



Sense of belonging among refugee students in Costa Rican classrooms

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Abstract

This paper challenges the general claim that teachers are always central in the school success of refugee students (Engels et al., 2021; Ghasemi, 2021; Wubbels et al., 2006). A typological analysis based on the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2017) was used to study how teacher-student interaction interplays with the sense of belonging and learning engagement of refugee students. In contrast to what studies from the Global North indicate, the analysis of the experiences of 15 refugee students in Costa Rican schools shows that teachers are less available and that refugee students may find alternative ways to succeed in school. Indeed, like other countries in the Global South, Costa Rica has seen a large influx of refugee students, and the educational system struggles in providing the appropriate support for the complex needs of these students. As such, teachers are not equipped to play a central role in the lives of refugee students. This study points out how important the role of peers is in successful engagement of refugee students in Costa Rican classrooms, more than those of teachers.

Keywords Teacher-student interaction · Sense of belonging · Refugee education · Learning engagement · Classroom Norms

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1 Introduction

Refugee children's integration in the Costa Rican education system is, like in most important host countries, anything but straightforward. However, an analysis of refugee children's integration in the country's education systems suggests that dominant paradigms on the centrality of the teacher in successful student integration might be overstated. Indeed, faced with the mental health implications of forced migration, trauma can obstruct learning (Fazel, 2017) and affect the student's ability to regulate their behavior and attention (Post et al., 2020). With often emotionally unavailable parents (Sciaraffa et al., 2017), a stable, positive relationship with a caring adult is shown to be an important protective factor for children with possible trauma, and a good predictor for integration. This is why literature, mainly from the global North, has stressed the important role of teachers. For many refugee students, teachers are the only available adults to develop a stable relationship with (Post et al., 2020; Sciaraffa et al., 2017).

While this article does not argue against the importance of teachers for student integration, it does question how realistic such ideal teacher-student relationships are in the global South, and whether teachers, in practice, can be expected to be such an important determinant for student integration. Costa Rica provides an ideal case study for this. As one of Latin America's most important refugee-receiving countries, the socially and politically stable Costa Rica saw an unprecedented influx of refugees from Venezuela in 2016 and Nicaragua in 2018 (Chaves-González & Jesús Mora, 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023a). Early 2023, the country hosted approximately 245,000 refugees and asylum seekers, with large new influxes throughout the year (Alvarado & Voorend, [forthcoming](#)). About a third of these were estimated to be minors (UNHCR, 2023a). These refugee students' integration into the country's educational system is legally ensured, but not without challenges. Indeed, the country's historically strong public educational system, already in gradual demise after the sustained austerity measures since the 1990s (Martínez Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2012), has had to deal with an "educational black out", not in the least because of recent education strikes and the COVID-19 pandemic (CONARE, 2021).

In this context, much like in other countries in the global South, the Costa Rican State struggles to find the financial means for the necessary additional teacher trainings, developing learning materials and creating more institutional capacity to welcome tens of thousands of new students who have often missed out on an average of three or four years of schooling (UNHCR, 2023b). Combined with the difficulties intrinsically implied with the refugee process, the integration of refugee children in Costa Rica's education system is not straightforward, their school attendance insecure and their sense of belonging to the educational system weak.

This article engages with debates about refugee students' needs in a global South context. Globally, 1.9 million children were born as refugees in the last five years and 76% of them are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2023b). The article argues that the educational context for teachers in these countries is not comparable with those in high-income countries, making it hard to apply research outcomes on refugee education from the global North. Specifically, it focuses on

the role of teachers in the refugee students' sense of belonging inside the classroom through effective interaction. While the effects of teacher-student interaction on students' sense of belonging in multicultural educational contexts in the global North have been pointed out (Engels et al., 2021; Roorda et al., 2017; Rucinski et al., 2018; Furrer & Skinner, 2003), studies so far did not specifically focus on the needs of refugee students (Fazel, 2017; Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019).

Also, to translate these effective practices directly to the Costa Rican context could be misleading, since communication is eminently defined by cultural norms (Hua, 2018; Rabello de Castro, 2020) and teacher-student interaction may differ significantly between countries (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). Several variables, such as the social status of teachers in a country, cultural norms about authority, the resources of teachers and the general state of the education system may influence student-teacher interaction. Indeed, it is likely that student-teacher interaction in Costa Rican classrooms differs from what has been studied until now in countries in the Global North, which in turn warrants studies in other contexts on the sense of belonging refugee students experience at school to capture the substantial heterogeneity within the Global South.

