



Understanding and Responding to Afghan Female Refugee Educational Needs as They Pursue Higher Education at a California Community College

The purpose of this study was to understand the educational needs of Afghan women refugees attending community college. Knowing this student population's needs could allow educators and educational leaders to create more equity-minded support. A qualitative study with a narrative approach was conducted with four Afghan female participants who identified themselves as refugees. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study. Four themes emerged from the data analysis. The women's narratives revealed the significance of their families' and the Afghan community's support when pursuing higher education. The women's personal strengths: positive, motivated, persistent, intelligent, and giving surfaced during the research. The study also revealed the college resources that help refugee women persist in college.

Keywords: Afghan women, refugees, educational needs, community college

Introduction

Knowing students and their educational needs is integral to creating empowering learning experiences for them in the classroom. English language (EL) classes often consist of a variety of student populations from all over the world including refugee students. With increasing political tensions across the globe, more and more individuals are forced to leave their countries to seek refuge. For example, with the Afghan government's fallout in August of 2021 and millions of Afghans leaving their homeland, more and more Afghan refugee students enrolled in community colleges and EL courses in the United States to improve their language skills and economic situation (Sadat Ahadi, Zaman, & Hey, 2022). California is one of the top four states resettling most refugees in the United States (National Immigration Forum, 2014-2018). In 2018, 8,923 refugee students were enrolled in community colleges just in the state of California (CCCCO, 2021). These students select community colleges as they are less expensive than 4-year universities (Hollands, 2012), have convenient locations, and provide open admissions (Phan, 2018; Szelényi & Chang, 2002). Refugee students are often grouped together with other immigrant-origin and international students (Dimitriadou, 2006; Taffer, 2010) making the refugee students' unique experiences less transparent. Although they share some similar characteristics with other immigrant-origin and international students, refugees experience unique challenges (Bush, 2017; Hey, 2022; Sadat, 2019). Refugee students are often forced to leave their country separating them from their families and leaving belongings behind (Sampson, 2023). They experience emotional and psychological trauma during and after their displacement (Tomren & Opaas, 2024). They encounter language, cultural, financial, and social barriers which can impact their behavior in the classroom (Burnett & Peel, 2001). Among refugees, women tend to be more vulnerable than their male companions. Pavlenko (2004) describes how trauma, interrupted education, and caregiving burdens uniquely impacted women's language learning. Some refugee women experience domestic violence, and due to the fear of being alone in a new country, not knowing the language, and not having work experience, they are forced to live in violent environments (Burnett & Peel, 2001). Afghan female refugee students are often less educated than their male family members due to restrictions for women to attend school in their home country (UN Women, 2024). Echoing Norton's (2000) concept of "investment" in language learning, Afghan women refugees may experience challenges in language education due to cultural expectations. Their investment in education is intercepted by gender and sociocultural constraints such as caregiving roles and reduced social capital. Although research exists on refugee

students, and Afghan students in particular, research on Afghan women in adult education is limited. Their unique needs and experiences in credit-bearing community colleges are not well known (Hey, 2022; Sadat Ahadi, 2020; Zaman 2024).

Through the concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) argues that the experiences of marginalized individuals are shaped by an interaction of different systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism. Building on this, Mendenhall et al., (2017) argues how the intersections of social, economic, and health inequalities interact and reinforce one another. This highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and equity-oriented support in EL education. EL educators need to recognize the intersecting challenges faced by EL learners. Many educators do not realize there are refugees among their students (McBrien, 2005). Hones (2002) believes that teachers who know their refugee and immigrant students' backgrounds are more willing to work with these students and are more compassionate towards them. Learning about Afghan women refugee students can help instructors develop educational practices that recognize and respond to the complex, intersecting challenges that they face. It can also encourage the educators to create supportive environments that promote academic success.

This research was conducted to understand the Afghan refugee women's educational needs in community colleges. Knowing their needs and motivations that brought them to college will help educators serve these students more equitably and most importantly help the students succeed in higher education. The research question that guided this study was: What are the educational needs of Afghan women refugees to be successful community college students?

