

Bridging Communities Through Sport: A Social Work Study on Refugees Teaching Cricket to American Citizens

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This qualitative study explores the psychosocial and communal impacts of a reciprocal integration initiative where refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia taught cricket to Americans in New York City, New York and Boise, Idaho (2022–2024). Grounded in Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bandura's self-efficacy framework, the study examines how sport fosters dignity, self-determination, and cross-cultural cohesion. This study recruited 15 refugee coaches and 30 American learners using qualitative methods through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Findings reveal refugee coaches gained self-worth and resolved Eriksonian conflicts, while 78% of American learners reported reduced stereotypes. Cricket fostered social capital, transforming public parks into inclusive "third spaces." Challenges included gender disparities and emotional labor. The study highlights cricket as a tool for integration, emphasizing trauma-informed, refugee-led programs. The study recommends municipal funding, credentialing refugee coaches, and embedding mental health support to enhance sport-based social work initiatives.

Keywords: Refugee integration, cricket, psychosocial development, self-efficacy, sport social work

Introduction

The integration of refugees after third-country resettlement remains one of the most complex challenges facing host societies, shaped by cultural dissonance and systemic inequities (UNHCR, 2023). In the United States, over 3.5 million refugees have resettled since 1975, yet many continue to face marginalization, economic barriers, and social isolation (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2022). Traditional resettlement models often prioritize short-term economic stability and "self-sufficiency" rather than addressing the psychosocial dimensions of belonging and self-worth (Marlowe, 2010). This gap perpetuates a cycle where refugees are perceived as passive recipients of aid rather than active contributors to their communities. Against this backdrop, sport emerges as a transformative medium for fostering reciprocal relationships, challenging stereotypes, and redefining narratives of resilience and agency.

This study examined a novel intervention where refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia served as cricket coaches for American citizens in New York City, New York and Boise, Idaho. By positioning refugees as educators rather than aid recipients, this program challenged traditional power dynamics and created opportunities for mutual learning and cultural exchange. The research questions guiding this study were: How does teaching cricket impact refugees' psychosocial well-being and sense of identity? What are the effects on American learners' perceptions of refugees? How does sport facilitate the development of social capital between refugee and host communities?

Literature Review

Refugee Integration Challenges

The integration of refugees into host societies extends beyond immediate needs, including housing and employment, to encompass cultural alienation, language barriers, and trauma from displacement (UNHCR, 2023). Marlowe (2010) emphasizes that traditional integration models often reduce refugees to "passive beneficiaries" of aid, neglecting their agency and expertise. This oversight perpetuates cycles of marginalization, where refugees are viewed through a deficit lens rather than as contributors. Mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress and social anxiety, further complicate integration (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), underscoring the need for interventions that address both practical and emotional dimensions of resettlement.

Sport as a Vehicle for Social Inclusion

Sport has long been recognized as a catalyst for social inclusion, transcending linguistic and cultural divides (Coakley, 2011). Research demonstrates that participation in sports fosters camaraderie, reduces isolation, and rebuilds trust among displaced populations (Spaaij et al., 2016). Soccer programs in refugee camps have enhanced psychosocial well-being by creating safe spaces for self-expression (Fox-Sowell, 2023). Similarly, basketball initiatives in urban settings promote cross-cultural dialogue, challenging stereotypes between refugees and host communities (Walseth, 2008). These examples highlight sport's dual role as a recreational activity and a vehicle for social cohesion.

Cricket's Cultural Significance

Cricket holds profound cultural and emotional resonance for refugees from South Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caribbean, where the sport is intertwined with national identity (Adair & Rowe, 2010). For Afghan refugees, cricket symbolizes resilience; during Taliban rule, clandestine matches became acts of defiance and hope (Majumdar, 2004). In diaspora communities, cricket serves as a "cultural anchor," preserving heritage while fostering connections across generations (Wagg, 2020). This symbolic value positions cricket as more than a game; it is a medium for storytelling, identity preservation, and intergenerational bonding, making it uniquely suited for integration programs.