Methodologically, this article studies the sense of belonging among refugee students in Costa Rica, based on semi-structured interviews with 15 refugee students in Costa Rica followed by a typological analysis based on the self-system model of motivational development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2018). This approach allows one to gain a better understanding of concepts that are well-studied in the global North, but not in the specific context of Costa Rica. In what follows, we present some context and theoretical bases for our arguments, after which we present the data and our methods. Then, section four discusses our findings, after which the final section presents some considerations for the academic debates around student integration in education based on this study from the global South.

2 Context and theoretical considerations

Fleeing the home country due to political unrest has an impact on the lives of children. Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school (UNHCR, 2023b), even though education is a legal right for any minor. Previous studies identify institutional as well as personal barriers for refugee students to enter and attain school. First, many host countries, including Costa Rica, are not prepared for high influxes of refugee students and tend to have limited educational capacity and inadequate programs to integrate refugee students in their national systems. At the same time, preparing teachers to educate refugees and develop learning materials to integrate refugee students efficiently into national curricula is a complex task that requires expertise and money (Arar et al., 2024). Also, in urban areas, refugee families tend to find housing where schools are already under strain, due to compounding problems faced by poorer neighborhoods (Graham et al., 2016). In rural areas, transportation to get to school is often expensive or unsafe (Graham et al., 2016). Finally, the financial stress of fleeing one's country can provoke children to stay home to look after siblings and perform other domestic tasks.

Together with the personal barriers (mental health, trauma), these institutional barriers obstruct refugee children's school enrolment and educational performance. Globally, just 50% of refugee children attend primary school, dropping to only 41% enrolling in secondary education. Only 6% continue university studies (UNHCR, 2023b). In Western countries, socially disadvantaged and refugee students are over-represented in national drop-out figures (Nouwen & Clycq, 2020; European Commission, 2016), and refugees tend to receive low-quality education (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

Costa Rica saw an unprecedented influx of refugees since 2016, initially from Venezuela, which intensified in 2018, with asylum seekers from Nicaragua, both related to political unrest in the countries of origin. The number of refugee applicants increased from around 2,000 per year to almost 5,000 in 2016, to more than 20,000 in 2018 and to between 50,000 and 60,000 in 2022 (Voorend & Alvarado, 2023). However, little to nothing is known about refugee children's integration into the country's public education system.

It seems important to study cases like Costa Rica to understand refugee education in the global South. While most research is from the USA and Europe, 86% of the world's refugees are hosted in the global South (Arar et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2023a). Policy based on research from the North is not automatically applicable to other countries, especially because countries in the South normally have weaker institutional capacity and fewer resources to prepare their school systems for a high influx of refugee students. Indeed, recent studies call for more detailed research on the unique ecology of schools attending refugee students (Arar et al., 2024; Lemke et al., 2021).

2.1 Refugee students and sense of belonging

To succeed in a school career, it is necessary to engage in learning (Buzzai et al., 2021). Being engaged in an activity means so much as to be actively involved (Wong & Liem, 2021). The motivation to engage is explained by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) as a result of feeling autonomous, competent and related to the community in which the activity takes place, which are internal psychological needs, facilitated by the external social context. In the educational domain these psychological needs can be understood as feeling capable of doing well in school (competence), feeling independent and self-determined in the learning process (autonomy) and experiencing a sense of belonging to people inside the school (relation).

When entering the school system of the host country, refugees may not directly experience competence or relatedness. Most have missed out on school for several years and they are not only new at school, but also to a foreign society with different cultural values. Without support, it may be less obvious for them to engage in learning activities. As such, for refugee children to feel like they belong at school, the external social context, teachers, and peers plays a great(er) role.

