

The Role of 21st-Century Skills in Supporting Refugee Students¹

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Abstract

In today's increasingly interconnected and dynamic world, the education of refugee students stands out as both a humanitarian responsibility and a concrete indicator of social solidarity. In this context, 21st century skills are considered an effective tool for refugee students to become stronger and develop resilience. Skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity and digital literacy contribute not only to academic success but also to students' active participation in social life, development of belonging and self-confidence. Teachers' integration of these skills into pedagogical approaches, creation of multilingual and intercultural learning environments and effective use of digital tools support individualized and inclusive education processes. Psychosocial support approaches based on social-emotional learning and collaborative project models accelerate students' adaptation processes and facilitate their resilience in times of crisis. In order to increase the quality of refugee education, it is necessary to include 21st century skills in teacher training programs and to conduct simultaneous policy, resource and field development studies. Integrating these skills into education strategies with a holistic approach will contribute to the formation of a more inclusive and resilient education ecosystem by increasing the social cohesion and solidarity capacity of both refugee individuals and host societies.

1. Introduction

As today's world becomes increasingly interconnected and dynamic, the education of refugee students is both a humanitarian imperative and one of the most concrete indicators of social solidarity. In this context, it is important to understand how 21st century skills can be an effective tool for refugee learners to become stronger and develop resilience. Indeed, increasing waves of migration and displacement on a global scale confront educators with the responsibility of supporting the holistic development of refugee students, beyond simply imparting academic knowledge. In order to provide the equipment required for this responsibility, 21st century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and digital literacy play a critical role in students' adaptation to changing world conditions and their effective participation in social life. The integration of these skills for refugee students is of great importance not only in terms of enriching course content, but also in terms of developing a sense of belonging in the school environment, gaining self-confidence, and contributing to their social resilience. In this study, how 21st century skills can be implemented in refugee education will be discussed within the framework of the main challenges and opportunities encountered. The aim is to shed light on practical educational approaches and to reveal strategies that will support the academic and social integration processes of refugee students. In this way, it is aimed that these individuals, who will grow up as an integral part of the global community, will undertake meaningful roles in a complex and rapidly evolving world.

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2. 21st Century Skills for Teachers

In today's rapidly changing information and communication technologies environment, the knowledge and skills expected from individuals show radical differences compared to previous centuries. This change necessitates the redefinition of personal, social, economic and academic life skills; it requires individuals to be prepared for complex and unpredictable problems (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). In this context, the concept of "21st century skills" is used as an umbrella term to define the equipping of individuals with new knowledge and skills (Han, 2021).

For teachers, 21st century skills include not only the transfer of content, but also the design of learning environments and the unleashing of students' potential. According to Trilling and Fadel (2009), these skills include "basic competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication and digital literacy"; while Voogt and Roblin (2012) draw attention to the need for teachers to develop "pedagogical approaches that will guide students' learning processes".

21st-century skills encompass a range of abilities and competencies that are essential for effective teaching in today's rapidly changing world. These skills go beyond traditional subject knowledge and pedagogical techniques and emphasize the need for educators to adapt to the demands of the modern learning environment. Some key 21st-century skills for teachers are explained below.

2.1. Digital Literacy

Digital literacy refers to the competence to effectively find, evaluate, and use information in digital environments (Gilster, 1997; Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Teachers must have in-depth knowledge of the digital tools and platforms they will use in their education and training processes; thus, they should be able to seamlessly reflect technology integration in their lesson plans (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Providing students with the ability to critically examine digital resources and distinguish between reliable information and misleading content is also among the basic responsibilities of teachers (Fraillon et al., 2014; Redecker & Punie, 2017). Today's learners tend to access information quickly, learn simultaneously, and multitask; they prefer visual content over text and value flexible access to information. These characteristics lead us to define them as "digital natives" (Sezgin & Han, 2022; Prensky, 2001). Therefore, it is of great importance for teachers to demonstrate competence in using technology effectively in the classroom. The main teacher skills within the scope of digital literacy are: Knowledge of selecting and managing software, hardware, and online resources to be used in education (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; UNESCO, 2013); raising students' awareness of ethical digital behavior, data privacy, and combating cyberbullying (ISTE, 2016; Redecker & Punie, 2017); developing strategies to increase the quality and interaction of learning outcomes by incorporating appropriate digital tools into lesson plans (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Voogt, Fisser, Pareja Roblin, Tondeur, & van Braak, 2013); ensuring that students analyze digital resources according to reliability, validity, and up-to-dateness criteria (Fraillon et al., 2014; Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Providing these skills with a holistic approach supports the professional development of teachers and enables students to adapt to the digital age and grow up as active members of the information society.

