

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS WHO DEAL WITH CHILDREN OF REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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Abstract

The Objective of this paper is to showcase the experience of teachers who work with children of refugees, asylum seekers and children on the move in Trinidad & Tobago. These experiences can be considered by other educators on the international front, who work with migrant children as a frame of reference for dealing with them when they enter new environments. This topic is quite relevant in a world where children are constantly being uprooted and have to leave their home countries for the unknown.

The paper aims to highlight the unique context under which these migrant children are informally educated. For reasons of risk and child protection, the paper will not use real names, locations and will focus only on the experiences of the educators/teachers.

The paper will highlight the views of 29 teachers and teaching volunteers who spent more than 20 months trying to find alternative educational solutions for children of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant children on the move who are not allowed to enter the mainstream of public or private schools within Trinidad & Tobago. To give background and context, The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago acceded to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In 2019, the country has still, not passed any legislation or administrative regulations on asylum or refugee status, nor established a national refugee status determination procedure.

The Venezuelan crisis and Cuban political and economic situation have contributed to a dramatic rise in the number of asylum seekers and refugees reaching to the nearby shores of Trinidad & Tobago in recent times. The borders of T&T are quite porous, and relatively unprotected allowing for constant new arrivals. Phillips (2018) reported, '160 arrivals everyday'. This influx of migrants and children on the move is putting the Republic in a position where educational practices need to be more closely examined, as the country's lack of legislation on refugee and asylum matters, and the country's immigration law, adopted prior to accession to international refugee instruments, does not provide an adequate framework for refugee protection and asylum issues. This simply put, means that the migrant population does not have the right to work, the right to an education; or any legal rights. Poignant is that the average Trinbagonian seems quite unaware of the needs and plight of this population of concern (POC).

There are many uncertainties and negative impacts, since Trinidad & Tobago is considered by all to be a transit point and not a settlement zone for refugees, asylum seekers and people on the move.

This paper will trace the challenges involved in educating the children of these persons who do not have legal standing within the country from the perspective of educators who have been directly involved in searching for educational solutions.

Keywords: Refugee, Venezuela, Cuba, Syria, asylum seekers, children on the move, migrant children, Population of Concern (POC), Teachers, Educators, displaced, Education in emergencies, inclusion, ESL, language, culture, transit point, resettlement, teacher preparedness.

Narrative

Carlos was only eight years old when he reached to Trinidad. 'I want to go back home.' He thought, 'If I could I would...but there is no home to go back to anymore.' The child remembers the pangs of hunger that made him feel dizzy and weak. He remembers what used to be; their comfortable house, a car that their father would drive, being able to go to the beach or movies...being happy and free. Then one day, it changed, there was no more food, no water, no medicine, no electricity...nothing but bitterness and strife...the child remembers his mother saying, 'We have to go somewhere better now...somewhere that we can find food to eat, a place where we can get some money to send back home'. Vaguely, the child remembers leaving his little sister behind with the promise that she would join them soon. Tears streamed down his face, the pain was no longer from hunger...it was from the hurt of not knowing when he would see all his family again...so many loved ones left behind, and him leaving with no knowledge, and a fear of what the future held for him in a strange and foreign land.

He reached to Trinidad; he had been told that it was an island of all 'creeds and races', maybe there was hope after all. Three years later, he knows no peace, his mother cries herself to sleep every night. There is no one to protect them. Three years and he has not seen his little sister. He lives in the depths of poverty, his mother is not allowed to work. They share an apartment in an unsafe neighbourhood with ten strangers. Ten people that speak his language, but that's the only thing they have in common. He remembers his dreams of becoming a doctor. Those dreams faded daily- they seemed like the hopes of a foolish, naïve little boy, who could no longer be- eleven was the age of a man that could help. It was his duty to return the smile to his mother's face. How could he become anything though when he wasn't even allowed to go to school? Why would they deny him an education? - A basic right of all children- Actually, why would they threaten to send them back home? Nothing made sense to him. He yearns for the days gone by.

He lived in a world where he had no future, denied an education, what was he expected to be?-This was his world, his reality; there was no sympathy, no hope, no humanity. Carlos is the embodiment of many asylum seeking and refugee children that have reached the shores of Trinidad & Tobago seeking help, betterment, the rights of a child to eat, to be safe and happy, to live; the right to learn.

