

# Portraits of young refugee women's identities, experiences, and beliefs in relation to college-going

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the stories of two young refugee women, Sue Mar and Amora, and how their adolescent identities, experiences, and beliefs, partially shaped by their English teacher, helped pave their paths to higher education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study is guided by the lens of critical literacy as “a way of being and doing” (Vasquez *et al.*, 2019). The authors chose portraiture, a participant-centered methodology, as a response to the historical marginalization of refugees, to bring their voices to the forefront (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). They draw from interviews conducted with Sue Mar and Amora, document analysis, and an interview with the English teacher.

**Findings** – In Sue Mar and Amora's portraits, aspiration and determination are seen as primary factors in their college-going. In addition, Sue Mar and Amora were propelled by their English teacher's support through the cultivation of a loving relationship, high expectations, and critical pedagogical practices. Their family and community fostered beliefs about the power and potential of education, and other refugees served as important role models.

**Research limitations/implications** – Researchers should explore refugee students' experiences accessing higher education.

**Practical implications** – English educators should connect literature to the lived experiences of their students to show that they value their students' knowledge and past experiences.

**Social implications** – Policymakers should consider the role that community colleges play in the lives of refugee students and should support programs including tuition reduction for refugee students.

**Originality/value** – As only 6% of refugees currently attend college (UNHCR, 2023), it is essential to understand factors that contributed to students' college-going.

**Keywords** Refugee students, Critical literacy, High school persistence, College-going, Caring teacher, English teacher, Portraiture

**Paper type** Research paper



This portraiture study examines the journey of two young newly arrived refugee women, Sue Mar and Amora (pseudonyms), as they traversed life as newcomers and navigated toward college in North Carolina. Highlighting their success, this study is meant to both *inform* and *inspire* – the two central aims of the portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). We approach this research from a critical literacy perspective,

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which considers systemic inequities, the potential for social change and our ethical responsibility to find ways to “tangibly improve the lives of our students and marginalized people, more broadly” (Chang-Bacon *et al.*, 2022, p. 47).

### **Purpose**

Given that only 6% of refugees worldwide attend college (UNHCR, 2023), it is pertinent to better understand how Sue Mar and Amora’s experiences in high school influenced their decisions to attend college. We asked: “How do two late-arriving refugee women describe their adolescent identities, experiences, and beliefs and how did these influence their decisions to attend college?” In addition, we inquired into their experiences in the English classroom and with their English teacher. Our goal is to provide understanding for educational stakeholders by presenting insights, viewed through a critical literacy perspective, about identities, experiences, and beliefs which help students overcome obstacles and ensure greater equity of access to higher education. As the goal of portraiture methodology is to share findings from positive learning environments and “figure out ways of transporting those ‘goods’, that goodness, to other settings and transfor[m] them as well” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20), we hope to inspire others to apply the insights described in this study in their own contexts.

### **Theoretical framework**

#### *Critical literacy*

In this study, we view critical literacy as “a way of being and doing” (Vasquez *et al.*, 2019), particularly, “doing” as engaging with the histories, identities, and struggles of marginalized students (Luke, 2014). We chose to embrace this framework as a result of Alex, an Iraqi refugee student in Author 1’s high school English class and the first participant in the larger study. When Author 1 interviewed Alex, he highlighted how Author 1’s way of being and doing, contrasted with his other English teachers (Mann, 2021a, 2021b) and how she influenced his decision to pursue a college education.

In addition, we have applied the asset-based beliefs inherent within a critical literacy framework to speak back against reductionist perspectives which have historically been ascribed to refugee and immigrant students (Alford, 2021; Chang-Bacon *et al.*, 2022), thus allowing us to enact critical literacy through the methodology of portraiture, which embraces storytelling in much the same way as critical literacy does. Through the acknowledgment of students’ cultural and experiential knowledge (Vasquez *et al.*, 2019), this study provides an opportunity to read the socially constructed worlds in which they live. Furthermore, the world itself, as they see and experience it, is a text unto itself (Freire and Macedo, 1987), mediated through day-to-day occurrences.