A sense of belonging is defined as feeling part of a group and seen as the psychological dimension of integration by the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). The term has been used interchangeably with relatedness, school belonging (Nouwen & Clycq, 2020), belongingness or connectedness (Wong & Liem, 2021). A sense of belonging

creates a context of relational security in which students can flourish (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Relational security in children's development was first studied by Bowlby (1969), who showed how toddlers who experience security in the interaction with their caretakers are more engaged in interacting with their environment. In education, a sense of belonging gives students the feeling that they are safe to explore, to make mistakes, and to celebrate success (Roorda et al., 2017). If students experience little sense of belonging, they might not feel comfortable trying new things, asking questions, or sharing their own ideas. In other words, students might show little engagement when they do not have a sense of belonging (King, 2015). The latter may not only empower students to engage academically, but also socially. It facilitates a student to approach peers and to make friends (Von Salisch, 2018) and enhances the students' well-being (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2017).

Refugee students who arrive at a new school might not immediately experience a sense of belonging. Unlike their classmates, they do not know the other students, did not grow up in the same neighborhood as their peers and most likely do not share the same cultural heritage (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ghasemi, 2021; King, 2015; Rucinski et al., 2018). Effective teacher-classroom interaction can promote prosocial behavior among the other students (Reynolds et al., 2017; Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021; Rucinski et al., 2018) and support students' emotional wellbeing (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2017). So, effective teacher-student interaction can enhance a sense of belonging in refugee students in several ways (Engels et al., 2021; Ghasemi, 2021; Wubbels et al., 2006).

2.2 The role of teacher-student interaction

Rucinski et al. (2018) distinguish teacher-student interaction on student and classroom level. First, teacher-student interaction can include high levels of closeness and little conflict. Closeness in relationships is conceptualized by warm, open, and reciprocal communication. Relationships contain high levels of conflict when interaction is mainly negative (Engels et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2022). In contrast, closeness will make refugee students feel more emotionally secure, which enables students to engage in class and perform better academically (Roorda et al., 2017). Second, teacher-classroom interaction can play a key role in relationships that exist between students by promoting prosocial behaviors (Reichert et al., 2021; Rucinski et al., 2018) and positive relationships (Rinnooy Kann et al., 2021). Classroom norms set by teachers regarding interaction between students, friendship formation, and 'being different' can reduce peer victimization in classrooms (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021; Roorda et al., 2019). The nature of teacher-student interaction largely depends on the teacher's interpersonal competence and training (Post et al., 2020; Wubbels et al., 2006). Between the two interaction-levels, individual teacher-student interaction is found to be the most crucial for students' well-being (Roorda et al., 2019).

This central importance of the teacher for student engagement and integration in school systems comes almost exclusively from research in the global North. The nature of the teacher-student interaction not only depends on a teacher's competence and training but also on cultural norms about the role of teachers (Alqarni, 2022). There, it is deemed necessary to give individual attention to students, and school

systems have more resources to ensure such attention, for example with nation-wide policies like “No Child Left Behind” in the United Kingdom. In other cultural settings, especially in the global South, perceptions regarding teachers’ role may differ substantially and institutional capacity is generally much weaker to ensure special attention to refugee students. It is therefore imperative to study teacher-student interaction in contexts like that of Costa Rica in more detail.

3 Methods – data and analysis

This paper is based on data collected during February until May 2022.¹ It was decided to focus on refugee students in Costa Rican public schools between 12 and 15 years old in 2022. This was motivated by previous studies showing that this is a critical age for school dropout (Roorda et al., 2019). For sample selection, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to contact participants that applied for or held refugee status across the country. Sampling continued until saturation was reached with 18 students who arrived in Costa Rica between 2017 and 2021. After critical revision of the quality of the recordings (background noise, inferior audio, rain etc.), it was decided to drop three interviews from the sample, leaving 15 high quality interviews for review. The sample of participants, who were enrolled in grades five to eleven, ranged in age over 12 ($n=5$), 13 ($n=2$), 14 ($n=1$) and 15 ($n=7$). Participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were consequently transcribed in that same language. Given both authors are fluent in Spanish, the selected quotes in this article were translated until the very end, were slightly edited for readability, and

Table 1 Participants demographics

Participant	Age	Grade	Place of Interview
#1 Tomás	15	8	Alajuelita
#2 Paulo	12	7	Alajuelita
#3 Javier	13	8	Liberia
#4 Wilco	15	11	Liberia
#5 Ariana	15	7	Upala
#6 Carlos	14	7	Los Chiles
#7 Julia	12	7	Los Chiles
#8 José	15	7	Upala
#9 Andrés	15	6	Alajuelita
#10 Mariana	12	6	La Garita
#11 Flor	13	7	Los Chiles
#12 Simón	12	5	San José
#13 Mónica	15	5	Lomas de Pavas
#14 Fabian	15	7	Upala
#15 Zayda	12	7	Upala

Source: Authors

¹Footnote: Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was sought from the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University. Before commencing the interview, the participants and their caretakers signed a written consent form.

were consequently revised by a Spanish-English translator. In what follows, to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants.

