools **lack interpreter services**, limiting communication with refugee families
- Schools and districts shape whether families feel **connected or disconnected**
- Intentional approaches are needed to **dismantle systemic oppression** (*Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018*)
- Services should include:
 - Interpretation for **less common languages**
 - Support for **formal and informal meetings**
- Barriers persist due to:
 - **Underfunding of public education**
 - Greater impact on **marginalized communities**

DEC Recommended Practices

Family
involvement
critical

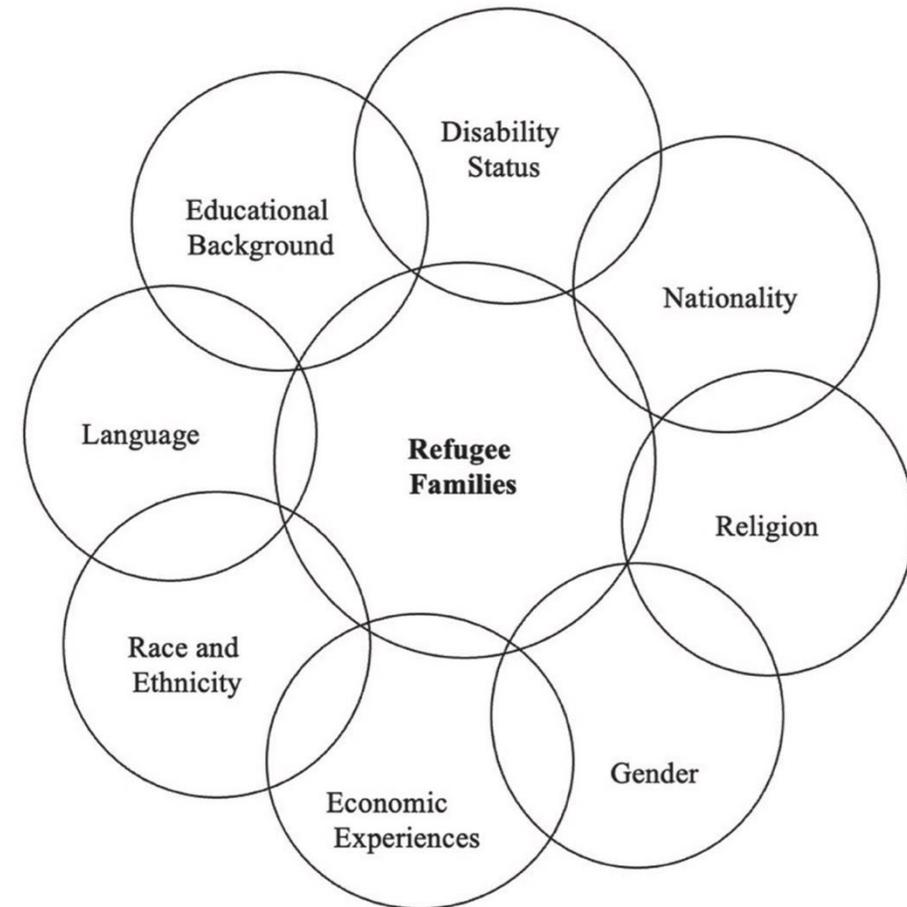
Intentional
partnerships

Administrative
support

Intersectionality Framework

(Bhattashali et al., 2025)

Figure 1
Developing Partnerships With Refugee Families With the Lens of Intersectionality



Note. Figure created by the authors based on Crenshaw's (1991) and Núñez's (2014) work.

Intersectionality Framework

- Shows how **multiple identities overlap** and create marginalization (*Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2019*)
- Examines **power, equity, and social context** (*Hernández-Saca et al., 2018*)
- Identities like **race, gender, class** cannot be understood in isolation
- Used to explore:
 - Refugee families' and educators' **intersecting identities** (e.g., nationality, disability)
 - Impact on **inclusive education and partnerships**

Language Resources

- Cross-cultural miscommunication and language bias are common.
- Limited or poor interpreters create inequities.
- Specialized jargon, legal terms, and acronyms exclude families.
- Immigrants from similar systems have an advantage.
- Cultural views of disability differ
- Language access affects ability to fight bias.

(Bhattashali & McCall, 2025)



Social Identities in the Country of Origin

- Immigrant families' fit depends on social identities from their origin country:
 - Wealth and social class
 - Education and occupation
 - Race, ethnicity, and religion
- These identities influence access to special education capital.
- Example: Parents with medical training often take decision-making roles.
- Valued social resources may not be enacted the same way in the U.S.

(Bhattashali & McCall, 2025)

Supports in the U.S. Context

- PTIs: Teach IDEA rights, advocacy, and IEP prep; build networks.
- Community Organizations: Offer financial, health, housing support; reduce stress.
- Cultural Support Groups: Provide safe, familiar spaces for connection.

Funds of Knowledge (FoK) Framework

- Families and communities are **valuable educational resources** (*Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014*)
- FoK = **culturally developed knowledge and skills** essential for well-being (*Moll et al., 1992*)
- Understanding children's lives requires analyzing **cultural routines and practices** (*Rogoff, 2003*)
- Identifying FoK helps teachers:
 - **Challenge biased perceptions**
 - Create an **inclusive environment** where all families share strengths (*Ortega & Oxford, 2023*)