2.2. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking is the process of analyzing pieces of information, evaluating arguments, and solving complex problems effectively (Brookfield, 2011; Facione, 1990). Teachers should design learning experiences that encourage students to question and solve problems, and ask guiding questions that support deep thinking (Paul & Elder, 2006; Halpern, 2014). In addition, as emphasized by Jonassen (2011), teachers should structure learning

processes gradually to guide students to overcome complex problems and thus develop students' independent problem-solving capacity (Ennis, 2011). There are some competencies that stand out in the acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills by teachers: Creating activities that include open-ended tasks and real-world problems that will enable students to actively participate in knowledge (Brookfield, 2011; Facione, 1990); presenting problems that examine the logical consistency and support of arguments and reveal thought processes (Paul & Elder, 2006; Halpern, 2014); teaching the steps of complex problems with step-by-step guidance strategies that guide students to produce independent solutions (Jonassen, 2011; Ennis, 2011). That is teachers should foster critical thinking skills in their students by encouraging them to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and solve complex problems.

2.3. Collaboration and Communication

In the 21st century, collaboration and communication skills are vital for individuals to work effectively in both face-to-face and digital environments (OECD, 2018; Voogt et al., 2015). Teachers should design collaborative classroom environments where students actively participate in problem-solving and project management processes together; thus, encouraging collective knowledge creation and learning from each other (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Stahl, 2006).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the central role of communication in the learning process, arguing that learning can only occur through social interaction. In this direction, teachers should organize activities that will develop effective listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; they should support students in expressing their ideas clearly and understanding different perspectives (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Alexander, 2008).

In addition, technological tools such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and online collaboration platforms enable virtual collaboration in globalizing and digitalizing educational environments. While Lave and Wenger's (1991) "collaborative learning" approach shows that learning takes place in social situations and community practices; today, teachers should provide students with virtual teamwork experiences using these tools (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018).

The competencies that stand out in the acquisition of collaboration and communication skills by teachers are as follows: Organizing project and task-based learning activities that clarify students' roles and responsibilities within the group (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Stahl, 2006); Providing structured guidance in listening, speaking, reading, and writing processes so that students can express themselves and their thoughts with confidence (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Alexander, 2008); Model and teach students the skills to carry out online projects using video conferencing (Zoom, Teams), instant messaging (Slack, WhatsApp), and collaboration platforms (Google Docs, Miro) (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Teachers need to facilitate collaborative learning experiences and teach students how to effectively communicate and work with others, both in person and virtually.

2.4. Creativity and Innovation

In a rapidly changing global context, creativity and innovation skills allow students to produce flexible solutions in the face of uncertainty and complexity (Pink, 2006; Robinson, 2011). Teachers should design learning experiences that will stimulate students' curiosity and motivation for discovery; and allow ideas to evolve through trial and error within these experiences (Sawyer, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Treffinger and Isaksen (2013) emphasize that the creative problem-solving process includes the steps of "developing different perspectives" and "producing alternative solutions"; in this context, teachers should create

structured environments for students to voice their original ideas. In addition, Robinson (2011) points out the importance of constructing school culture as an ecosystem that supports creativity. In this context, teachers; should create a classroom atmosphere that sees mistakes as learning opportunities, rewards bold ideas, and encourages collaborative innovative projects (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Sternberg, 2006). The competencies that stand out in teaching creativity and innovation through teachers are as follows: organizing open-ended projects and prototype development activities that keep students' curiosity alive (Sawyer, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996); encouraging students to develop alternative solutions through brainstorming, role-playing, and design-oriented thinking workshops (Brown, 2009); developing classroom norms that reduce the fear of making mistakes, reward innovative experiments and collaborative projects, and make students' voices heard (Robinson, 2011; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014). Teachers should encourage creativity and innovation in their students by providing opportunities for them to explore new ideas, think outside the box, and develop original solutions to problems.