Within the framework of critical literacy, we understand the relationships between people, places, poverty, and power in everyday life as a foundational tenet (Comber, 2015); this interrelationality is not neutral, but rather reveals personal and communal injustices for marginalized communities (Vasquez *et al.*, 2019), which we seek to reveal through the portraits. We also seek to learn from our participants and to understand the multiple factors that played a role in the students’ move from high school to college in hopes of changing current restrictions for marginalized students dreaming of access to higher education (Vasquez *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it is also due to critical literacy’s promise of prospective change which led us to embrace its use and application.

## Literature review

### *Barriers to college-going for refugee students*

The process of resettling into a new cultural and linguistic context as someone who has been forcibly displaced is exceptionally difficult. The barriers to making it to college are even greater. To begin, most refugee families have suffered from emotional and physical trauma prior to or during their emigration to the USA (Hos, 2016). They often report suffering from persecution, torture, rape, violence, and the death of family members; as a result, refugee youth experience higher rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Bronstein and Montgomery, 2011). Even after relocating to the USA, refugee youth are at greater risk for poor social, psychological, and educational outcomes in part because their parents have low rates of formal schooling (Daniel and Zybina, 2019) and work low-wage, sometimes dangerous jobs (Roxas and Roy, 2012) due to this lack of formal schooling. Likewise, there are often gaps in children's formal education before and during the resettlement process (Daniel and Zybina, 2019), complicating their ability to catch up to school-aged peers. In addition, "refugee children often find themselves unwelcome in schools and taught to defer even imagining their futures" (Dryden-Peterson, 2022, p. 4).

Even once refugee students graduate from high school, there are additional factors that contribute to deferred dreams and place them at risk either before or after matriculation into a community college, often the first entry point for refugee and immigrant students in higher education (Teranishi *et al.*, 2011). These barriers include the lack of knowledge about navigating the admissions process and insecurity about their ability to handle the rigor of college classes (Leo, 2021). In addition, refugee and immigrant students often need significant academic remediation (Conway, 2010) and have time-consuming familial responsibilities, including care of family members, which often distract them from their studies (Leo, 2021; Shakya *et al.*, 2012; Venzant Chambers *et al.*, 2015). These barriers compound, resulting in 94% of refugees never attending college (UNHCR, 2023).

### *Factors contributing to college-going for refugee students*

Counter to the stories of barriers and hardship of refugee-background students, hope exists in the examples of students who, through the support of their schools and communities, find success and thrive despite formidable challenges (Dryden-Peterson, 2022). It is important to address the notion of "success," which we acknowledge as fraught when applied in a dichotomous way, viewing success as synonymous with college-going and a lack of success as the discontinuation of schooling. Instead, we embrace Howard *et al.*'s (2019) renaming of success as understood through the Black and Latino participants in their study. They found that success was not associated only with school, but that the communities and homes of the students were equally significant considerations in their understanding of success. Such concepts of success include hard work, determination, financial security, helping family and community, and simply being happy.

One significant factor contributing to refugee and immigrant students attending college is empathetic school personnel (Liou, 2016). It has been demonstrated that mentorship by a caring adult plays a positive role in their success (Hos, 2016; Roxas and Roy, 2012). One refugee adolescent explained that she felt most supported by her English language arts teacher who both "acknowledged [her] background and understood the complexities of learning a new language" (Hoff and Armstrong, 2021, p. 7). Care work includes personal connection, understanding and high expectations, not pity (Liou, 2016). It includes taking action to address societal inequities, improving the lived experiences of learners and cultivating students' hopes and plans for brighter futures (Ghiso, 2016; Liou, 2016; Player *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, impactful care work with refugee and immigrant students is

rooted in important community practices and ways of being and doing, which specifically includes long established “intergenerational and familial-like loving relationships” (Player *et al.*, 2022, p. 167) which students report as “necessary for full learning” (Player *et al.*, 2022, p. 168). These care practices help to establish sustained motivation, provide ample learning opportunities and foster high expectations for postsecondary education for refugee and immigrant students (Liou, 2016; Player *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, these high expectations come not only from fictive kin within school systems, but also from within students’ own families and communities (Carey, 2022; Chavira *et al.*, 2016; Raleigh and Kao, 2010; Venzant Chambers *et al.*, 2015). Raleigh and Kao’s (2010) study found that immigrant families have higher aspirations for their children’s college-going than do native students’ parents. One of the primary factors contributing to college-going is the aspirations of the refugee-background students and their families and a dream for something greater than what they have now (Carey, 2022; Shakya *et al.*, 2012). In Shakya *et al.*’s (2012) study, their results showed that newcomer refugee youth develop strong aspirations for higher education as a “proactive response to overcome pre-migration experiences of forced migration and educational disruptions” (p. 65). Thus, refugee students’ determination is rooted in their life experiences, which motivate them.