Method

Research Design

The researcher conducted qualitative research with a narrative approach with four Afghan women who arrived in the United States as refugees and were at the time of the study enrolled in a mid-sized community college located in central California. The narrative approach allows researchers to explore the lived experiences through each participant's stories (Kim 2016). Through sharing of their stories, participants expressed their feelings and perceptions providing meaningful content (Polkinghorne, 1995). The researcher interviewed each participant and analyzed the data through Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Participants' responses were coded to identify salient ideas. Those ideas were further analyzed, grouped into themes, and presented in the findings.

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Theory. Yosso's (2005) theory focuses on what cultural knowledge and abilities the students bring to the classroom rather than what skills they lack. Although Yosso's (2005) focus is on students of color, which includes "disadvantaged students" (p. 70), the Afghan refugee community college students fall into this category. Yosso (2005) argues that students of color often possess six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant, that if valued and utilized by educational institutions could transform their educational experience. She defines aspirational capital as the ability to anticipate a better future no matter what hardships one is experiencing. In linguistic capital, an individual is able to communicate culture and audience sensitivity and tell stories in multiple languages. Familial capital covers individuals' knowledge and support gained from family and community networks. According to Yosso (2005), students using the familial capital can use the resources they learned within their communities to navigate common problems. This capital provides the sense of belonging and comfort students feel when they realize they are not alone. Yosso's social capital includes the networks that students create within their communities that help them navigate new experiences such as applying for school or receiving health care. When navigating various institutions, students exhibit navigational capital which allows them to maneuver their way through difficult situations and become successful. The resistant capital allows students to learn to stand up against inequality. In this research, applying Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory sheds light on the types of capitals students bring so that instructors can build upon that cultural wealth to better meet students' needs.

Participants

Four Afghan women refugees participated in this qualitative study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. In this selection method, participants were chosen based on their experiences and knowledge about what is being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Since the goal was to examine Afghan female refugee students' educational needs in community college, the researcher sought Afghan women who identified as refugees and were enrolled in a California community college at the time of the interviews. All four participants had recently

taken EL courses in the community college credit program which prepares them to pursue further college education rather than teaching them survival language skills. Students enrolled in the credit bearing courses are at least at the low intermediate English level which enabled the participants to share their experiences in English.

The first participant, named Zohra, is a 27-year-old female married with three children. She has been in the United States with her husband and children since 2014. The rest of her and her husband's family resides in Afghanistan. As a child, Zohra and her family moved to Iran in search of better opportunities. Her parents did not experience a formal education; however, they ensured that their daughter was enrolled in elementary school after returning from Iran. She studied there until 10th grade. This is when she got married and moved to her husband's town. With the encouragement from her husband and his and her family, she continued her education in Afghanistan with the goal of becoming a teacher's assistant. She was unable to follow up with her plan due to having to immigrate to the United States. Her new goal is to study medicine and become a medical assistant.

Taara, participant 2, is a 19-year-old single woman. She has been in the United States since 2019 and has been enrolled in community college since 2021. Her parents experienced some level of education in Afghanistan. Her mother was able to graduate from high school before the Taliban made it impossible for women her age to attend school. Her father was a medical technologist for 27 years. Taara graduated from high school and passed entry exams at a university before immigrating to the United States. Her goal is to become a public health specialist and work for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Her hope is that while working for CDC, she will be able to help others.

Participant 3, named Yasmin, is a 22-year-old single woman. She immigrated to the United States with her father and 4 younger siblings. Her mother and older siblings experienced difficulties when trying to leave Afghanistan, so they stayed behind with hopes to join the rest of the family in the United States in the near future. The participant has been a community college student since 2021. Her goal is to become a teacher.

Participant 4, Veeda, is a 32-year-old mother of three. She is married and has been living in the United States since 2017. She has been a community college student since 2018. Veeda's mother worked as a medical doctor in Afghanistan, and her father was an engineer. She had the opportunity to attend and graduate from the American University of Afghanistan and work at a well-known bank in Afghanistan for 8 years. Her goal is to graduate with an Associate of Arts degree from the community college and pursue a bachelor's degree in business administration and then a master's degree in accounting.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) family support, (2) Afghan community, (3) personal strengths, and (4) college resources.