Introduction

This paper showcases the experiences of twenty (29) elementary and secondary school teachers and teaching volunteers who have worked with children of refugees, asylum seekers and children on the move in Trinidad & Tobago. It provides teachers' views on their experiences, conducting a survey and subsequent focus-group discussions. These persons have spent more than 20 months trying to find alternative educational solutions for 200+ children of refugees and asylum seekers, otherwise known and referred to in this research as migrant children, children on the move or the Population of Concern (POC) Children. The experiences showcased in this paper could be appraised by other educators on the international front, who work with migrant children, as a frame of reference for dealing with this population. This topic is absolutely relevant in a world where children are constantly being uprooted and have to leave their home countries for the unknown. (Associated Press, 2016)

The paper aims to highlight the unique context in Trinidad, under which these migrant children are informally educated because the POC is not allowed to enter public or private schools, thus causing children's studies to be curtailed, or not be certifiable and/or recognized within Trinidad and Tobago or internationally, from the views of their teachers.

The overall stance of the country is that these POCs have no legal status and little emphasis has been placed on recognising their presence and by extension, the matters affecting their well-being. Any research done to investigate their living conditions and educational needs have been promoted by the UNHCR TT, and in more recent times through a joint venture with UNHCR and UNICEF. Those studies focus mainly on numbers of registered POCs and general demographics.

At the time of this study, little or no local research had examined the 'impact of a dearth of educational opportunities on migrant children, or how the local education system needs to be reformed to potentially meet the needs of these displaced children'. With the continuous unrest in Venezuela, and the oppressive situation in Cuba, it is unlikely that the refugee population, Asylum Seekers and Children on the Move in Trinidad and Tobago will decrease, and therefore it is essential that research on the topic be done to provide empirical evidence upon which to base future policies. As Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega (2005) aptly described it, 'Too often, there are holes in the amount of services being provided, including appropriate evidence-based practices (EBPs), for this population'.

For reasons of risk and child protection, the paper does not use real names, locations and focuses only on the experiences and perceptions of the educators/teachers. (Jackson & Wernham, 2005).

Overarching Perspective

A main requirement of a thriving society is to have an educated, skilled labor force to positively steer future societies. Subsequently, countries have concentrated energy and resources on education systems and ways in which these systems impact societal needs; accepting that economic growth will be achieved through skilled human beings via a well-ordered education system. Accordingly, educational restructuring is high on national agendas, Trinidad & Tobago being no exception, with the chief aim of enabling quality education for all. This, however, has brought with it the critical issue of providing education to POC children. In recent times there has been substantial debate into whether such learners should be allowed to enter and be taught in an inclusive environment i.e. within the mainstream of the traditional system of schools, in parallel school systems, or whether they have the right to an education at all, seeing that their presence is not 'officially' recognized in Trinidad & Tobago.

Within the past decade Trinidad & Tobago has actively moved towards inclusive teaching. From its history, research has established congruities related to identifying relevant issues in preparing for and implementing inclusive education. These are definition, school organization, cultural, social and religious backgrounds and factors like teaching resources and skills which are all delineated in and impact a school's development plan. Pijl, et al. (1997) classify these under categories; teacher-factors, school-factors and external-factors, highlighting the need for managing inclusive education, synonymous with managing various needs in inclusive teaching. The question emanating from such a discussion is whether the children of incoming asylum seekers and refugees have the right to be 'included' in this plan, or even considered in local education systems.

These are important points that need addressing in view of the claim of providing 'education for all'. The re-thinking of education policies towards inclusion has also been manifest in the Caribbean, where educational provisions occur within the context of different cultures, subcultures and systems. (Armstrong, Severin, Armstrong, & Lynch, 2005). Consequently, the Caribbean Plan of Action – Education for All (2000-2015) was established by the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM) through the Caribbean Regional Technical Advisory Group (UNESCO, 1997). This is one initiative that exemplifies the Caribbean movement towards inclusive education and inclusive societies, in providing education for all learners.

Aim of the Research

The aim of the research was to document the experiences of teaching staff engaged in creating alternative learning spaces for migrant children. It was important to investigate the circumstances surrounding the lack of legislation in Trinidad and Tobago regarding rights for refugees and asylum seekers, and how this lack of rights affects educational opportunities for this population of concern (POC).

Political & Social Context & Background to the Problem

To provide some background and context; in November 2000, The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago acceded to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (Government of the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago, 2016). The government drafted a document entitled "A Phased Approach towards the Establishment of a National Policy to Address Refugees and Asylum Matters in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago" (2014). Although the unravelling situation in Venezuela, has affected T&T drastically the government has adopted an 'officially' neutral stance, and not taken political sides, while failing to institute any local legislation or administrative regulations on asylum or refugee status. Trinidad has still not established a national refugee status determination procedure. (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the United States Department of State, 2016). The Venezuelan crisis and Cuban political and economic situation have contributed to a dramatic rise in the number of asylum seekers and refugees reaching to the nearby shores of Trinidad & Tobago recently (Wilkinson, 2018). But it is not only these nationalities that have requested asylum. Trinidad has also seen asylum seekers from Russia & Pakistan, from Syria since 2011, St. Lucia and the Dominican Republic and temporary visiting migrants from Dominica.