Strong support systems are vital for refugee students to pursue their goals (Liou, 2016; Player *et al.*, 2022). Teachers of refugee students are integral parts of a healthy support system. They can help students “imagine the kind of life they are seeking in a new country” and “how [students] can support each other to imagine and build better futures” (Dryden-Peterson, 2022, p. 5), which can include college education. While research shows refugee and immigrant parents and youth hold high educational aspirations (Carey, 2022; Chavira *et al.*, 2016; Raleigh and Kao, 2010; Venzant Chambers *et al.*, 2015), being able to operationalize those dreams in a new country is multifaceted and complex. Teachers are well-positioned to be able to help refugee and immigrant students navigate these systems. Dryden-Peterson (2022) argues that refugees and their teachers demonstrate “a new vision for refugee education” by examining and questioning existing power structures and lack of equality in schooling in favor of justice-focused and collaborative education (p. 4).

Also, central to the role of educators in supporting student success is making learning applicable to students’ lived experiences (Marciano, 2016), thus “reducing the dissonance between school learning and students’ identities and daily lives” (Dryden-Peterson, 2022, p. 6). It is within these types of educational settings that school and society are intertwined, and teachers and students are interconnected as educators seek to intentionally connect students’ learning with students’ worlds through culturally relevant practices, which increase college-going (Marciano, 2016).

### Positionalities

Our researcher voices not only reveal the understandings of those whom we present in this article, but also, our voices echo ourselves – who we are, what we know, our experiences – which overlays the portraits crafted within this paper (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Author 1 has been an educator for 16 years and spent a decade as a high school English teacher, teaching Sheltered English literature, which is a literature class composed of newly arrived immigrant and refugee adolescents. It was in her Sheltered English classes that she taught both Sue Mar and Amora. Author 1 became an English teacher because her English teachers changed her life. They loved her and pushed her to be her best self. Growing up in a poor, rural community, to parents with limited education, it was hard for her to envision a promising future for herself, but her English teachers envisioned it even when she did not. While her own embodied existence as a white woman did not create additional barriers, and

she acknowledges that for Sue Mar and Amora, their minoritized bodies create an additional layer of hardship she's never experienced.

Author 2 is a white woman and nonnative speaker of Spanish who has learned the language by living in Spanish-speaking countries. She acknowledges the privilege of learning another language, not out of necessity as refugees face, but as an asset to use in her professional and personal life. Speaking Spanish in the community has given her opportunities to connect with multilingual learners and families and to understand the many assets that they bring to classrooms. As a teacher educator, Author 2 joined this study to help explore the role of the teacher's (Author 1) actions in Sue Mar and Amora's college-going.

### **Portraiture methodology**

We chose to use portraiture because it centers participant voices through stories. Given that storytelling is "a significant embodiment of critical literacy, where life experiences are permitted to count" (Mann, 2022, p. 3), we embody our critical framework through the research methodology of portraiture. Rooted in relationship, the portraiture methodology invites the researcher to engage in dialogue, observation and reflection, through collecting, making sense of and crafting stories which communicate the compelling messages contained within the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Portraiture highlights hope in people's experiences; it is a blend of multiple qualitative methodologies: ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological and life history, with a focus on "goodness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Goodness is defined as what is "worthy and strong," but goodness also manifests itself as "inevitably laced imperfection" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20). We acknowledge that in their journeys Sue Mar and Amora encountered challenges and setbacks. However, portraiture resists documentation of failure. Therefore, we focus on the success in Sue Mar and Amora's stories.

We, as portraitists, see Sue Mar and Amora as knowledge-bearers who are the best authority on their own lives. Thus, we explore their critical ways of being and doing through their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives as they relate to their access to higher education. We aim to "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 3) through the reading of their worlds and subsequent writing of their worlds (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Due to the interrelational nature of this methodology, it is impossible to separate the portraitists from the portraits, particularly with respect to Author 1, whose portrait is seen within the student portraits.