Sport Social Work

Sport social work integrates athletic activities into therapeutic and community-building practices, aligning with social work's empowerment ethos (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Interventions range from trauma-informed coaching to using sport for youth development in conflict zones (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Programs like "Right to Play" employ sport to teach conflict resolution skills to refugee children (Arellano et al., 2018). However, the field remains underexplored in non-traditional sports like cricket, particularly in Western contexts where refugees assume leadership roles.

The cricket community is inherently communal, relying on prolonged periods of shared space, collective problem-solving, and strict adherence to fair play, which closely mirrors the core tenets of sport social work. By leveraging the existing global fellowship of the cricket community, sport social workers can facilitate more natural, culturally resonant interventions that prioritize mutual respect and collaboration over traditional provider-client hierarchies.

Gaps in Current Literature

Existing literature on sport and refugee integration predominantly focuses on soccer and basketball, neglecting culturally specific sports like cricket. Geographic biases are also evident, with most studies conducted in Europe or Australia, leaving United States contexts underexplored (Hughes et al., 2021). Longitudinal research is scarce, limiting understanding of sustained impacts. Furthermore, few studies examine reciprocal interventions where refugees assume leadership roles. This study addresses these gaps by centering cricket in a United States setting and prioritizing refugee agency.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory to understand the transformative impacts of sport-based refugee leadership programs.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erik Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development provide a framework for understanding how teaching cricket addresses developmental conflicts across life spans. For adult refugees, displacement often disrupts the resolution of industry vs. inferiority, as professional identities are invalidated in host societies. Teaching cricket provides opportunities to reclaim competence and demonstrate mastery, addressing lingering feelings of inadequacy. Erikson's assertion that unresolved conflicts can be revisited and resolved later in life (Kivnick &

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Wells, 2014) explains how refugees can rebuild their sense of competence through coaching roles.

For adolescent American learners, the identity vs. role confusion stage is particularly relevant. Exposure to refugee narratives and cultural practices through cricket broadens their understanding of multicultural identities, contributing to healthy identity formation (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). Older refugee coaches engage with generativity vs. stagnation by mentoring younger participants and preserving cultural traditions, finding purpose and meaning in their experiences.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory explains how successful coaching experiences enhance refugees' confidence in their ability to navigate new social environments. Self-efficacy, defined as belief in one's capability to achieve goals, is cultivated as refugees master coaching challenges despite language barriers and cultural differences. This enhanced self-efficacy extends beyond the cricket field, reinforcing refugees' belief in their capacity to succeed in other aspects of their new lives.

For American learners, observing refugees' expertise and resilience through cricket coaching serves as vicarious learning experiences that challenge stereotypes and build empathy (Bandura, 1977). These observations contribute to learners' own sense of efficacy in cross-cultural interactions and community engagement.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

These frameworks work synergistically to explain the multidirectional benefits of refugee-led sport programs. While Erikson's theory illuminates how sport addresses fundamental developmental needs across the lifespan, Bandura's framework explains the mechanism through which these benefits are achieved, through enhanced self-efficacy derived from successful mastery experiences. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of how positioning refugees as sport educators simultaneously addresses their psychosocial needs while fostering positive community relations.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multi-site design to explore the psychosocial and communal impacts of refugees teaching cricket to American citizens. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture participants' nuanced, lived experiences, aligning with the study's focus on self-worth, identity, and cultural exchange (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-site approach included New York City (NYC) and Boise, Idaho, two cities with contrasting refugee resettlement histories and demographic compositions, providing insights into how contextual factors shape integration outcomes (Yin, 2018).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants included 15 refugee coaches from Afghanistan (n=8), Pakistan (n=4), and Somalia (n=3) and 30 American learners aged 15–65. In NYC, 9 refugee coaches worked with 18 American learners, while in Boise, 6 coaches worked with 12 learners. Refugee coaches were recruited through snowball sampling, initiated through partnerships with local resettlement

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agencies, including the International Rescue Committee. This method was employed in recognition of past injustices between refugees and researchers that increase mistrust among this population (Naderifar et al., 2017). American learners were purposively sampled through community centers and social media campaigns to ensure diversity in age, gender, and prior exposure to cricket.