Family Support

The analysis of the narratives revealed that all four participants rely on their families' support. The families inspire and encourage the women to continue with and succeed in their education. The messages to trust education and that it will bring a brighter future and more opportunities were shared by parents who had experienced education and those who did not. During the interview, Taara shared about her parents: "They've always said that education is the only thing that will give you a better life." She added about her family: "Everyone really encouraged me, and I really feel blessed to have them. Without their love and support, I wouldn't be here and continue my education." Zohra spoke about her father's constant encouragement: "He would tell me, 'Do as much as you can to continue your studies.' He never went to school and had a lot of problems when young. He always wanted me to study to have a better life." Zohra calls her husband her superman; during the interview she recalled: "When I got married, I was 17 years old. I was a student in 10th grade. My husband never told me: 'don't go to school or stay home.' He always told me to continue my studies and goals." The support from close members of the family was evident in the women's stories.

The women also receive family encouragement when encountering challenges while at school. When Yasmin had trouble in her math class while in Afghanistan, she recalled her parents tutoring her at home. Veeda recalled having to sit in the mud due to poor conditions at her school and crying to her dad asking to let her stay home and skip school to which her dad very calmly responded that this was a place where she would learn. He encouraged her to sit on the school bag to avoid getting dirty and continue her education. Veeda also described her family's support when her parents encouraged her to enroll in computer classes in Afghanistan even though other girls her age were kept at home due to parents' fear of possible bombings.

The family support in the women's educational endeavors began in Afghanistan and continues while the women attend community college in California. When Veeda gave birth to her baby mid semester and was close to quitting college due to exhaustion, it was her husband who supported her and encouraged to keep going reminding her, "You're a strong woman; you can do it." After enrolling in college, Tara recalled her mother bringing meals to her room when she spent long hours in front of the computer doing homework. Yasmin also shared how her father helped her with college registration: "He is very supportive of me and wants me to make something good out of myself. He really tried to help me get enrolled in college." Those participants whose closest family members still live in Afghanistan also described the constant support they received from them. Zohra, for example, spoke about her weekly phone conversations with her father in Afghanistan in which he encourages her to continue her studies. She shared that when she feels down because of too many responsibilities at school and home, it is her parents in Afghanistan who remind her to simply do her best and that good things are coming.

The analysis of the data so far reveals that the participants used aspirational, familial, and resistant capitals. Dreaming about a better future no matter what circumstances they were in revealed the women's aspirational capital. When relying on their families' support and encouragement, the participants drew on the familial capital. The resistant capital was present when the women showed a strong desire to learn and persist despite the challenges they were experiencing.

Afghan Community

In addition to the family support, the significance of Afghan culture and community was also revealed through the women's narratives. Zohra, for instance, learned about the California community college that she attends at an Afghan gathering. Another participant, Taara, spoke about her friendships and reliance on the Afghan women her age here in California who constantly encouraged and supported her in her college studies. The best encouragement she claims she has received from them is to "set your goals, be patient, and wait for things to get better." Veeda discussed her involvement in frequent local community gatherings where she learned about the community college she now attends. She appreciated the guidance she received from the Afghan community members regarding what college to choose. She shared that with her newly gained experience of having taken multiple courses at the college, she is able to guide others in her Afghan community with their educational needs. It is evident that within their communities, Afghans share their experiences of applying for college, which gives the newly arrived refugees encouragement and guidance to do the same.

Within this theme, Yosso's (2005) social capital was present. By relying on social networks that the participants developed within their communities, the women received the support they needed when learning about community colleges and provided support to new members of their community.

Personal Strengths

When sharing the educational experiences in their narratives, significant evidence of the women's personal strengths was present. In their stories, the participants appeared to be very positive, motivated, persistent, intelligent, and giving. Even when sharing the challenges that they encountered in their lives, all participants stressed how challenges helped them become stronger. Instead of dwelling on the negative, the women look for and focus on the positive no matter what challenge they are experiencing. When reflecting on her own past, Veeda shared:

Life in Afghanistan was challenging and coming to the US was a challenge, but I think when we go through challenges in life, they make us stronger. With time, I will get a good education, and this is not hard, this is something I can do. Taking care of the babies and going to school is a challenge, but I think I will come out of them stronger. I am not feeling bad for the challenges I'm going through; I will overcome them.