The borders of T&T are porous and relatively unprotected, allowing for constant new arrivals. Phillips (2018) reported, '160 arrivals everyday'. This influx has placed Trinidad in a position where educational practices, among other factors, need to be more closely examined, since the lack of legislation and the immigration laws do not provide an adequate legal or operational framework for refugee protection and asylum issues. Simplified, the migrant population does not have the right to work, to an education; or any other legal rights in Trinidad & Tobago. Poignant

is that the average Trinbagonian seems unaware of the real needs and plight of the POC (Scruggs, 2018). There are many uncertainties and negative impacts, since T&T is considered to be a transit point and not a settlement zone for people on the move. Trinidad's close proximity to Venezuela, coupled with its small population has resulted in the country retaining one of the largest Venezuelans per capita. The island nation remains the only country to take in large numbers of Venezuelans without having an official asylum policy in place (Hamilton, 2019). The local government carried out a two-week registration process in June 2019 that attempted to address the issue by granting Venezuelans photo IDs, a six-month to one-year work permit and basic medical care. It was the first major action, and a sign of good will in addressing the spike in migration that began about five years ago, and more than 15,000 Venezuelans registered. However, many questions remain unanswered, including what will happen to new Venezuelans who arrive after the registration process, whether permits will be renewed once they expire, and why there still isn't an official asylum law granting refugee status. Noteworthy, is that Cubans who up until mid-2018 made up the majority of the asylum seeking population in T&T, were not given the same option to register. (Matroo, 2018).

Asylum-seekers can only receive refugee status through the NGO Living Water Community, the UN Refugee Agency's local implementing chapter in Trinidad, which coordinates the application and approval of asylum status. This process has created a 'disconnect' between the United Nations approving asylum status in a country that doesn't dictate how to address refugees (Hamilton, 2019). After the amnesty opened up, Minister of Education, Anthony Garcia on the 06th June 2019 emphasised that 'educating migrants was not a priority' (Matroo, 2019). Mere hours later, the Prime Minister proclaimed, that 'Government would not prevent Catholic schools from educating the children of Venezuelan migrants.' (Paul, 2019). This could be read as mixed signals since the PMs statements directly contradicts local laws as these students still do not have the right to 'student permits'. The crisis needs to be managed and policies and laws, put in place to allow a measure of control with some clear cut guidelines. Arguable though is that the refugee and asylum situation is very new to the English-speaking Caribbean region, and one can understand that being faced with a new situation, the government may simply not know how to manage this situation. There is no easy solution.

The Statement of the Problem

Migrant children in Trinidad & Tobago are not recognised. There is no law allowing them to attend schools. Even if exceptions are made to accept them into the physical classrooms, then there is still no legislation giving them the right to a student permit, the right to do national exams or to get certification. Teachers at Temporary Learning Centres/ Temporary Learning Spaces (TLC/TLS) who facilitate these children describe them as 'The invisible children lost inside a web of red tape, bureaucracy, xenophobia and intolerance'. This teaching staff are doing a charitable, humanitarian work and covertly finding means of assisting these youngsters while subtly and quietly advocating for positive change.

Research Question:

What are teachers' experiences related to teaching children of refugees and asylum seekers in Trinidad & Tobago and what important points emanating from their experiences can inform the wider Trinidad & Tobago society, including the government, on how to cater to the educational needs of this population of concern?

Method and Methodology

The paper highlights the views of 29 teachers and volunteers who spent more than 20 months trying to find alternative educational solutions for learners who are not allowed to enter the mainstream of schools within Trinidad & Tobago. The study is based on mixed methods with the research questions targeting both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with the focus being on recording an unfolding phenomenon of migrants rapidly entering, and their engagement related to educational processes in T&T, from the perspectives of teachers. The study was therefore based on phenomenology which fit well into the 'exploratory research design' and mainly qualitative method

To begin the collaborative process, there was an initial meeting with staff where the intended outcomes of the research were revealed. An information sheet outlining aims and research questions were issued to potential participants. Once individuals indicated their willingness to collaborate, a consent form was issued for their signatures. The voluntary nature of participation in the research study was also stressed and confidentiality guaranteed.

The main research instruments were online survey questionnaires, and semi-structured focus groups. Miles & Huberman (1994) suggested steps of: 'data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing' were followed. Then as aligned with the phenomenological approach which attempts to derive understandings of collaborators' experiences, prominent themes and patterns were sought out, and the participating teachers' voices presented in the final write-up.