A typological approach (Hatch, 2002) was adopted to analyze how sense of belonging and teacher-student interaction are experienced by refugee students in Costa Rica. This approach considers theories with a broad scientific consensus as a valuable starting point for analysis. From self-determination theory (Nouwen & Clycq, 2020), the following three concepts were chosen to use in the analysis: a sense of belonging or relatedness, teacher-student interaction and learning engagement. The typological approach allowed the researchers to look for more fine-grained patterns within these three well-studied typologies, in the specific context of refugee students in Costa Rica. Hypothetical patterns that were supported by most of the participants' experiences, resulted in identified relationships between teacher-student interactions, sense of belonging and learning engagement.

4 Results and discussion

In this section, the main results from the analysis are reported and discussed. Consistent with global numbers on refugee school engagement, seven of the fifteen participants followed education according to their age, seven were two or more years behind their peers and one participant was out of school. In other words, only 50% of the participants followed classes in a grade according to their age.

4.1 Interaction between teacher and student

Effective teacher-student interaction is defined in the literature by high levels of closeness and little conflict. But in the Costa Rican context, this definition is problematic because interaction with teachers seems to almost never happen on a personal level. Of the fifteen participants, only five report occasionally having informal contact with teachers. For example, teachers sharing the date of their birthday, or talking about their own family. Interestingly, all those five students are in a grade corresponding to their age.

'Well, super good. Or well, they are people that care, they ask you 'are you okay?'. Sometimes one can talk with them. Or ask them to help with a topic?' (Wilson, 15 years)

The other ten students reported not having informal contact with teachers. If there is interaction, it concerns their learning progress. Some participants even report to feel uncomfortable when teachers approach them informally, like Javier explains:

'Actually, I think it was last week. Wednesday, I was in the first lesson and the teacher had us working. So, suddenly she starts to ask me how I felt, if I was okay, and I was focused on trying to finish my work so that I could review it and I tried to only answer in a way so that, I could get quickly out of the questions she was asking me.' (Javier, 13 years).

With teachers being more distant, and personal communication between teacher and student relatively abnormal, the threshold to approach a teacher becomes high. This is demonstrated in the number of participants that feel uncomfortable asking the teacher for help in class. Eleven participants report to rather not ask questions in class. Of them, seven are in a grade two years or more under the grade corresponding with their age. Only when confidence in a teacher is established, some may approach the teacher to ask a question in private. Ariana (15 years) describes her experience as follows: *'I get that a lot. They say that if you have questions, ask but I better stay quiet and solve it on my own with what I understood.'* According to Ariana the relationship between student and teacher plays a role here: *'Yes, often it is when one feels confident, confident with the teacher, one asks, yes. But we have to go to where he is'.* This confidence is not always established, as for example in Andrés's case:

'I felt ashamed to speak to my math and science teacher. Or well, I did not feel confident with him. [...] The only thing he told me was that I needed to study. That I was too old to be asking him in fourth grade. That I should already know everything. That, and nothing else. He said that and I felt ashamed to speak to him' (Andrés, 15 years).

Interestingly, with the teacher unavailable as a resource to ask for help, many participants report to look for peers that can help them with the classes. Twelve participants normally resolve unclarities in class between peers, or even work together outside of school to do homework or assignments. Like Andrés, who entered fourth grade at age twelve without being able to read.

'He [peer] helped me to read the words, unite them, and what I did not understand, he explained me well. Sentences that I did not understand well, he explained to me. He would read it to me, so that I would understand. Because reading was very difficult for me. So, he supported me a lot' (Andrés, 15 years).

Similarly, Fabian, Flor, and Simon, who are all relatively new at their school, report to do schoolwork together with their friends.