Veeda believes that challenges can make people stronger and can help them overcome obstacles in the future. The participants' motivation to keep going is sourced in their families, the Afghan community, and their own belief in themselves. Constant encouragement from the family members, community, and the trust in their own strengths motivates the women not to give up but to continue working towards their goals.

The women's positivity and motivation lead to their persistence. The participants' stories revealed that women do not give up when faced with obstacles. Taara shared, "There isn't always just one plan in life. If plan A

doesn't work, there is always another plan." The women choose to persist and work on a problem and stay positive with hopes to achieve their goal rather than give up.

The narratives also showcased the women's intelligence breaking the common perception that all Afghan women have always been deprived of education. Taara proudly described Afghan women's successes in Afghanistan: "Many females are active in different fields, like political fields; they can work in hospitals, they can be teachers, doctors, or engineers." She and other participants shared their high scores in schools both in Afghanistan and in the United States, stories about giving presentations in their biology, chemistry, and history classes, and being top of their class.

Finally, the women's stories painted a picture of them being very giving. The participants appreciated every support they received whether it was from family, community, or college, but they also were willing to give back. For instance, Yasmin's goal is to become a teacher so that she can help other students, just the way her parents helped her when she struggled with math at school in Afghanistan. Veeda hopes to be employed at a community college one day to be able to assist newly arrived refugees in feeling welcomed just the way the California community college staff made her feel on the first day of school. When asked how she would help refugee students once she gets employed at a college, she shared:

I will hold their hand; I will encourage them. I will give a positive view of the life here in the U.S. because some of the immigrants who come here are under lots of pressure. There is no one to help them and tell them that this is a good place for them. I want to encourage them not to worry.

Zohra also described her goal of helping others:

I imagine sometimes going back to my country and helping all the kids. That's my goal. One day, I want to be able to do this for my country especially the children. Many Afghan children work. There are no laws. There is no one in charge of that. No one thinks about the children, not even the president. I want to be that person. In other countries, children have rights. For example, in the United States, children under 18 can't work. But in my country, I saw more than 80% of kids who are four, five or six, they work on the streets. When you travel in Afghanistan, you see a lot of children who work on the street. They clean shoes, they sell grocery bags. They clean cars. They work on the cars. They work with their father, with their brother, someone older than them. It really hurts me that Afghan children don't have any rights. And nobody, even people who have money in Afghanistan, is helping.

Zohra shared that she helps her Afghan friends by taking them to doctor's appointments where she serves as a translator. She remembers the challenges she experienced when she first arrived in the United States and did not speak any English. By knowing Pashto, Dari, and Farsi, she can translate for her newly arrived refugee friends when needed. Other participants shared stories about their involvement in the Afghan community and their willingness to help others register for college to improve their lifestyles and provide a good education for their children.

These women demonstrated five types of capital. When being persistent in their goals of pursuing higher education, the women demonstrated aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals. By wanting to help others navigate the educational institutions, the women demonstrated social and navigational capitals. The linguistic capital emerged when the women supported each other through translation.

College Resources

Participants' stories revealed that Afghan women refugees rely on various college resources that contribute to their success in a community college. In their narratives, women appreciated what the college was offering them. They praised staff, counselors, and teachers. When describing her first day on campus, Veeda expressed how impressed she was with the help she received from the college administrator who guided her through the college registration. She appreciated the time the woman spent with her and the patience she showered her with, especially when she had trouble expressing herself in English. Zohra also enjoyed the support she received on her first day on campus and hopes to be employed by the college one day to serve that kind of support to new refugee students.

The participants' narratives also showed the appreciation the women have for the counselors they worked with in the college. The counselors assisted the women with choosing appropriate courses, creating an educational

plan, and accessing other useful resources while showing lots of patience in the process. In her description of the help that she received from her counselor, Yasmin shared:

She walked me through which classes to take, and since I'm here for transfer, she explained that I can't take any class I want. She made an educational plan for me and said, "Now you can see what class to take in what semester." She showed me how to do it on PiratesNet and that was very helpful because she showed me everything that I needed in order to register for the right classes and how not to make any mistakes.