### **Context of portraits**

Sue Mar and Amora's arrivals to North Carolina mirror that of nationwide trends – since 2002, 31,934 refugees from 56 countries have resettled in North Carolina, with one in four moving to the Raleigh/Durham area (Refugee Processing Center, 2022). Sue Mar and Amora arrived in Raleigh from Thailand and Iran, respectively, in their teens and each, years apart, landed in Author 1's ninth grade Sheltered English Literature classroom. These data draw from a larger three-year study in which we are examining refugee students' experiences in North Carolina high schools and their transitions to higher education.

### **Data sources and analysis**

We draw from multiple interviews and informal conversations with Sue Mar and Amora (together and individually), an interview with the English teacher-researcher (Author 1), and an analysis of two of her publications on her reflective pedagogical practices (Mann, 2021a, 2021b). Following IRB protocols, college students from refugee backgrounds were recruited

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via social media posts and a flier distributed at a local refugee nonprofit to participate in the study. The study has grown from one student participant (Alex), to include six additional students for a total of seven refugee-background students who all went to college. The two students featured in this paper are the subsequent two students to join the study, with an explicit focus on the role of the English teacher on their college-going.

In alignment with the portraiture methodology, we examined the data for emergent themes with particular attention to repetitive refrains, metaphors, and commonly held beliefs (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) describes this process as “always ‘listening for’ the metaphors, the images, the allusions people use, and the repetitive refrains that lace their talk” (p. 23). Initial data collected in preliminary interviews directed subsequent data collection. We used a dialogic approach whereby we interacted with the data and asked questions of it, and in turn asked questions and sought clarity from and with Sue Mar and Amora, mirroring authentic interaction and experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

As we analyzed each transcript and document, we inductively coded the data according to the salient concepts and themes. We worked collaboratively modifying and collapsing codes and compiled emerging themes. Some initial critical literacy themes included: educational power, resilience, bravery and aspiration, community support, and inequities faced. In addition, a metaphor of a race recurred.

### Portraits

In accordance with the portraiture methodology, rather than share traditional findings, we instead share reflective stories which convey the insights gathered through our analysis. Such insights include the role of the teacher in cultivating a belief in the possibility of college; the role of families in fostering beliefs about the power and potential of education; and the significance of refugee models of college-going.

### Sue Mar’s story

It was the unseasonably hot summer of 1996 in Burma when Sue Mar was born. It was this year that ceasefires had failed, and her people’s villages were being raided and torched. The Burmese military was seizing Karenni lands and driving the people away. Sue Mar explains that years later, these hardships increased for her family: “My father was arrested in the middle of the night. When the military let him go the next morning, my father had no choice but to flee Burma, and my family did not see him for one year.” Upon his return, Sue Mar and her family trekked through jungles for nearly a year until they arrived at the Karenni Refugee Camp in Thailand. Yet, arrival at the camp did not bring reprieve from suffering.

Sue Mar had never been permitted to learn to read or write her native Karenni language, and now she was expected to use her native language. At age nine, her parents placed her in a Karenni boarding school so she could become proficient in their language. Students mocked her lack of ability to read and write. Sue Mar met this treatment with determination and perseverance. “I worked so hard to learn Karenni [. . .]. I felt myself more confident [. . .] when I learned [. . .]. I was at the top of my class [. . .]. And after that no one was making fun of me anymore.” Reflecting on this experience, Sue Mar proclaimed that “education can make me a powerful person.” The difficulties she faced instilled in her a deep resolve to work harder and to seek strength and power through acquiring knowledge.

Recounting the next phase of her journey, Sue Mar explains:

My family lived in refugee camps for a total of seven years [. . .] in 2010, we were approved to come to the United States. When I first arrived here, I did not speak any English, but I was a teenager, so the school system placed me in the ninth grade.



It was at this point that my (Author 1's) life converged with Sue Mar's. Sue Mar entered the classroom, standing upright, shoulders back; she put out her hand, looked me in the eyes and said, "Hi. My name is Sue Mar. I don't speak English." I remember that initial meeting from over a decade ago because most of the newcomer refugee students I have taught were more reserved in our first encounter.