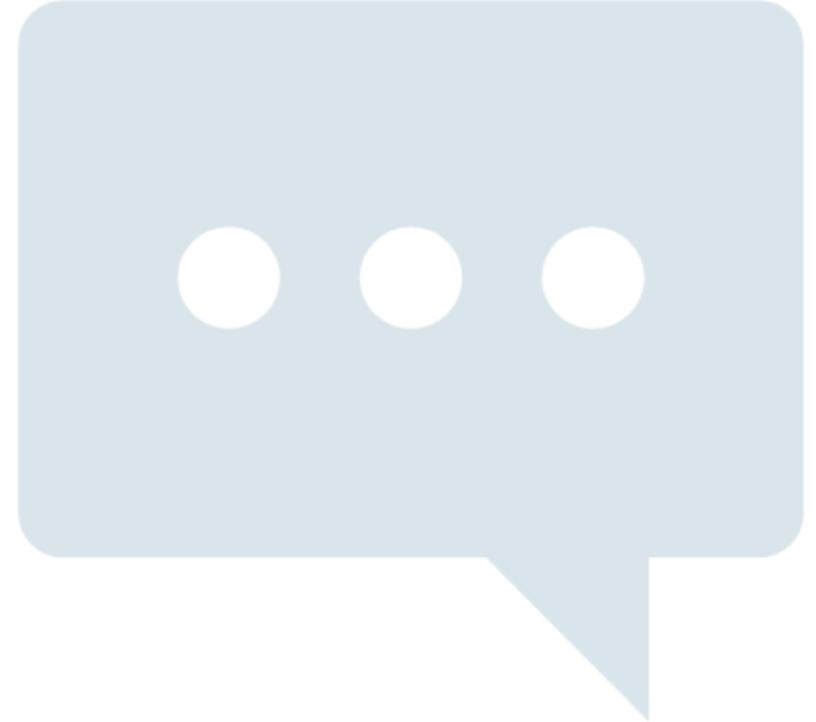
Intersectionality & Funds of Knowledge

- Combining **Intersectionality** and **FoK** helps shift from **deficit-based views** to **strength-based perspectives**
- Refugee families bring **rich experiences and knowledge** from diverse contexts (*Conteh & Riasat, 2014*)
- Teachers can:
 - View **multiple identities as assets**
 - Integrate families' **FoK into classroom practices**
- Building relationships is key to leveraging these strengths



Brainstorming Activity

- Duration: 5 minutes
- Step 1: Think about the funds of knowledge that immigrant and refugee families bring.
- Step 2: Consider how professionals can incorporate these strengths when serving children with disabilities.
- Step 3: Please share your ideas with the group, type in the chat or unmute yourself.



Practical Strategies Overview

1

Learn about families

2

Use cultural brokers

3

Display cultural humility

Learning About Families

Teachers can:

- Learn about refugee families' **intersectional identities and experiences**
- Apply the **FoK approach** in practice
- Example of FoK in literacy:
- **Oral local stories**
- **Traditional children's songs** in native languages (*Reyes et al., 2016*)

Cultural Brokers & Interpreters

- Teachers can:
 - Ask families (via interpreter) if they want a **cultural broker** during home visits
 - Contact **trusted community cultural brokers** before visits (*Rossetti et al., 2020*)
- Cultural brokers:
 - Connect people from diverse cultures
 - Improve collaboration and partnerships
- Challenges:
 - Families may feel **mistrust** due to past persecution
- Alternative:
 - Work with **refugee resettlement agencies** and brokers to learn about families without revealing identities

Displaying Cultural Humility

Cultural humility means:

- **Recognizing personal biases**
- Being open to learning from families (*Lekas et al., 2020*)

Teachers should:

- Learn families' **multiple identities, experiences, and FoK**
- Use **home visits** to build rapport and trust (*Turnbull et al., 2021*)

Address **power imbalances** between schools and families:

- Through **ongoing reflection and questioning** (*Wright, 2019*)

Table 1**Possible Reflective Questions to Foster Cultural Humility**

Possible Questions to Reflect on to Display Cultural Humility

Adapted from Fisher-Borne et al. (2015) and Wright (2019)

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Individual level | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are my cultural backgrounds (e.g., home language, race/ethnicity)?• To what extent do I have experience working with families from marginalized backgrounds, specifically refugee families?• How familiar am I with the experiences and challenges faced by refugee families in the United States?• What are my initial reactions when I observe diverse child-rearing practices that differ from my own? |
| Systemic level | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What barriers exist in my school that might prevent refugee families from feeling welcome?• What initiatives has my school taken to learn about the experiences and expertise of refugee families?• What provision do my school and district have for quality language interpretation services?• How do I connect the community resources with the refugee families? |

(Bhattashali et al., 2025)

Table 2**Questions for Teachers to Learn About Families' Intersectional Identities****Questions for Teachers to Learn About Families' Intersectional Identities**

Topics	Possible Questions
Experiences regarding potential discrimination in the United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the family perceive their experiences?• What does the family enjoy? Why?• What does the family dislike? Why?• What are the major changes the family has gone through after arriving?
Experiences regarding families' familiarity with English and home language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the family's familiarity with English marginalize/privilege their experiences?• How does the family feel about their language being valued?
Experiences navigating special education services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How comfortable does the family feel navigating special education services?• How do the family's past experiences influence their ability to navigate special education services?• In what ways does the family feel marginalized/privileged in navigating special education services?
Experiences and familiarity with school curricula	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How comfortable does the family feel about their children's curricula?• What are family's expectations for their child's education and skills?• What modifications regarding children's learning and developmental goals, IEP meetings, and translated materials does the family want?• How can EC/ECSE teachers help the family included in their children's education and classroom activities?• What support does the family need for their children's education?• What are the family's expectations of the teacher regarding how they will teach and support their child?• What are the family's expectations of communication to and from the teacher?• What are the family's expectations of their own role in relation to curriculum and supporting their child's learning?

Note. These questions are developed by the first author's lived experiences, working in early childhood settings and literature such as Adams and Santos (2021); Kamisli (2021); and Peredo (2016).

Questions?