A Look at the Findings

Although the findings emanating from the surveys and focus groups were extensive and quite telling, this paper will focus on what the researcher considers the principal and most significant points that emerged. The subsequent section provides the teachers views related to their experience while working with migrant children.

Teachers definitions of the refugee or asylum seeking child

Teachers of the TLC felt that the terms asylum seeker, refugee and migrant were mere labels. They saw the labels as terminology that made assisting the kids more difficult. They felt the terms created more red tape and bureaucracy, preventing children from accessing educational services. The literature showed that the terms all mean something unique and gives varying status to each, however when asked to give a definition, teachers came up with the following:

- a) Children who have been displaced and who have been forced to leave their homes.
- b) Refugee, asylum seeker, migrant- they all mean the same to me- children who have been left without a home or community support
- c) Children who have no one else to turn to and they come to our country seeking help
- d) Children does not mean only persons under 18, it means any vulnerable youth that needs assistance and need guidance for their futures
- e) At the end of the day a child is a child no matter where they come from so we should not be labelling them. Give them a chance to integrate.

Teachers are Emotionally Vested in teaching Children of Concern

Spoken with a profound genuity, the educators in schools, some having taught in many institutions throughout the country and globally, for many years, mentioned that the dedication they give to their job, and the care they give to the students at the centre is even better than that given at private schools, where teachers are paid large sums and which have a reputation for quality care and interaction with students. Supervisors attested to this.

Interestingly, all teachers used words that showed deep affection for students. Teachers repeatedly said, 'my children' when referring to the learners at the centre. They used words like, 'care', 'like', and 'love' - when describing how they felt about learners. UNHCR (2017) advocates building a sense of trust and a safe relationship between teachers and students. Some teachers confessed that they found it difficult to not be affected by their students' plight and situations. In the focus group discussions, teachers repeated over 120 times combines how much they 'loved' and 'cared for' their students.

Teachers also confessed that they often spent time outside of teaching hours trying to find ways to assist students who may have confided in them about their challenges and problems. UNHCR (2017) also purported that 'Self-care' (for teachers) is very important when working with refugee or asylum-seeking children. Teachers admitted that they went beyond the duties of a teacher, but they had somehow felt responsible for the overall well- Teachers also divulged that previously they had no psycho-social support for students, due to budgetary constraints, they therefore tried to support the student population as far as possible. Asked if they would behave in the same with local students, teachers identified the POC children as 'more vulnerable', and in need of their 'protection'. Teachers referred to the kids as 'at-risk' repeatedly.

Teachers Levels of Preparedness

Considering some challenges that had been underscored in the surveys by the teachers, the interviewer felt it was important to ask teachers about their level of preparedness for this audience of learners. Many of the teachers described their experience as unique. Even those that had over 10+ years of teaching experience explained that no amount of teacher training was enough to prepare them to help these learners to succeed. Wirén (2013) pointed out that 'Teachers are one of the more important conditioning factors for how well students might achieve in their

studies. She continues, 'Given these teachers generally higher educational profile it is interesting to note a tendency that teachers in classes with a higher percentage of migrant students feel less well prepared to teach...'

An experienced teacher at the TLC who had studied 'Education', emphasized that any educator wanting to work with migrant children needed to be 'Extremely versed in the particular subject area that they taught, they needed to have much patience, consistency and dedication'. He added, 'This is not a 'job' for us, it is a calling, we have to do it, if we were here for money, then we might not be here at all'. He reiterated that an environment of 'constancy and consistency' were of the utmost importance. When asked about support that teachers needed or have been given, they talked about trainings they received from international organizations such as the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and UNICEF on how to deal with young persons who have experienced trauma. They believe that such training was essential for dealing with the emotional and mental well-being of the learners; however, they expressed that having to pursue an 'expedited curriculum was not in the long-term' best interest of learners. The teachers worked with combined curricula on a trial and error basis, often finding themselves having to tweak teaching strategies and lessons to reach the majority of learners. They felt that training in curriculum development should have come early, as sometimes they had to build materials and lessons from scratch and create materials that could be usable. One said, 'I thought I knew what to teach when I started, but while teaching classes, I realized that some of it was not working, so I had to come up with creative ways and change lessons completely for students to understand. I feel like I learn something new each day- our principal is constantly helping us every day to find new and realistic ways of coping...with everything, it's not easy.' Teachers got this training more than 15 months after setting up the TLC. Financial constraints would have prevented such training from happening earlier. Save the Children (2019) discusses that 'A lack of effective teacher professional development is a key issue for teachers of refugees around the globe. Without the right training and support, some teachers of refugees may misinterpret refugee students' behaviours due to misunderstandings of culture, language, or how children manifest underlying mental health issues. This can lead to teachers using teaching styles that are insensitive to refugee children's needs and create the opposite of a healing classroom'. The report emphasizes support and training for the well-being of teachers.