Despite the many academic difficulties that Sue Mar would face, she found ways to persevere. She recalls the first year I taught her:

I stayed after school [to] make sure for you to help me to get extra help cause sometimes I don't wanna ask questions in front of students cause I don't have good English [. . .] I just needed extra help to understand what is the problem or to do projects.

We spent many hours together after school, working to build her English language and literacy. She carried a small notebook with unfamiliar words she had heard or read written down. As we discussed these words and ideas, we also talked about her culture, experiences and aspirations.

Sue Mar frequently expresses that she has always felt cared for and loved by me. When I asked what I did to convey this she said:

When I ask for your opinion to an issue in my life, you respond with your heart and the best solution *for me*. You not only help me with education, but also with personal issues [. . .] You are concerned about my long-term prospects and my life.

In her junior year, Sue Mar joined the cross-country team. I remember driving her and shopping for running shoes. We discussed how she loved the opportunity cross-country provided her to talk with English-speaking students. Growing in her English language helped to increase her future college-going prospects, which was a hope of Sue Mar's since relocating to the USA. While running cross-country, she talked about her goals with her peers. When faced with doubt from others, Sue Mar related, "I tried to not get angry, but motivate myself to show [them] that I can be [in college] too— slow, you know, like the turtle can walk slowly, not the rabbit."

Though there were times others discouraged her pursuits, she was also met with pivotal moments of encouragement. Within her church community, Sue Mar met a Vietnamese doctor who had also moved to NC as a late-arriving refugee. In talking about the power of meeting another refugee-background woman who found success, Sue Mar said, "if I see someone born in the U.S. do something amazing, it's like yeah, that's amazing, but that's not my life." But when she met the doctor, she said to herself:

"Oh, she came here at 15 and then, she could become a doctor!" And, I thought I came here too late and maybe I cannot finish school on time. But she said as long as you study hard, it doesn't matter how long it takes if you like it. And, I was like "This is not something to give up on."

When she was still in high school, Sue Mar relayed this same story to me. I told her that I believed she should and could continue her education into college. She did not think she could attend college in the USA. Her family intended to send her back to Burma to receive an education because it was cheaper there. It was not until I took her on a college tour during eleventh-grade that she realized a college education in the USA was an option for her. Recalling this, Sue Mar says:

I remember you took us to [the local community college][. . .] when we drive back home, I ask you how to do this. And you told me, "Just go back *there* and ask them." Go to financial office. And if your parents do not make enough money, they should be able to help you for *free*! So I did. I went to go back with my mom.

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Sue Mar's initial exposure to college through the tour helped propel her inquiry and journey into higher education. We had many conversations about the way education can provide pathways to promising or fulfilling careers. Sue Mar explained my role in her motivation:

Nobody actually talk to me about college until she [Author 1] talked to me one time [. . .] I was like, oh, she thinks I can go to college? I was like proud of myself [. . .] It gives me happiness when someone believes in me. It makes me stronger.

Over the next many years, we communicated back and forth about college life, choices and struggles. Sue Mar completed her associate degree at the community college and transferred to a four-year college and graduated with her bachelor's degree in fashion design. It took her seven years for her to complete her degree while she worked as a seamstress.

Sue Mar's hope is to use her passion to help others:

I dream of owning a fabric company and providing jobs for women in Asia. There are many women being tricked and sold into human trafficking [. . .] I want to provide a safe workplace for them to do meaningful work. I dream of helping hundreds of other women. I want to give them an opportunity for success, like the opportunity for success that was given to me.

### **Amora's story**

Amora, likewise, seeks success, which she also believes is tied to a college education.

Amora is Afghan, but when the Taliban regime was established, her parents had to flee to Iran. The Taliban denied all the previous generations of women in her family the opportunity to be educated. Amora is the first to receive any formal education. Amora's mother, like many refugee and immigrant parents, places great value on education precisely because she, herself, was denied it. Amora relayed to me a significant conversation she had with her mother about the potential of education. "My mom said someone with education is different than someone who doesn't have it because if you continue, you have a better future than us. You can do something more than just selling stuff in the street." When Amora's father died and her mother was left widowed with six children, Amora's seven-year-old brother took to the streets selling chips and cookies to help provide rent, food, and education for the family. Despite their dire poverty, education was always a priority. Amora realized that she was able to live the dream of pursuing an education that her mother could never have for herself. Based upon Amora's request, I spent months visiting their home teaching her mother English language and literacy skills.