2.5. Adaptability and Flexibility

In a rapidly changing educational environment, teachers must have the flexibility and agility to adapt to students' different needs and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2014). In this context, individualizing teaching strategies and restructuring them according to student profiles in both content and process dimensions is a fundamental approach for an effective learning experience (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). On the other hand, Fullan (2007) emphasizes that teachers can respond quickly to unforeseen in-class and out-of-class challenges through crisis management, immediate implementation of pedagogical innovations, and establishing continuous feedback loops. In addition, innovations and methodological developments in educational technologies require teachers to keep their professional practices up-to-date. As Papert (1980) predicted, teachers must redesign their learning environments in a transformative way by embracing new technologies and learning theories (Zhao, 2012; OECD, 2020). Such professional flexibility is not only about technology integration; It also supports the teacher's own learning journey and increases professional resilience (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

The competencies that stand out in providing adaptability and flexibility through teachers are: The ability to adapt content, activities and assessment methods appropriate to different learning goals and styles (Tomlinson, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009); the ability to make pedagogical decisions in times of crisis, make flexible plan updates and create support mechanisms for students' emotional needs (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012); the capacity to quickly learn and integrate emerging digital tools, agile teaching methodologies and current pedagogical approaches into the course processes (Papert, 1980; OECD, 2020). With the pace of change in today's world, teachers need to be adaptable and flexible in their teaching methods and approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students.

2.6. Cultural Competence

Cultural competence refers to understanding and respecting students' cultural origins and perspectives (Gay, 2000; Banks, 2008). Teachers should create inclusive learning environments that view diversity as an asset; thus, they should make each student's identity, language, and experiences an integral part of education (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Nieto, 2010). Understanding how culture shapes the learning process allows teachers to develop fair and equitable approaches in course content and methods (Banks & Banks, 2010). There are some basic skills that teachers should focus on in providing cultural competence: In-depth evaluation of heterogeneous class profiles by investigating students' communities, family structures, and cultural heritages (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a); developing classroom norms that take

into account differences in language, religion, ethnicity or gender, and in which all students feel safe and can contribute (Nieto, 2010; Banks, 2008); ensuring that learning becomes both meaningful and transformative by incorporating examples from students' life experiences and traditional sources of knowledge into course materials (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Banks & Banks, 2010). Teachers should be culturally competent and aware of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of their students.

2.7. Global Awareness

Global awareness is the process of helping students understand global issues, various cultures, and different perspectives; thus, they become individuals with a sense of global citizenship (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Teachers should design learning experiences that will help students adopt global citizenship values; in these experiences, they should develop sensitivity to different perspectives by engaging in critical discussions around environmental, economic, and socio-cultural issues (UNESCO, 2015). Merryfield (2000) emphasizes that students' interactions with their peers around the world through collaborative projects in and out of the classroom strengthen empathy, tolerance, and a sense of shared responsibility. In this context, teachers should develop the following competencies: Teaching basic concepts and facts on issues such as climate change, migration, human rights, and economic inequality (Byram, 1997; UNESCO, 2015); Encouraging students to develop a critical perspective on world issues through scaled case studies, simulations, and discussion sessions (Merryfield, 2000; Oxfam, 2015); providing students with the opportunity to communicate directly with their peers from different geographies by organizing online exchange programs, bilateral projects, and virtual cultural meetings (Merryfield, 2000; Deardorff, 2006). Teachers should help students develop a global perspective and understanding of global issues, cultures, and perspectives

2.8. Media Literacy

Media literacy encompasses individuals' ability to critically evaluate, derive meaning from, and transform media messages and sources (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010). Teachers should teach students to analyze the production processes of media texts, the ideologies conveyed, and strategies for targeting the target audience; thus, they should develop resistance to disinformation and manipulation in both traditional and digital media environments (Livingstone, 2004; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In addition, as suggested by Hobbs (2010), media literacy education should be integrated into the curriculum and realistic and meaningful practice opportunities should be provided to students in different disciplines. There are some basic skills that teachers should focus on in acquiring media literacy: Teaching how to analyze the language, visual design, production context, and ideological emphases on the messages conveyed in texts (Buckingham, 2003; Jahn, 2020); developing strategies for questioning the flow of information on social media, blogs, and online publishing platforms and identifying reliable sources (Livingstone, 2004; Hobbs, 2011); supporting interdisciplinary learning across subjects by organizing media analysis projects and production workshops in language, social studies, and even science courses (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In a world saturated with media and information, teachers should teach students how to critically evaluate and analyze media messages and sources.