The majority of teachers reported that they didn't think that refugee and immigrant students have 'unique needs', in fact all of the participants agreed that students wanted to be treated 'normally', 'like any other young person his /her age'. The kids did not want to bear the stigma of being called a 'refugee child'. Hollander et al. (2016) said it aptly, 'I fear putting a vulnerable group into a more stigmatized situation'. Teacher M said, 'They do not have unique needs, yet teachers need to account for their unique situations and backgrounds and create flexible classrooms that can reach all their unique personalities'.

Teachers experience frustration and desire Change. They want to shed the shroud of secrecy and create visibility and sensitization.

Teachers felt that there was a need to raise overall awareness about the background and complex needs of the asylum-seeking children. In Ghosh's (2018) article, Refugees are asked to integrate, but what does that even mean, he underscores that "The government needs to raise awareness about refugees and asylum seekers, what brought them here and ways of including them in to your country's processes...There is no 'us and them.' It is up to us to welcome them. The feeling of being unwanted or a burden can prevent them from integrating well and blossoming." These kids were described as the 'unwanted' and 'invisible' children by teachers. Teachers felt that there was a deep separation and that xenophobia existed. Teachers recounted how their pained learners spoke about being harassed and called names by some of the common folk on the streets. Teachers seemed perturbed that their students were frequently told by some locals to 'Go back where they came from'. This concept of raising awareness and promoting acceptance was important to teachers. However, they confessed that due to 'child protection issues' they were not allowed to speak about their jobs, the centre or the population they work with. They sometimes felt frustrated as it seemed their entire existence was shrouded in secrecy. They felt powerless as they might hear outsiders discussing the migrant population and making baseless comments, but they could not correct them or comment.

It is important to mention that teaching staff also acknowledged that some Trinbagonians proved to be quite generous and empathetic towards the POC children. Teachers spoke of donors who came to know of the work (through word of mouth) that the principal and staff were doing. Many were moved to offer tangible contributions in the form of donations of foodstuff and stationary- some gave of their time too, and would help lead relaxation activities like music and yoga for the kids. Teachers felt these activities helped the children to be more relaxed and have positive frames of mind. Teachers were also certain that if the local population were educated about the population of concern that there would be less tension and fears.

Teachers want to be heard by those in authority

Teachers at the TLC expressed frustration that their suggestions are often disregarded. The TLC reports to a series of larger organizations. Teacher L said, 'We don't want to sound bitter, but we often have people making decisions without asking for our input. More often than not, it's the wrong decision. Another teacher added, 'We are the ones that work with the kids at the centre. We know what works and what does not. Some people sit in offices far away and make all the decisions'. From the comments gathered, it would appear that staff at the TLC does not feel engaged or listened to when it comes to decisions that affect their centre. This does not seem to be a unique situation as Hodges (2018) reported similar sentiments about how teachers in Washington feel about having an input in decision making. He reported, 'Teachers feel that governing bodies... have had too prominent a voice in important decisions -- and believe that they themselves should have much more input in decision-making'. Perhaps if teachers' voices were considered they would feel less 'frustrated'.

Teachers want long term planning and consideration.

Apart from teachers of the infant's level classes, all other teachers felt that the students had a sense of 'immediacy' and 'rush'. They show extreme impatience. Teacher R explained, 'They seemed to live only in the present, the here and now'. They always act as if everything is temporary. Maybe that comes from a background of not having stability...I mean, they change homes nearly every few weeks, so that might explain why they don't feel they need to have 'long term plans, or long-term goals.' Teacher T added, 'What can we expect from kids that have lost everything? Maybe they are afraid of forming attachments to anything'.

Related to more strategic thinking, teachers felt that the short-term planning for learners with a budget and considerations that spanned only a 3-6-month period was an injustice to all. Learners could not settle into a routine. Teachers would be constantly unsettled, planning for two scenarios- the one that catered for closing the centre at any given moment that the budget or planning team decided, and another; if the centre was allowed to keep running for a while longer. The disadvantage was of course that learners could not set long term learning targets, and this affected student and teacher motivation levels. The dynamism was describes as 'hard to humanly keep up with'. Teacher T pondered, 'How can I ask my students to have long term learning goals when I can't even guarantee them a place to learn for more than a few months at a time?' This 'instability' negatively affected teacher attitude and morale.

Teachers recognize some obvious barriers to their students' learning

Teachers said they were particularly startled by students' fear of persons in authority, like police or immigration. Students had confided in them that they were afraid to go anywhere as they were scared of immigration. Children confided to both their teachers and the principal that they became scared whenever they saw police officers or any other officers in uniform. This was a major deterrent in them moving around and even affected their attendance at the centre.