'They are calm and until now we have shared time during the breaks, and we work together in class.' (Simon, 12 years).

'We play, yes, if we do not have anything. If we have homework, we go back to doing homework.' (Fabian, 12 years).

'She helps me when I do not understand the class.' (Flor, 13 years).

Having only peer support available to complete assignments may influence the quality of one's schoolwork. As Carlos explains below, sometimes peer support is insufficient.

'It is not that smart of me, because it has already happened that I had to leave an assignment in blank, because I did not know how to do it. But when one does not know how to do something, you normally ask a friend how it is done.'

Or when I do not understand, my friends explain me, and when we both do not understand something, we leave it' (Carlos, 13 years).

These quotes show, first, the importance of having at least one friend to ask for help when teachers are unavailable. In this study, three participants report neither to not feel comfortable approaching teachers nor do they have friends to help with school-work. Unsurprisingly, these participants are two years or more behind their peers. Second, with only peer support, refugee students may have inferior school performance than with the proper support of a teacher.

4.2 Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging seems to be largely influenced by peers, possibly more so than by teachers, in the Costa Rican school context. As refugee students, all participants shared the experience of being 'the new student' at school. This can be a stressful occasion for any child. Though not exclusive to refugee children, Carlos explains about the stress his first weeks at school generated, making him feel like an outsider:

'It was quite complicated because I...I almost did not speak. They would put a topic on the board, and I did not ask anything. It was really uncomfortable because during the breaks... I did not know anybody; I did not know who I could get together with. And then, I started to get to know others. [...] Yes, yes. I felt very foreign then. Because I did not know how the norms were.' (Carlos, 13 years).

Carlos' statement shows how being new and the feeling of not belonging can obstruct students to engage in school, academically as well as socially. Other participants report to have similar experiences. Like Ariana, who had no one to work with during group assessments:

'I did not have any friendships, I would spend all day at school there, but talked with nobody. I had no one to relate with. But you do not spend a lot of time like that. Right now, I do have many friendships and when we must do group work, I now have who to work with. Before they would say, work together, but everybody would form groups and I would have nobody to work with.' (Ariana, 15 years).

Indeed, refugee students do not automatically experience a sense of belonging and are often aware of their outsider's role during the first months. This can cause refugee students to engage less socially and academically during these first months. This quote also shows the importance of peers for sense of belonging and the potential role for teachers in contributing or getting in the way of students' collaboration and bonding. However, some participants report developing a sense of belonging with peers over time. Like Wilson, who had been at his new school for just over six months at the time of the interview.

'I have friends in different grades. [...] In seventh, in ninth, in fourth and I have three friends in eighth grade. [...] Well, normally simply with persons that are not serious, but also not irresponsible. For example, I get together with people who have fun, but also do homework. I have a friend called Carlos. He always talks, he will always have a topic of conversation. He can always make you laugh. You can have a laugh with him but when it is about studying, he is super serious.' (Wilson, 15 years).

Wilson's statements give the impression that he has found several friends at his new school with whom he feels comfortable. About nine of the participants report having such comfortable relationships with peers. Five other participants report to indeed have found friends at their new school, but that as a group they are isolated inside the school community.

'I walk with my friends; we are separate from the rest. So, right now that works, nothing else. [...] Well, isolated, no. We do the things we have to do at school together, groupwork. We do not get along with the others. So, during the breaks we get together and we talk' (Ariana, 15 years).

This social isolation is a result of negative behavior of other peers at school, and not wanting to be associated with refugee children. Xenophobia can be a reason why refugee students are being left out by peers. Especially participants that lived in areas with a large Nicaraguan community, like Alajuelita or Upala, reported about xenophobia. Because they are being left out by their Costa Rican peers, segregated groups of peers with the same nationality form inside school communities.

'Like, we do not speak with other students? Maybe we get together to not be alone. [...] Like, because we are Nicaraguans and all and they leave one on his own. [...] Like they say: 'do not hang out with one from Nicaragua because they are troublemakers', I don't know. When I started at this school they said, 'Ah, no, you are Nicaraguan. My mom told me better not to hang out with you' (Tomás, 15 years).

Although most participants in this study seemed to find their place at a new school with time, still three of them reported to not have anyone to talk to at school.