2.9. Life Skills

Life skills are defined as a set of basic competencies that enable students to be successful in both their academic and personal lives (World Health Organization, 1999). In order to provide these skills, teachers can teach students competencies such as problem solving, financial literacy, and time management by relating classroom activities to real-world contexts (Lombardi, 2007). In addition, Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulation theory emphasizes the

importance of helping students plan their learning processes by taking an active role in the processes of setting goals and monitoring their progress. The roles that teachers play in providing students with life skills are as follows: Ensuring that students experience these skills through budget planning workshops, prioritization studies, and case-based problem-solving tasks (Lombardi, 2007; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014); Guiding students' educational and career planning through SMART goal setting, incremental goal monitoring methods, and career choice simulations (Zimmerman, 2002; OECD, 2018); Demonstrate the application of academic content to everyday life through internship projects, field trips, and community service activities (Lombardi, 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Teachers should equip students with essential life skills such as financial literacy, time management, and problem-solving skills that will prepare them for success in the future

2.10. Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning refers to students taking the initiative in their learning processes, assuming responsibility, and developing an attitude focused on continuous development (Knowles, 1975; Candy, 1991). Based on Dweck's (2006) "growth mindset" model, teachers should present learning as a journey of discovery and make students embrace the idea that mistakes are learning opportunities. This approach reinforces students' love of learning, while also strengthening motivation and self-regulation (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2003).

Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulation theory emphasizes the importance of students consciously managing the processes of effective goal setting, monitoring progress, and receiving feedback. Teachers should teach students to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely) goals and guide them to evaluate their learning processes through regular reflection sessions (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Locke & Latham, 2002).

In addition, Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) "flow" theory suggests that individuals experience deep focus and satisfaction in areas where their interests and abilities intersect. Therefore, teachers should design personalized learning experiences by providing students with opportunities to explore their own interests and develop independent projects (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

The competencies that teachers should focus on in developing self-directed learning skills are as follows: Nurturing students' curiosity and determination for learning with encouragement and feedback strategies based on Dweck's (2006) model (Hoffman et al., 2003; Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007); Adopt methods of setting SMART goals, keeping a learning journal, and regularly assessing progress (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998); plan individual research projects, portfolios, and self-directed learning modules that allow students to follow their passions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teachers should foster a love of learning and teach students how to become self-directed learners who can take initiative and responsibility for their own learning.

2.11. Ethical and Responsible Behavior

Success in academic and personal areas is directly related not only to cognitive skills but also to ethical and responsible behaviors. Teachers should guide students to adopt ethical principles in both online and offline environments; they should conduct awareness-raising activities on digital citizenship, combating cyberbullying, and online privacy (Ribble, 2015; Selwyn, 2016). Kohlberg's (1994) theory of moral development emphasizes the importance of teachers not only conveying rules to their students, but also modeling how they can take responsibility and make ethical decisions in the dilemmas they encounter. Nucci and Narvaez

(2008) have shown that virtue-based education approaches are effective in helping students learn to respect social norms and develop empathy.

Among the complex dynamics of the digital age, preventing cyberbullying and protecting online privacy support students' balanced development in both emotional and security dimensions. Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2014) stated that cyberbullying trainings, beyond raising awareness, provide students with intervention and support strategies; Solove (2006) has shown that teaching personal data protection and privacy rights form the basis of digital citizenship. Some of the basic competencies that teachers should focus on in providing ethical and responsible behavior skills are as follows: Ensuring the internalization of social responsibility and justice principles by adopting value-oriented approaches beyond rules (Ribble, 2015; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008); teaching students about protecting their personal data, secure password management, and strategies against online harassment (Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2014; Solove, 2006); allowing students to experience decision-making processes based on the principles of honesty, justice, and responsibility through daily examples and case discussions (Kohlberg, 1994; Selwyn, 2016). Teachers should promote ethical and responsible behavior in their students, both online and offline, and teach them how to use technology and social media responsibly.

2.12. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to individuals' ability to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and the emotions of others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Goleman, 1995). Teachers should both develop their own emotional competence and support students in gaining empathy, self-awareness, and social skills (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). According to CASEL's (2003) model, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making components are the main areas of incorporating emotional intelligence into the educational context. Creating a safe and supportive classroom environment enables students to openly express their emotions and take academic risks to fully participate in the learning process (Maslow, 1943; Denham, 2006). In addition, the ability to establish positive peer and adult relationships strengthens students' social adaptation and academic motivation (Elias et al., 2000; Brackett et al., 2011). The basic skills that teachers should focus on in developing emotional intelligence are as follows: Assessing the effects of students' emotional states such as stress, anxiety, or frustration on the learning process (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Brackett et al., 2011); supporting students' social and emotional competences through empathic listening, emotional sharing, and conflict resolution strategies (Goleman, 1995; Denham, 2006); establishing classroom norms in line with Maslow's (1943) principle of "need for safety" where emotions are freely expressed and making mistakes is accepted as a natural part of the learning process (Maslow, 1943; CASEL, 2003). Teachers should develop their own emotional intelligence and help students develop their social and emotional skills, including empathy, self-awareness, and relationship-building.