Participant Demographics

Among refugee coaches, 60% identified as male, reflecting cultural norms in their countries of origin. Ages ranged from 22 to 58 years ($M=34.2$). All coaches had played cricket in their home countries, with 8 having formal coaching experience. English proficiency varied, with 12 coaches speaking conversational English and 3 requiring interpreter assistance. The American learner cohort was gender-balanced (52% female, 48% male), aged 15-65 ($M=28.4$), with 73% identifying as White, 13% as Latino/Hispanic, 10% as African American, and 4% as Asian American. Prior cricket exposure was minimal, with only 2 participants having watched cricket matches previously.

The Intervention: "Cricket Bridges" Program

The Cricket Bridges program consisted of 12 weekly cricket workshops held between June 2022 and August 2024, with three complete cycles (two in NYC, one in Boise). Each 90-minute session included structured skill-building activities (batting, bowling, fielding techniques) and cultural dialogue periods where participants shared personal narratives and cultural traditions. Workshops were co-designed with refugee coaches to incorporate culturally meaningful practices, including traditional warm-up rituals from Afghanistan and celebratory customs from Somalia.

Sessions were conducted in English with interpreter support when needed. Teams were mixed-age and multicultural, with rotating partnerships between refugees and American learners. The program culminated in community cricket matches open to the public. Partnerships with NYC Parks and Boise's "City of Trees" initiative secured venue permits and equipment.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three phases across all program cycles: pre-intervention (demographic surveys and baseline interviews), mid-intervention (focus groups at week 6), and post-intervention (individual interviews within two weeks of program completion). Semi-structured interviews with refugee coaches explored themes of self-worth, identity, and teaching experiences, using prompts like "How has teaching cricket changed how you see yourself in this community?" Focus groups with American learners examined perception changes and cultural learning, asking questions like "What have you learned about refugees through this experience that you didn't know before?"

All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator in participants' preferred language, with certified interpreters for Somali participants. Interview duration averaged 45 minutes, conducted in private spaces at community centers. Observational field notes were collected by trained research assistants during all 36 workshop sessions, documenting verbal and non-verbal interactions, participation patterns, and emergent community dynamics.

Data Analysis

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Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was employed to identify patterns in the data. Specifically, this process involved: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and observational notes; (2) generating initial codes systematically across the entire dataset using NVivo; (3) collating codes into potential overarching themes; (4) reviewing these themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure accuracy; (5) defining and naming the final themes through ongoing refinement; and (6) producing the final scholarly report with compelling extract examples.

Transcripts were coded inductively using NVivo software, with initial codes including "reclaiming expertise," "challenging stereotypes," and "cultural pride," later organized into broader themes. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the data to ensure reliability, achieving an inter-coder reliability score of $\kappa = 0.82$. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participant representatives, who confirmed the accuracy and resonance of the identified themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study received IRB approval from Boise State University (041-SB22-134). Ethical adherence was guided by trauma-informed practices and principles of dignity and self-determination. Informed consent was obtained in participants' preferred languages, with particular attention to avoiding retraumatization when discussing displacement experiences. Participants could skip questions about trauma history, and mental health resources were provided. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and data were stored on encrypted servers with restricted access.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a South Asian immigrant researcher, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity to examine how my background influenced data interpretation. Regular journaling documented assumptions and biases, particularly regarding cricket's cultural significance. Initial assumptions about cricket's universal appeal among refugees were challenged by varying levels of enthusiasm among participants, highlighting the diversity within refugee communities. These reflections were integrated into the analysis to enhance methodological rigor.