Financial issues were also barriers to learning. Asylum seeker and refugee children, according to teachers, tended to be more mobile, moving from area to area, searching for the cheapest housing accommodations. As a result, even learners registered at the centre were frequently absent, adding to the disruption of learning. This was a cause of concern for the educators. Teaching staff recognised that the children in question suffered due to financial constraints. This was often reflected in students' frequent absenteeism from classes. Save the Children (2019) teachers identified 'that many refugee children do not come to school regularly or drop out due to family financial hardship.' Teachers noted that some parents needed their child to contribute to the family's income instead'. The poverty and economic suppression of local POC children were magnified in teachers' reports of kids coming to school and letting teachers know that they had nothing to eat at home. The teachers of the TLC would have to find solutions and would eventually move from offering snacks alone to offering breakfast and lunch. One teacher noted, 'Some of the students tell me that they look forward to coming to school because they won't go hungry, they know we will give them something to eat'. On the issue of financial constraints, when students started missing classes because they had no money to take transport to the TLC, they were also provided with transport from main pick up points. However, another crucial observation is they frequently needed to take care of very young siblings who may have been too young to attend classes, and sometimes had to take on the role of caretaker and breadwinner to assist their families.

Some students came with broken or torn shoes, clothes that did not fit. Teachers spoke of students being hyper sensitive about their images, and their constant comparison of things they used to have before things got bad in their home country, and what they no longer have here in Trinidad & Tobago as parents and families are being

economically marginalized. In the teachers' minds, students came from homes and backgrounds where parents', not having the ability to work translates to not being able to afford necessities. This of course affects students' daily lives at the centre. On the other hand, there were children as young as 11 years old who teachers said were rumoured to have left the centre to work, some at food outlets, some at bars and some who were reported to be engaged in 'sexual activities' in exchange for money. Oftentimes, there was no way to prove that the kids were being taken advantage of or exploited. Teachers were very evidently upset over the possible exploitation of their learners and their powerlessness to help.

Teachers face many challenges in their service to POC children.

Teachers believe it is essential to create support programs to help migrants and their children feel welcome and integrate into local society. They spoke of creating safe havens for all migrant children and their families, preparing ongoing programmes to receive new arrivals and give them an induction. Teachers identified that learners had limited English language proficiency, even though some had been in T&T for over a year, or in some cases two-four years. They felt disturbed as they believe students need to have ESL for survival skills. They described tweaking their classes, regardless of subject area to improve on the English skills. Birman et al. (2015) confirmed that language presented 'barriers to education', describing it as "...Refugee children often hav(ing) exposure to multiple languages and academic mastery of none." Save the Children (2019) advocates for support in language skills as 'essential, as it holds the key to whether they will be able to access past learning, keep learning in their new classrooms, and integrate and recover'. Teachers experienced challenges where learners hold fast to their first language and cultures of their home countries. They often resisted adapting to the new culture.

Even though, T&T is an English-speaking country, learners only speak English when forced to. Teachers commented that students progressed tremendously in the second language, but often explained that they felt embarrassed to speak English. When Teachers and Administrators enquired, parents of the students encouraged them to speak Spanish at home, and only use survival skills English language to move around in Trinidad & Tobago. Further displays of unwillingness to immerse were apparent when teachers occasionally tried offering local T&T meals as a part of the lunch services offered at the centre. Teachers reported that in 70% of the cases, the migrant children refused to even try some of the local dishes.

Eisenbruch (1988) postulated that 'Uprooted children may experience powerful grief...in response to a loss of culture'. Teachers therefore understood that even though they wanted learners to adapt and acculturate to the Trinbagonian culture they needed to be sensitive about not appearing to deprive the learners of the culture that was familiar to them. When asked about whether there was the need to know the culture of the POCs, the answer was unanimously 'yes'. The explanation was that learners opened up and gravitated towards teachers that showed some interest in students' home culture. Teachers felt that students somehow displayed, 'more confidence in them', if they showed that they knew something about the countries they had fled from. As a part of teaching strategies, teachers would take much time to research areas such as music, important holidays, key landmarks and foods. In teaching, they found learners to be more receptive if they compared local cultural items and holidays to the learners' own. 'This takes much more time, but it is just something that we have to do', one teacher said.