3. 21st Century Skills for Enhancing and Empowering Refugee Education

Education is of vital importance for social integration and individual development; this is especially true for refugee individuals with socio-economic disadvantage. Displacement processes limit access to learning opportunities, making it difficult to cope with trauma and uncertainty. Therefore, refugee education takes on multidimensional functions beyond just providing academic knowledge; such as psychosocial support, the creation of safe learning environments, and the resumption of community-building processes (Han & Tösten, 2023; Dryden-Peterson, 2011). UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that empowering refugee students through education both increases their personal autonomy and contributes to the harmony and

well-being of host communities. Complex competencies such as critical thinking, digital literacy, collaboration, creativity, and cultural competence, which are 21st century skills, are important tools for refugee students to overcome the multi-layered challenges they experience (Betts & Collier, 2017). By integrating these skills into their course designs, teachers can strengthen students' problem-solving abilities, social networking skills, and personal resilience (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; UNHCR, 2022).

In order to effectively implement 21st century skills in refugee education, teachers need to adopt holistic approaches at both pedagogical and psychosocial levels. First, designing multilingual and intercultural learning environments increases students' sense of belonging and academic motivation by incorporating both their mother tongue and cultural heritage into the educational process (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). In this context, building bridges between different perspectives through cultural storytelling and project-based activities enriches interaction among student communities and supports social cohesion.

The use of digital learning tools provides both accessibility and individualization of the learning process. Teachers should provide students with basic digital literacy skills while providing distance education support through online platforms and open educational resources (OER) (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). This approach contributes to equal opportunities in education for refugee students from different levels by regulating the pace of learning and access to content in a student-centered manner.

Psychosocial support and resilience-building strategies are critical to ensuring the continuity of the learning process. Activities focused on social and emotional learning (SEL) provide students with the skills to regulate post-traumatic stress reactions and strengthen emotional resources (UNHCR, 2022). In addition, social support networks created through group work and mentoring programs reinforce students' sense of solidarity both within the school and in the host community.

Learning experiences focused on critical thinking and problem solving encourage refugee students to develop meaningful projects based on their own life conditions (Betts & Collier, 2017). Case studies and inquiry learning methods deepen students' analysis and synthesis skills to tackle real-world problems. Similarly, collaborative and participatory learning models strengthen social skills and mutual understanding through mentor and peer interactions both in and out of the classroom (UNHCR, 2022). Finally, creativity and innovation workshops and the integration of design thinking processes into the classroom provide students with the opportunity to prototype their own solutions and express themselves (Sawyer, 2012). Methods such as art, drama, and storytelling deepen emotional expression and increase social awareness. The systematic implementation of these components supports refugee students not only in achieving academic success, but also in achieving long-term social integration and personal empowerment (Han & Tösten, 2023; Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

4. Conclusion

The systematic adoption of 21st century skills in the context of refugee education has the potential to create profound impacts at both individual and societal levels. Competencies such as critical thinking, digital literacy, collaboration, creativity, adaptability, cultural competence, global awareness, media literacy, life skills, self-directed learning, ethical responsibility, and emotional intelligence provide the mental and emotional equipment necessary for refugee students to overcome the multi-layered challenges they face (Han & Tösten, 2023; UNESCO, 2019). Beyond supporting academic success, these skills strengthen students' psychosocial resilience, reinforce their self-confidence, and enable them to establish meaningful connections with their host communities (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Teachers'

ability to integrate these skills into course design and create multilingual and intercultural learning environments becomes possible by effectively using digital tools and open educational resources to provide individualized learning experiences (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). In addition, psychosocial support approaches based on social and emotional learning and collaborative project models accelerate students' social adaptation processes and increase their capacity to show resilience in times of crisis (UNHCR, 2022; Betts & Collier, 2017).

Looking forward, in order to increase the quality of refugee education, it is of great importance to include 21st century skills as a curriculum title in teacher training programs; to conduct resource development, policy development and field research simultaneously (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). In addition, continuous monitoring of field practices and evaluation of effectiveness with quantitative and qualitative methods are necessary for sharing best practices and developing scalable models.

As a result, integrating 21st century skills into education strategies with a holistic approach enables a transformation that will add value to both the present and future lives of refugee students. This process will contribute to building a more inclusive and resilient education ecosystem on a global scale by increasing the social cohesion and solidarity capacity of not only refugee individuals but also host societies.

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