At the same time, Amora was still struggling in school herself. She often recounts a story from her first year in the USA:

Honestly it was hard, because I feel bad when I can't speak the English and then you know, I was in your class. And then we have an exam and I have to give you like an empty [paper]. Like nothing written on it [. . .] But after that time, you helped me to write it because you asked me questions and I just say it word by word and you got it.

Amora explains that she felt my English literature class helped prepare her. She says, "The way you teach the classes—honestly, I learned more." Amora further elaborates:

I think those books that we read in class was meaningful [. . .] Most of them was based on beliefs, cultures, race, traditions, and government stuff [. . .] Which is the reality of the world [. . .] So those are meaningful, and it was a good lesson to learn in real life because those situations are still happening and we close our eyes on them or we don't care because it didn't happen to us.

Amora appreciated the opportunity for critical thinking and meaningful discussions – central elements of a college education. For Amora, classes being hard did not preclude them



from being good. She even says she loved her biology class “because it was challenging” and would help prepare her for college and demonstrate her ability to handle the rigorous coursework.

Students like Amora bring a wealth of aspiration, knowledge, and experience to our classrooms. As such, the texts I selected allowed her to engage with complex social and global issues that were relevant for her life. I paired current news articles with core texts that featured marginalized characters and dealt with personally relevant concepts. For example, when reading *A Raisin in the Sun* and discussing Civil Rights, we also read a news article about Somali refugee women joining the police force in Minnesota and fighting for their right to wear the hijab.

Throughout high school, Amora continued pushing herself and intentionally placed herself in increasingly difficult classes. She explains, “I remember somebody told me for this society you need a degree to get a job,” and so she was determined to be prepared for college. She decided she wanted to be a dentist, inspired by meeting an Iranian dentist. Amora confided her anxiety and doubt about her ability to meet her goal to the dentist. Amora recalled the response: “[he] said it’s gonna be hard. You gonna cry most of the times, but it’s worth it at the end of the day.” These words from another refugee who had found success through education, affirming the difficulty of the task but also expressing confidence in her abilities, became a source of confidence as she persevered through honors level courses.

Amora sees her future career as a dentist as an opportunity to help others by providing needed care. She explains that she wants to:

Help people [. . .] like the patients, and you know kind of do some charity [work] [to] help people like myself if they want to continue to help them out [. . .] I know, money is not always going to work, sometimes you need help in some different way.

Amora believes that help can come in many forms. As a future dentist she imagines helping people in her practice who might not otherwise have dental care.

Amora has since completed her associate degree in community college and is now in her last semester of her bachelor’s degree at a four-year university. She plans to apply to dental school. She is determined to be successful, not just for herself or for her community, but for her mom:

I really want to buy her [a] house, just her own house, give her all the money that [I] have, like half of my house [. . .] because my mom sacrificed a lot [. . .] [so] I just want her to relax after that.

## Discussion

Within these portraits, we see that aspiration and determination drove both Sue Mar and Amora toward higher education and success. The sources of their aspiration and determination were, in part, their English teacher cultivating a belief in the possibility of college and helping to prepare them for that journey; family and community fostering beliefs about the power and potential of education; and the motivating impact of refugee role models who helped them envision their potential futures.

Teacher support helped propel these young women through the cultivation of a loving relationship, high expectations, and critical literacy as a way of being and doing. To connect with students who exercise greater degrees of caution due to trauma, relationship building requires an informed approach which carefully accounts for the needs of the individual students and their families to build trust and form community connections (Dryden-Peterson, 2022; Gibbs Grey, 2022; Player *et al.*, 2022). This requires relationship building within students’ families and communities so that they can feel fully supported through a

“community of possibility,” which “encompasses a collective of people who affirm and support the academic capabilities of Students of Color and other marginalized youth” (Gibbs Grey, 2022, p. 1198). Affirming capabilities includes challenging students. Historically, refugee students have been provided only basic forms of literacy that fail to engage them meaningfully and critically with texts (Alford, 2021). By withholding critical literacy due to a belief that refugee students are incapable of complex engagement because of their English proficiency level, educators are failing to prepare them for the complex cognitive tasks associated with higher education. A loving approach maintains high academic expectations, while providing necessary support (Liou, 2016).