Other barriers to learning for migrant children would include Interrupted Schooling- Teachers indicated that students of the same age groups came in with varying levels of knowledge, causing challenges in placement. They described having secondary-aged students with the academic level of a primary school child in Maths and/or their first language. Teachers observed that those students become disheartened if they worked alongside younger groups. Birman et al (2015) outlined: *'Refugee children often miss out on school and never catch up due to:*

- a) *Acute conflict*
- b) *Legal restrictions*
- c) *Ongoing migration*
- d) *Younger children may never have been enrolled in primary school*
- e) *It is highly likely that older children would never have been in secondary school*
- f) *Even for those refugee children who enrol in school, disruptions to their schooling are common.*

Teachers also voiced concerns about the lacking motivation when it came to academic learning. As much as students told them that they 'like the centre', students were not focussed on academic achievements. One teacher recounted, 'When I asked my class what their objective was for coming to school, they said, 'to see their friends'. I asked, if they didn't want to learn, and one of them replied, "Why teacher? So I could end up cleaning somebody's house?"- It doesn't make sense getting good grades, because we can't graduate anyway'. Teachers realized that lack of

formalized and recognised learning affected students' willingness to learn. At the same time, this lack of motivation to learn was affecting teacher morale. Deci & Ryan (2008) discuss the Self-Determination Theory, a theory of motivation; this theory addresses the social conditions that foster or reduce motivation in parallel with the fulfilment of psychological needs. Ackerman (2018) suggests using 'goal setting' as a measure towards boosting students' self-determination. However, in the local context where there is no long-term planning for the migrant population, one is left to ponder how one could resolve this lack motivation and help these young people to be more optimistic about the future.

Lack of social skills and opportunity for socialization and psycho-social support

Of the same teachers who expressed caring deeply for learners, 80 % of them noted that many students displayed lacking social skills and some anti-social behaviour: Some Examples are: some students, regardless of age used 'obscene language' as a norm, and responded rudely when spoken to, though they were corrected. Generally, students did not pay heed to reprimands, using the excuse of "having a hard life" as the reason for not needing more rules. Teachers also reported some students 'verbally' bullying or threatening others and being territorial in 60% of classes; in upper primary and secondary levels. Teachers intervened. If this did not work they called in parents. Pointedly, 100% of teaching staff expressed disbelief that most parents did not think their children were culpable. Instead, rationalizing why it was okay for their children to threaten others. Hymel et.al (2005) describe this reaction as, 'moral disengagement'.

Teachers are concerned about health matters

Teachers highlighted that students often got ill. They came to school with flu-like symptoms, what appeared to be rashes on the skin, many students often complained to teachers of feeling nauseous, having regular headaches and having pains about their bodies. The students usually said that they did not know why they were 'feeling sick', but there were frequent reports of illness. Currently there is no official 'surveillance system to monitor disease trends among newly arriving refugees. Teachers feel that it is essential to have data and summary reports. Chuah et al (2018) explains that 'Overall, poor access to healthcare is perceived to have detrimental consequences on the health status of refugees, asylum-seekers and its host population, and may incur greater costs to the health system in the long run'. Teachers felt an urgent need to have a proper monitoring mechanism and support system for health services for these children of concern. Teachers were fearful that many of the children had not been vaccinated in their home countries for lack of medication and may be at high risk locally.

Teachers advocate for policies, procedures and a proper framework for educating POC children

To create the conditions for improved teaching, one must first define good teaching standards. Teachers had started off by saying that they worked on a 'Trial and error basis'. They explained that the principal when she had started the school had been given the mandate to run a three month program. She therefore planned to accommodate the language and cultural needs of the children for a short term period. Thereafter, the chosen curriculum and overall planning was selected term by term, especially as budgetary constraints played a huge factor. All personnel at the TLC agreed that having an overall solid plan, a good defining framework on how to educate these children who came with unique circumstances, was crucial. It was important to tend to the immediate, short, medium and long term needs of the children. Teachers felt that having such definition, identifying the special needs and having guiding policies to attend to these were vital in a volatile society that had not spent time understanding the population they were receiving (whether willingly or unwillingly). The framework could potentially look at areas of: planning and preparation for receiving migrant children as learners, a classroom environment conducive to their successful learning, methods of instruction that could be used to aide teachers, and a definition of professional responsibilities which could include reflecting on teaching, maintaining accurate records, communicating with families, participating in a professional community, human resources and training needed to work with this unique group of learners, to name just a few. Teachers believed that even if mainstream schooling was opened up to POC children immediately, it might not be able to efficiently cater to their needs, especially as there was no other bridge for language and cultural gaps, and there would be no psychosocial support which is required to help them acculturate. Teachers worried that the migrant learners would get lost in a system that was not in any way directed at POC children, and furthermore one for which guiding principles does not currently exist. Improving school culture and climate to accept these children would improve the educational experience for all; POC children and locals.