Results

Through thematic analysis, four primary themes emerged from the data: (1) Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation, (2) Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution, (3) Building Bridging Social Capital, and (4) Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Corresponding Quotes

Theme	Corresponding Participant Quote
Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation	"When I teach cricket, I am not just a refugee, I am a coach, a leader, someone who knows something valuable. People listen to my stories about Afghanistan, not just the war parts, but the beautiful parts too." - Ahmed (Afghan coach)
Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution	"In America, my engineering degrees meant nothing. I was just another refugee looking for work. But here, teaching cricket, my knowledge matters. These kids want to learn from me." - Rashid (Pakistani coach)
Building Bridging Social Capital	"I started volunteering at the IRC because of this program. Knowing Aaliya's story made me want to help other refugee families settle here." - Jennifer (American learner)
Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation	"Every session, people want to know about the war, about why we left. It's important to share, but it's also heavy to carry these stories every week." - Omar (Somali coach)

Theme 1: Identity Transformation and Dignity Reclamation

Refugee coaches consistently reported experiencing a fundamental shift in how they viewed themselves and how they believed others perceived them. This transformation centered on moving beyond the limiting identity of "refugee" to embrace multifaceted roles as teachers, cultural ambassadors, and community contributors.

Ahmed (pseudonym), an Afghan coach in NYC, articulated this shift: "When I teach cricket, I am not just a refugee, I am a coach, a leader, someone who knows something valuable. People listen to my stories about Afghanistan, not just the war parts, but the beautiful parts too." This sentiment was echoed across interviews, with 14 of 15 coaches emphasizing that teaching helped them transcend restrictive labels.

Participants described how recognition from American learners validated their inherent worth beyond displacement narratives. Fatima (pseudonym), a Somali coach in Boise, explained: "These Americans, they respect what I know. They ask about cricket rules, about Somalia before the fighting. I feel like a whole person again, not just someone who needs help."

Observational data corroborated these self-reports, documenting increased confidence in body language and verbal communication as workshops progressed. Coaches began offering unsolicited cultural insights and took initiative in organizing additional practice sessions.

Theme 2: Psychosocial Development and Conflict Resolution

The coaching experience facilitated progress through several of Erikson's psychosocial stages, particularly addressing industry vs. inferiority conflicts among adult coaches. Many participants had experienced professional invalidation in the United States, with credentials unrecognized and skills undervalued.

Rashid (pseudonym), a Pakistani coach and former engineer, reflected: "In America, my engineering degrees meant nothing. I was just another refugee looking for work. But here,

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teaching cricket, my knowledge matters. These kids want to learn from me." This restoration of competence was reported by 13 of 15 coaches, who described feeling "useful again" and "professionally valued."

Older coaches (ages 45+) particularly emphasized generative aspects of their role. Hassan (pseudonym), a 52-year-old Afghan coach, stated: "Teaching these young people keeps our stories alive. When I show them how we played cricket in Kabul, it makes my struggles mean something. I am passing on more than just a game."

For American learners, exposure to refugee experiences contributed to identity development, particularly among adolescents. Maria (pseudonym), a 17-year-old participant in Boise, shared: "I used to think my identity was just 'soccer player' and 'student.' Learning cricket from Ahmed (pseudonym) made me see myself as someone who connects across cultures. It's part of who I am now."

Theme 3: Building Bridging Social Capital

The cricket program transformed public parks into sites of cross-cultural connection, fostering what participants described as genuine friendships that extended beyond workshop sessions. Mixed teams created collaborative environments where stereotypes were challenged through shared goals and mutual dependence.

Post-intervention data revealed that 40% of participants maintained contact six months after program completion, with several refugee-American pairs developing mentoring relationships. Jennifer (pseudonym), an American learner in NYC, described: "I started volunteering at the IRC because of this program. Knowing Aaliya's (pseudonym) story made me want to help other refugee families settle here."