'With no one. [...] I do not like to hang out with anyone. [...] I don't like it. [...] I stay inside [the classroom, during breaks]' (José, 15 years).

While this study only found three students that experience no sense of belonging with anyone at school, the actual number of students may be a lot higher. Several participants in this study report about bullying and fights at schools and about students being left out.

'Yes, there are a lot on their own. I sometimes try to talk to them, so that they are more connected to others, right? [...] Sometimes the teachers counsel them,

they encourage them, to socialize. [...] To me, it seems... maybe they feel better on their own, like how I felt before, right? But now I feel different with my friends and all that' (Zayda, 12 years).

The feeling of being the new one, not knowing how the social norms of a new classroom function and possible mental traumas create barriers for refugee students to engage in academic and social processes at school. It has been pointed out by previous studies that a stable relationship with a teacher can promote refugee students to positively interact with peers, establish friendships and engage in class. The experiences from refugee students in Costa Rica, however, suggest that this personal interaction between teacher and student is not common in Costa Rica, and instead, refugee children's engagement is highly dependent on the type of social relations they form with their peers.

4.3 Interaction teacher - classroom

Although it may be difficult for teachers in Costa Rica to assume the role of a stable adult in the lives of refugee students, some participants do recall the efforts of their teachers to make sure they at least felt welcome at their new school. Teachers did this mostly through interactions with the whole class and stressed the importance of making somebody feel welcome. Such classroom norms established by teachers can help to prevent peer victimization and promote positive relations (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021; Roorda et al., 2019).

'I thought that they would bully me because I have a different skin color. But no, it did not go as I thought, right? Rather, I got along well with them, and I was in fourth grade at the time. And I could not read. So, my classmates helped me. One teacher, she helped me whenever she could. She supported me with exams, and I was getting along with all students. I did not feel bad, I felt good around them, yes. My teacher, she told the class: First, make him feel welcome, help him with what he can't do. Because he comes from another country. He has a lower level, and we must help him with what we can. They helped me with my exams, with my studies' (Andrés, 15 years).

The previous quote underscores the stress refugee students can experience when starting at a new school for looking, speaking and being different than the majority others. Also, it illustrates the important role of teachers in creating a positive social context in a classroom. Finally, it shows the importance of feeling accepted and supported by the social context in which refugee students engage in learning. Although the teachers' role seems to be relatively limited in refugee integration and sense of belonging in Costa Rica's schools, most participants do acknowledge their role in encouraging students to get to know each other. Activities in class, like games, are ways in which teachers help create this positive environment:

'Those games are necessary. [...] Yes, because I see many sharing their ideas and like that you start getting to know the other and form more friendships' (Julia, 12 years).

These interventions by teachers to create more social bonds between the students, prevent students from always spending time and working together with the same students and excluding others. For new students, it is a safe way to approach and get to know their peers. As Ariana explains, she prefers teachers to oblige students to work with random peers, especially in the first weeks at a new school, so that no one is left out.

'Well, some teachers let the students pick, but others form the groups [...] Well, now, I like to pick because I have friends to work with. But before I would say, better let the teacher pick. It was better because the classmates would leave you out' (Ariana, 15 years).

Some participants encountered more obstacles in finding their place at their new school and needed more support from their teachers. This support was generally given when students raised concerns, but teachers normally did not have an active role in identifying the underlying issues. Misbehavior among peers was reported as bullying ($n=9$), stealing money and accessories of peers ($n=3$), fighting ($n=7$) or skipping school ($n=5$). Of the participants of this study, three had been exposed to bullying. This was often focused on their accent or because they were foreigners.

'They [the first months] were very difficult, I first went through a period of bullying. And after I got along well with my classmates. I told the teacher, and now I get along very well with my peers. Thank God' (Mariana, 12 years).

In Mariana's case, a teacher provided protection when bullying occurred. Mariana's quote shows that reinforcing social norms is just as important as establishing them. Although Mariana reports about a teacher acting as an authority in school, most participants report about teachers being absent or unaware of cases of bullying or exclusion inside school. As a result, the responsibility to report this behavior and reinforce social norms largely lies with students, who often experience a high threshold to approach teachers.