Yasmin appreciated the guidance she received from the counselor. Being enrolled in a community college in a new country is an overwhelming experience. The help that counselors provide can make the experience feel manageable.

Lastly, all women appreciated their instructors at the community college describing them as knowledgeable, approachable, and supportive. The participants praised the college educators for their kindness which encouraged the students to ask questions in class and reach out during office hours and via email. Yasmin shared, "Sometimes I thought what if my problem is silly, and they would think why is she asking this, but then I saw that they were supportive which made me feel comfortable asking them questions in the future." The participants also shared that instructors were able to create an atmosphere in the classrooms where the students felt that they belonged in the college. Zohra described the help she received from her language teacher when she faced a personal crisis. She shared, "I emailed him and said: Can you talk with me for a minute? He said: yes. And I talked about my problem and about my life." The instructor's flexibility and willingness to respond to her request was very meaningful. Taara shared how she was grateful for the suggestions from her instructors, who "also played the role of counselors at times." She appreciated when she could ask them questions about her own educational future and they would help her think things through which enabled her to make her own decisions about her education.

Within this theme, Yosso's (2005) social and navigational capitals were present. Utilizing help from staff, counselors, and instructors as a resource while pursuing higher education, the participants drew on the social capital. The fact that the participants were able to locate the resources within the college is evidence of using their navigational capital.

Discussion

All four themes that emerged from the data analysis provided answers to the research question: What are the educational needs of Afghan women refugees to be successful community college students? The themes were: family support, Afghan community, personal strengths, and college resources. In addition, the study revealed that Afghan women refugee students utilize all six of Yosso's (2005) cultural capitals when navigating to succeed in a community college.

The first theme, family support, indicates that the women appreciate and rely on family encouragement when pursuing education in a community college. Receiving constant support from family members from the time the women were little has taught them to be strong and resilient. Drawing on the family support while living in the United States is helping the women persist in college despite the challenges they encounter.

The second theme, Afghan community, reveals that the women need their own community's support. Their Afghan friends provide guidance with the choice of school and major, help with college registration, college resources, and share encouragement with the women while at school. Drawing on their own strength of being giving, the participants enjoy being the encouragement to others in their Afghan communities with hopes to support newcomers. The trust the participants share within their community helps them give and receive the support they need to pursue their studies at the community college.

The third theme, personal strengths, describes the characteristics the women have developed that help them to be successful in college. Their positivity helps them persist in challenging situations. The motivation that they reflect encourages them to reach for their goals and stay focused. Their intelligence helps them approach their studies with an open mind and perform well. Being a giving person allows them to assist each other and others who need support and encouragement. Their unique strengths aid the women to persist in their educational dreams no matter what challenges they experience.

The last theme, college resources, reveals that the college provides the support system the women need to succeed in college. The participants find staff, counselors, and teachers very supportive. The women's stories showed how much they valued the patience of staff and counselors as well as their ability to recognize students'

limited knowledge of the American educational system. The college educators' being kind and approachable was praised by the women as it encouraged them to participate in classes, attend instructors' office hours, ask questions, and share challenges that led to receiving support.

The analysis of the data revealed that the Afghan women bring all six forms of Yosso's capital to college. In the first theme, family support, there was the presence of aspirational, familial, and resistant capitals. When hoping for a better future despite the challenges they were experiencing, the women drew on the aspirational capital. Relying on their families' encouragement showed evidence of the women's familial capital. The resistant capital surfaced every time the women showed persistence in wanting to learn no matter the barriers they were encountering. The second theme, Afghan community, showed evidence of the social capital. This capital manifested itself in the women's ability to create social networks within their Afghan community and utilizing these contacts to learn about and navigate college. In the third theme, personal strengths, the aspirational, navigational, resistant, social, and linguistic capitals were present. While demonstrating their persistence to pursue college and willing to help others reach their educational goals, the participants displayed their aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals. When supporting others in translations within their networks, the women exhibited the social and linguistic capitals. The last theme, college resources, reflected navigational and social capitals where the participants were able to locate and utilize the support from the college's staff, counselors, and teachers. This evidence of six cultural capitals shows that although Afghan women have substantial educational needs when enrolling in community colleges, they do not come empty handed. They bring knowledge and skills that if recognized and utilized could empower the Afghan refugee female students and assist them in excelling in their education in the United States. This could also help other college students learn valuable skills from them.