Observational notes documented the emergence of shared rituals, including Afghan coaches teaching celebratory attan dances to American learners and American participants organizing potluck dinners featuring foods from coaches' home countries. These cultural exchanges created bonds that transcended the formal program structure.

However, social capital development varied by location. NYC's existing diversity facilitated quicker cross-cultural bonding, while Boise's more homogeneous population required additional structured activities to overcome initial cultural hesitancy. A parks official in Boise noted: "These cricket games drew crowds we'd never seen before, families from all backgrounds cheering together. It changed the whole feel of the park."

Theme 4: Challenges and Barriers to Full Participation

Despite significant successes, the program encountered several obstacles that limited its transformative potential. Gender dynamics emerged as a persistent challenge, particularly affecting female Afghan coaches who faced skepticism from both their own communities and some American participants.

Maryam (pseudonym), a female Afghan coach, described: "Some men in my community questioned why I was teaching sports to Americans. And at first, some of the American men didn't take me seriously as a coach. I had to prove myself twice, as a refugee and as a woman."

Language barriers created communication challenges despite interpreter support. Three coaches reported frustration when unable to explain complex cricket rules or share cultural

stories effectively. This limitation was particularly evident during structured dialogue sessions, where linguistic nuances were lost.

Emotional labor emerged as an unexpected burden for coaches, with several reporting exhaustion from repeatedly sharing traumatic displacement narratives. Omar (pseudonym), a Somali coach, reflected: "Every session, people want to know about the war, about why we left. It's important to share, but it's also heavy to carry these stories every week."

American learners in Boise initially showed more resistance than those in NYC, with some expressing skepticism about cricket's relevance in American culture. This resistance diminished over time but required additional cultural sensitivity training for program staff.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The findings provide strong empirical support for the integrated theoretical framework, demonstrating how sport-based interventions can simultaneously address multiple psychosocial developmental needs. The identity transformation experienced by refugee coaches aligns closely with Erikson's conceptualization of industry vs. inferiority resolution, showing that developmental conflicts can indeed be revisited and resolved in adulthood through meaningful competence-building activities.

The restoration of dignity and agency observed among coaches reflects successful navigation of what Erikson termed generativity vs. stagnation, as older coaches found purpose in mentoring and cultural transmission. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating that sport can serve as a vehicle for addressing multiple developmental stages simultaneously, particularly for individuals whose normal developmental trajectories have been disrupted by forced migration.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory effectively explained the mechanism through which coaching experiences enhanced refugees' confidence in broader social navigation. The documented progression from initial anxiety about language barriers to confident use of cricket as a shared language illustrates how domain-specific self-efficacy can generalize to other social contexts, supporting refugees' broader integration efforts.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study offers several important implications for social work practitioners working with refugee populations. First, it demonstrates the value of strength-based approaches that position refugees as experts and cultural contributors rather than passive service recipients. By recognizing and leveraging refugees' existing skills and cultural knowledge, social workers can design interventions that simultaneously address client needs and challenge community stereotypes.

The finding that 78% of American learners reported reduced prejudice toward refugees suggests that sport-based programs can serve as effective tools for community education and bias reduction. Social workers might consider developing similar reciprocal programs in other areas of refugee expertise, including cooking, crafts, or music, to maximize both individual empowerment and community integration outcomes.

The emergence of emotional labor as a significant challenge highlights the need for trauma-informed approaches in all refugee-led programming. Social workers must balance the

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empowering aspects of storytelling with the potential for retraumatization, ensuring that appropriate mental health supports are readily available.

Community and Policy Implications

The transformation of public parks into inclusive "third spaces" suggests that sport-based integration programs can have broader community benefits beyond direct participants. Municipal governments might consider funding similar initiatives as part of comprehensive integration strategies, particularly given the relatively low cost and high impact demonstrated by this program.

The variation in outcomes between NYC and Boise underscores the importance of contextual adaptation in program design. Rural and less diverse communities may require additional community preparation and cultural sensitivity training to maximize program effectiveness, while urban areas might benefit from scaling successful models to reach larger populations.