5 Final remarks

This article discussed refugee children's integration in the Costa Rican classrooms, through the eyes of the children themselves. In line with global tendencies, only 50% of the participants were on track with their education. The conversations with students suggest that the number of students feeling excluded, or may have even dropped out, may in fact be higher. However, this study was done against a backdrop of a lack of data on refugee student integration and participation in Costa Rica's education system.

We aimed to identify the role of teacher-student interaction and its importance for the sense of belonging of refugee students in the school system. Somewhat in contrast with what studies from the global North suggest about the central role for teachers in the creation of a sense of belonging of refugee children in schools, we argue that teachers can be important for creating this sense of belonging, and ultimately, engagement in learning, but that in practice their role is limited in contexts like that of Costa Rica. Where recent studies from the global North underline the importance of teacher-student interaction (Rucinski et al., 2018) for refugee integration, this paper argues that these interactions are less prominent in Costa Rican classrooms. We suggest that studies emphasizing the importance of teacher-student interaction and the level of closeness in this relationship (Roorda et al., 2017; Engels et al., 2021) may be less applicable to contexts in the global South, like Costa Rica. Instead, what seems to be a main predictor for the sense of belonging is the kind of peer relations refugee students create. Indeed, in our study, peers seem to be of more importance in the Costa Rican context than teachers, both for academic as for social support.

When teachers do play a positive role in creating a sense of belonging among refugee students, this typically happens by reminding students that everyone is welcome in the classroom and reinforcing the general agreements in class. As such, teachers may play a positive role, although participants of this study generally find it hard to build up the courage to inform teachers about negative situations. Thus, findings from studies focusing teacher-classroom interaction and its effect on prosocial behavior between peers seem to be more applicable to the Costa Rican context (Reichert et al., 2021; Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021). Where previous studies from the global North argue that individual teacher-student interaction was found to be the more crucial for students' well-being than teacher-classroom interaction (Roorda et al., 2019), this paper finds little evidence to support this argument in the Costa Rican context, since effective teacher-student interactions seem to be scarce.

Then, there seems to be a high threshold to approach teachers for support, which may result in lower school results. Especially for refugee students already behind their peers, this is problematic. Their sense of competence (Ryan and Deci, 2018) may be affected in such a way that they become demotivated. Also, without guidance of teachers, refugee students depend entirely on their own social skills in making social connections with their peers. Less socially skilled students run the risk of not fitting in and are more vulnerable to peer victimization resulting from bullying or possible discriminatory tendencies that can be present in society and therefore also inside schools (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021; Roorda et al., 2019). Of course, feeling excluded affects the sense of belonging and decreases motivation to go to school (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2018; Nouwen & Clycq, 2020). If anything, the experiences of refugee students in Costa Rica discussed in this article beg for more investigation on refugee education in the global South.

While the focus of the article was limited to the experiences of 15 refugee students and we did not study the limitations teachers face nationwide in dealing with thorny situations regarding student integration, or their stance towards refugee students in general, we cautiously offer some possible explanations. A first could be found in the cultural norms about teacher-student interaction in Costa Rica. Cultural norms influence how teachers perceive their educator role, for example as a formal authority, a

role model, a facilitator (Zhang, 2022). Also, cultural norms influence whether teachers consider social aspects of their job as important as academic aspects.

A second might be related to the teachers' limited expertise in dealing with these issues, and the lack of training programs and capacity building initiatives. Some participants appreciated support from teachers in developing social connections with peers, mostly during unstructured moments like breaks and collaborative moments. While refugees are not new to Costa Rica, the magnitude of the current refugee situation is unprecedented, and the way this translates into more refugee students integrating in the school system confronts more teachers with the need to be sensitive to their specific needs.

It is unrealistic to expect this expertise to grow, organically and speedily, without proper training programs. Existing training programs for teachers on inclusion of refugee students exist, for example Team Up by War Child (van den Berg, 2020). Again, these training programs are developed and evaluated in the global North context. Testing and adapting these programs in the global South may result in a useful tool for teachers in those parts of the world. Finally, the structural context in which this refugee spike is unfolding is one of eroding educational capacity, and a State incapable of upholding Costa Rica's strong trajectory of social policy. Put simply, can we expect teachers to respond to refugee students' needs, if they must run double shifts in overcrowded classrooms, and can hardly keep up a decent level of education in general?

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