Implications

Knowing their students well enhances educators' ability to address students' needs and create empowering learning experiences. With California being one of the four states that admit the highest number of refugees in the United States (National Immigration Forum, 2014-2018), education leaders must acknowledge this student population by learning what culturally appropriate and equity-minded support they require. This study reveals some of cultural wealth Afghan female refugees bring to the college community that contributes to their success. Helping students use the cultural capitals that they possess while responding to their needs can be very empowering. Based on the results of this study, here are some pedagogical implications that can help educators, English language instructors in particular, support their refugee students in their classrooms.

First, educators working with refugee students could be more culturally oriented by getting to know their students. Learning and using the students' names and treating them as the unique individuals that they are is a great start. Research suggests that if educators know about their students' experiences, they tend to be more compassionate (Hones, 2002). Learning about students' experiences to get to know them individually can be done in multiple ways. For instance, students can be encouraged to share their life stories in journal writing. In composition courses, faculty could ask students to put themselves in the shoes of a character from the book they are reading in class. Students can be invited to discuss what they would do if they were in the character's situation. This will give students an opportunity to write about their own similar past experiences. Students can be encouraged to be personal in their writing; they are also encouraged to share only what they feel comfortable disclosing. Teachers may provide their own answers to prompts, which will encourage students to share theirs. In EL listening and speaking courses, creating assignments where students share their cultures with one another could offer a learning opportunity not only for students from other cultures but also for their instructors. In one assignment, students can be encouraged to bring five artifacts that they identify with and find important in their culture. An instructor could model sharing by bringing five artifacts from her culture to demonstrate to students what is expected of them in the assignment. This encourages questions and discussions and promotes learning. In this activity, even the shyest students tend to participate and voluntarily ask questions, and their pride when discussing their culture is evident. Student feedback collected at the end of each semester has shown that students are grateful for these opportunities where they are able to share and teach others about their country and culture and where they learn about others'.

Another way to support refugee students in the classroom is to help them create and become a community within the classroom. The participants in this study appreciated how the English language instructors made them feel that they belonged in the classroom and college. When instructors reflect on the practices that help students feel a sense of belonging, they can become more intentional about creating this environment for their classrooms.

Yasmin mentioned that in her EL class, an instructor encouraged all students to share the struggles they were experiencing in college. She recalled that this was the moment when for the first time she realized that she was not the only one with problems and that there were other students struggling like her. She added that this activity also taught her how to deal with certain struggles in college, struggles that she did not realize existed but that she experienced later on in her college journey. She also shared that the classroom was full of people like her, from outside of the U.S., which helped her confirm that she was in the right place. Assignments that encourage students to express their challenges and provide ways to overcome them can be very educational and empowering.

The narratives also revealed how important the Afghan community was to the refugees' college success, as they relied on their friends in the community and learned from their previous experiences. One way to create this in the classroom is to invite guest speakers, for instance former students, who recently finished their English language courses or recent college graduates and let them share their success stories. Students in the classroom would have an opportunity to ask questions and hear about possibilities beyond EL programs. It would allow them to meet other students like them and realize that their goals could be accomplished. There are many creative ways to build a community in the classroom, but the key is to give students a voice and opportunities to share their experiences as it will help them learn about others which will create a comfortable environment for them to study and eventually succeed in college.

Another way to help students be successful in college is to create opportunities for involvement in college and the community because it can teach them about available resources. Many refugee students are not aware of the resources provided by the colleges (Earnest et al., 2010). Showing them a college website with all the resources may not be enough. One of the participants mentioned in the interview that she knew about the resources the school offered but did not know which one was right for her. Some community colleges support teachers and students by providing short classroom presentations for students where a program or department (nursing, library, tutoring center) representative visits the class to introduce themselves and let the students know what they offer, their location on campus, contact information, and business hours. By inviting college representatives to classrooms and letting them introduce themselves and the services they provide, instructors are giving their students an opportunity to learn about the resources that are available to them which in result may help them choose the ones that are appropriate for them. Within just a few minutes, the representatives show students how to make an appointment and allow students to ask questions and voice concerns. This also allows the instructor to learn about college-wide services that are offered and refer her students during the semester if the need arises.