Teachers worry about their learners having future prospects

Having spent the last several months talking to educators about working with migrant children, many were very affected by the plight of the children they facilitated; some were overwhelmed and even cried. Their tears, they say, come from a mix of worry, empathy, and frustration with the negative rhetoric that was often directed at their learners by some in local society who simply are ignorant of the circumstances and plight of the POC child. Teachers lamented always having to maintain that shroud of secrecy as they felt that sharing the POC experience may would aid in sensitizing the local population. Teachers were most preoccupied with the fact that students had nowhere to go if the centre was shut down. They worried that they were sending the kids into a society that was inadvertently cruel and unwelcoming to them. They worried most of all about the kids not being able to integrate into local, or any other society, about their not being able to achieve official certification and most of all, about them not ultimately having a means of becoming a productive member of any society they end up in. Teacher 'N' said: What choices are we giving to these children? What tools are we providing them with? If at the end they have nothing concrete to show, are we doing an injustice to these kids?

Teacher 'T' chimed in sadly: We are creating a lost generation? What does that say about us, our humanity? Teachers felt the indecisiveness and 'half-measures were tantamount to emotional torture and taunting'.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to gauge experiences of teachers who provide alternative educational support to children of refugees and asylum seekers in Trinidad & Tobago. The research realized the need for support and inclusion of a 'displaced group of children' within a society that has been able to cater for their presence. As a small study that focussed on the views of only one group of actors; teaching staff, the inferences of the study are unavoidably restricted. Yet, the study presented an effective basis for identifying challenges educators encountered and important points from their experiences which could inform the wider Trinidad & Tobago society on how to cater to the educational needs of this population of concern.

The study demonstrates that from teachers' perspectives it is important to acknowledge the presence of 'children on the move' and cater to their holistic needs, including educational needs. Though at the start of the research, teachers were not clearly able to define it for themselves, their discussions allowed them to identify what they see as solutions and combative steps to be taken in order to provide some level of services and see that 'no child is left behind'. Teachers admitted that it that it is essential however to conquer mind-sets and propagate respect amongst the different peoples, leadership, the government and all stakeholders about inclusion and preparation to integrate POC children, even if it is for the period that they are 'in-transit' in Trinidad & Tobago. Thomas (1997) declared that inclusive schooling 'will beget a younger generation which is more tolerant and accepting of difference' (p. 106). The lesson teachers proffered is that Trinidad & Tobago needs to decide if they are ready to include these displaced children, after all 'No one leaves home if the hurt that will come is greater than the hurt that they will leave behind' (Bausells & Shearlaw, 2015). In the end, as a nation it is imperative to decide that inaction is not a course of action. Ultimately, will T&T's 'wait and see' stance add to the hurt that these children have already endured, or will they be allowed a possible future? The issue is that the phenomenon is confronting Trinidad & Tobago and the country must acknowledge the presence of the migrant child and put efforts into planning one way or the other, for this population of concern.

Important Terminology

- **Refugee** - A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. (UNHCR)
- **Asylum seeker** - When people flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – which means the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded. (UNHCR)
- **Migrant children, Children on the move, Displaced children-** Throughout this presentation, these terms are used interchangeably to describe children who move away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, usually to seek asylum. (Adapted from the IOM)
- **UNHCR-** United Nations High Commission for Refugees

- **Population of Concern (POC)**- This term refers to persons of concern to the UNHCR including refugees, returnees, stateless people, the internally displaced and asylum-seekers. (Adapted from the UNHCR)
- **Temporary Learning Centre (TLC)** – Center that provides alternative educational opportunity to children outside of the mainstream avenues.
- **English as a Second Language (ESL)**- The teaching and/or study of English Language as a second language to speakers of other languages.
- **Country of first asylum**- The first country in which a migrant arrives to and applies for legal status as a refugee.
- **Resettlement zone**- Countries or areas that according to international law and individual country protocol are approved for refugees to build new lives.
- **Transit zone**- A country, that though it may host a number of refugees or asylum seekers is not a final country approved for resettlement and so is simply a transit location for those who apply or register there.

Biography

Sunita Maharaj-Landaeta, Global Goodwill Ambassador for Trinidad & Tobago, graduated from the Faculty of Education at the University of Sheffield (UK) after earning her Post Graduate Certificate and M.Ed. in Educational Management & Leadership, Educational Research and Globalisation & Inclusion respectively. She has worked in the Education field and in the area of languages for over twenty years. Her previous research has concentrated on learners who are often excluded from mainstream schooling. In recent years, she has worked as an Educational Manager on sub-projects funded and supported by UNHCR and UNICEF Caribbean, related to alternative educational solutions for migrant children. She is current pursuing her PhD at the University of Trinidad & Tobago

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