Most refugee students and their families desire a college education (Leo, 2021; Shakya *et al.*, 2012). The expectation that a college degree will help refugees “attain well-paying, high-status careers” is an offer of power in this capitalistic society (Leo, 2021, p. 444), where money and status buy control over one’s own life. For refugees like Sue Mar, who have had their family’s multigenerational land stolen, and subsequently fled for their lives, and for refugees like Amora, who have never laid eyes on her homeland because of abuse of power by the Taliban, the potential power that educational attainment holds is significant. If by obtaining a college degree, they can choose fulfilling careers, which provide for them and their families, then they are able to seize control over their own trajectories, thus taking back part of what was taken (Shakya *et al.*’s, 2012).

These future-facing perspectives of Sue Mar and Amora reveal a persistent concern for the futures of their families and community and for a desire to give back (Howard *et al.*, 2019; Raleigh and Kao, 2010). Venzant Chambers *et al.* (2015) explains this is similarly true of immigrant students:

When it came to the impact of these close family ties on students’ academic performance, many participants expressed feeling that it was important to do well in school as a show of appreciation for the sacrifices family members made in order to come to the U.S. (p. 810).

For both Sue Mar and Amora, it was the physical embodiment of another person from a refugee background that provided a source of hope and belief in their own ability to obtain a college education. Representation matters, especially for marginalized students (Gibbs Grey, 2022). It is impossible to say whether either of these young women would have pursued a college education had they not met the Vietnamese doctor or Iranian dentist. Both Sue Mar and Amora now present themselves as role models to refugee youth. Through a critical literacy project initiated by Author 1 in response to educational injustices, Sue Mar, Amora, and other refugee-background college students visit refugee organizations and speak to youth about their college-going experiences and “represent visual counternarratives” (Gibbs Grey, 2022) of the immense possibility possessed by refugee youth.

## Implications

This study has important implications for educational stakeholders. English educators are well positioned to use literature as an opportunity to reflect the assets and the challenges of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Through reading and critically discussing texts that grapple with sociopolitical and sociocultural matters, refugee students can display an immense depth of knowledge built upon their experiences (Ghiso, 2016; Mann, 2022). Students can be given opportunities to make connections between their lived experiences and the experiences of others, thus fostering a more positive educational environment and encouraging refugee students to persist in their educational attainment (Knight-Manuel *et al.*, 2019; Mann, 2021a). Some of these texts can include stories that center the experiences of students from refugee-backgrounds including *Inside Out and Back Again*, *When Stars are Scattered* and *We*

*Are Displaced*. Using such texts in critical, thoughtful, and careful ways can remind students that their lives matter and are worthy of exploring inside the classroom.

For researchers, there is much work to be done in learning about what is driving the recent rise in refugee college-going from 1% in 2019 to 6% in 2023 (UNHCR, 2023). There are a myriad of factors contributing to this acceleration, and it is important to uncover specific occurrences which have helped increase college-going. More information can be learned through evaluation of existing programs and initiatives (largely being launched by community colleges) and through qualitative explorations into the lived experiences of refugee youth.

For policymakers, it is important to consider the integral role community colleges play in the lives of refugee students. Community colleges are already more accessible points of entry, with resources dedicated to refugee and immigrant students (Conway, 2010; Teranishi, 2011), but they could be made more accessible by providing more comprehensive mental health programs, developing programs specifically designed for refugee students and involving local community-based organizations who already know these refugee families (Teranishi, 2011; Tulliao *et al.*, 2017). An additional important policy change to consider relates to the financial burden of college for refugee families. By covering the tuition cost of community college (including English language learning courses) and a subsequent transfer to a publicly funded state university for all individuals who have been granted refugee status, there would be less attrition for refugees, who currently have a disproportionately high attrition rate (Leo, 2021). As we have detailed in this section, supporting students who are refugees in successfully matriculating to and through college requires a multipronged approach at multiple levels. Students like Sue Mar and Amora possess dreams and aspirations for their futures in the midst of personal and academic challenges. Listening to their stories with compassion and commitment will allow teachers, policymakers, and researchers to deconstruct barriers, allowing these students' dreams and aspirations to become a reality.

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