One participant in the study defined college success as knowing the college and its community. She suggested that in order to get to know the college and its surrounding community, students need to get involved and participate in school and local events. Many community colleges organize workshops, sporting events, concerts, art displays, fundraisers, and other events on a regular basis. Emails about the events are sent out to the college community. Some of the announcements reach the students, some do not because not all students check their emails or open emails from unknown senders. To help students learn about the events, an instructor could spend the first couple of minutes of her class to go over the flyers. It can be done verbally or by posting flyers in the classroom or the college's web-based learning management system such as Canvas. In their feedback at the end of the semester, students mention these events and how they appreciated the opportunity to take their family to sporting events or musical concerts. Some take advantage of the workshops and appreciate learning about finances or healthier ways of life. Sharing all college and community events shows their value to students. It is the easiest way to help students get involved in after-school activities; it does not require instructors' involvement to create any events or even attend them. It does take a couple of minutes of the class schedule, but it lets students know that these events exist and gives them an opportunity to learn about them.

Encouraging students to be a part of a club may be another way to support Afghan refugee students. Advising an International Club or more specifically an Afghan Student Club could be very supportive for Afghan refugee students. With the student club officers, an advisor could organize camping trips and fundraisers. In addition, there are many ways to participate in community events and volunteering opportunities. One is to help at local races and marathons where student volunteers support police to control traffic, local churches where volunteers are needed to wrap Christmas gifts for the low-income families, and health events such as Walk to End Alzheimer's Disease where students can help set up tents for the event. Each time students get together and work on a project, they not only learn about the event, but they get involved and learn to appreciate the community they live in. They create bonds and opportunities beyond the event. Participating in college and community events can be very empowering to students. Not all instructors can be involved in creating and advising a club, but many of them

should be able to find a couple of minutes in a day and announce the events hosted by colleagues and encourage students to participate. Students who hear about the events from their professors are more likely to attend, which can help them integrate into the community.

Finally, for EL instructors, to be able to support their students and create an empowering learning experience for their refugee students, they need to constantly be involved in educating themselves about best teaching practices to support their diverse student population. Attending conferences and hearing from others about their experiences is one way, but for those who are unable to travel, educational institutions should provide professional development opportunities for their colleagues and staff so that they can create equity minded and culturally responsive environments for their students. One EL department in a community college in California organizes CATESOL (California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) highlights for instructors who are unable to join the CATESOL conference and other EL teachers in the community. Those instructors who attend the conference prepare short presentations and share what they learned at the conference. In addition, when more refugee students joined the EL program after the fallout of the Afghan government in 2021, the EL department contacted Afghan representatives in the local community and organized a webinar for college instructors and staff to gain knowledge about the situation and learn about the culture and experiences of the newly arriving students. This gave the college an opportunity to acknowledge this student population, learn about their needs, and serve the students more equitably to create empowering learning experiences in the college.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the following limitations when considering the implications of the study. First, this research was conducted including only four participants attending a community college in California; however, the study sheds light on some of the educational needs the refugee students, Afghan women in particular, have as community college students. Second, two participants were the interviewer's previous students. To ensure rigor of the study, the researcher engaged in reflexivity paying close attention to her own subjectivity and bias and their effects on the data analysis. Third, the interviews were in English which invites the question if the participants would share more if they could use their native language given that they were still learning English at the time of the interviews.

Conclusion

This study examined the Afghan refugee women's educational needs in a community college. Guided by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory, the research revealed Afghan women's reliance on family and Afghan community's support when pursuing higher education. The study also helped to shed light on the women's personal strengths and the college resources that help them persist in their educational journey. The results of this research highlight the need for culturally responsive support structures for marginalized students, Afghan women refugees in particular, and invites broader conversations on equity and inclusion in higher education. Future studies can deepen the understanding of the role of trauma and how it manifests itself in the women's psychological safety.

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