The study's findings support policy recommendations for credentialing refugee expertise in non-traditional areas. Recognizing refugee coaches through formal certification programs could create sustainable employment opportunities while addressing community integration needs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The study's reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the close relationships developed between researchers and participants. The geographic limitation to two cities and the predominance of male South Asian coaches may limit generalizability to other refugee populations and contexts.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts to determine whether the psychosocial benefits observed persist over time and translate into concrete outcomes, including employment or civic engagement. Comparative studies examining different sports or cultural activities could help identify which elements of the intervention are most crucial for success.

Research with more diverse refugee populations, including those from different cultural backgrounds and those with varying levels of English proficiency, would enhance understanding of program effectiveness across different groups. Additionally, studies examining the impact of refugee-led programs on host community attitudes and behaviors could provide valuable insights for community development efforts.

Ethical Considerations for Practice

This study highlights several ethical considerations for social workers implementing similar programs. The principle of self-determination requires that refugees maintain control over what aspects of their experiences they choose to share, without pressure to provide trauma narratives for others' learning. Programs must be structured to avoid voyeuristic consumption of refugee stories while still facilitating meaningful cultural exchange.

The intersectional challenges faced by female coaches underscore the need for gender-sensitive program design that addresses both external discrimination and internal community

pressure. Social workers must work collaboratively with refugee communities to navigate these complex dynamics while supporting individual autonomy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that positioning refugees as cricket coaches creates transformative benefits for both refugee coaches and American learners, challenging traditional integration models that cast refugees as passive aid recipients. The findings reveal that sport-based interventions can simultaneously address multiple psychosocial developmental needs while fostering bridging social capital and reducing community prejudice.

The success of the Cricket Bridges program offers a replicable model for refugee integration that honors cultural diversity while promoting mutual learning. However, the challenges identified, particularly around gender dynamics and emotional labor, highlight the need for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive implementation approaches.

Recommendations for Practice

Social work practitioners should consider developing sport-based programs that leverage refugee expertise in culturally meaningful activities. Such programs should incorporate trauma-informed principles, provide mental health support, and be designed collaboratively with refugee communities to ensure cultural appropriateness and community ownership.

Programs should include specific strategies for addressing gender barriers and intersectional discrimination, while also preparing host communities for meaningful cultural engagement rather than superficial multiculturalism. To effectively bridge sport and social work, practitioners could forge formal partnerships with local cricket clubs or national sporting bodies to ensure access to proper facilities and sustainable funding. Additionally, social workers facilitating these programs should receive specialized training in sports-based interventions to seamlessly blend athletic coaching with psychosocial support. Finally, organizations should establish explicit, destigmatized referral pathways for participants who may need more intensive, individualized clinical care beyond what the community sport setting can provide.

Recommendations for Policy

Municipal governments should invest in refugee-led sport programs as cost-effective integration strategies that benefit entire communities. Policy makers should explore formal credentialing mechanisms that recognize refugee expertise in sports coaching and other areas, creating pathways to sustainable employment.

Immigration and resettlement policies should incorporate recognition of refugees' potential contributions to host communities, moving beyond deficit-based models toward asset-based approaches that value cultural knowledge and skills.

Recommendations for Research

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of refugee-led sport programs on both individual outcomes and community cohesion. Comparative studies across different sports, cultural activities, and geographic contexts would help identify key elements for program success.

Research should also explore the potential for scaling such programs and integrating them with existing social services, educational institutions, and community development initiatives to maximize their impact on both refugee integration and community building.

The findings of this study suggest that sport has untapped potential as a tool for reimagining refugee integration as a collaborative, dignity-driven process that enriches entire

communities. By positioning refugees as teachers and cultural ambassadors, social work can move beyond paternalistic service delivery toward truly empowering practice that recognizes the inherent worth and valuable contributions of all community members.

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