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Exploring Refugee Children's Pre- and Post-Migration Educational Experiences

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Introduction

During the ongoing war in Syria, the Canadian government promised to receive 25,000 refugees¹ fleeing war and persecution over a period of three months in 2015-2016 (IRCC, 2019). Half of those admitted were children (IRCC, 2019). The arrival of comparatively large numbers of Syrian refugees necessitated resettlement in smaller urban centres such as Saskatoon and Regina in addition to the traditional refugee-receiving large metropolitan centres like Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver (CIC, 2016). During the initial wave of migration, the province of Saskatchewan welcomed 1,415 Syrians, nearly 650 of whom were resettled in the city of Regina (IRCC, 2019). In total, 98 percent of the arrivals in Saskatchewan came as Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) while two percent were privately sponsored (IRCC, 2019). In 2016, Regina recorded the fourth highest rate of population growth in the country, and immigration to the city is projected to continue (IRCC, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2022). Regina has an established settlement agency, the Regina Open Door Society (RODS) which mobilized to cultivate support, putting out an urgent call to the community for housing and employment possibilities. The newly formed Regina Region Local Immigration Partnership also worked with key community stakeholders to provide a coordinated response to Syrian resettlement including preparing welcome packages, soliciting donations, and locating resources. This research study was designed to provide in-depth insights into the educational experiences of a small group of Syrian children back home, in transitional countries, and in public elementary schools in Regina, Saskatchewan. In the report which follows, we begin by detailing the context for the research, then review the relevant research literature. We follow with the statement of purpose and research questions, and a description of the methodological approach used in the study. Finally, we develop an expansive discussion of the research findings and conclude with implications and future directions for practice.

1 We use the terms “refugee” or “newcomers” to refer to our participants, but recognize that this is just one facet of their identities.

Research Context

Context of Resettlement in Saskatchewan

Newcomers to Canada experience a number of structural and systemic resettlement barriers (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Hanley et al., 2018). Since Canadian migration research has predominantly focused on large urban centres, there is a need for research on these complex settlement and integration challenges experienced by newcomers living in small and mid-sized cities (Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017). In a study completed by the researchers in 2016-17, newcomers to Regina cited challenges such as the extreme and prolonged prairie winters; lack of child care; an expensive, confusing, and limited public transportation system; limited access to affordable housing; challenges securing a health provider; and difficulties finding halal food (Kikulwe et al., 2017). The new arrivals found that the lack of established cultural communities to offer support was a persistent concern (Kikulwe et al., 2017). Bonifacio and Drolet (2017) emphasize that the absence of social support systems provided by ethnocultural associations or communities can contribute to social exclusion. Similarly, very few of the Syrians spoke English, but there was the lack of interpretation (only 0.8 percent of the population of Regina spoke Arabic in 2016) as well as long wait lists to access English language training (Wilkinson et al., 2017; Kikulwe et al., 2017).

Context of Refugee Children's Schooling

Over a short period of time with scant advance notice, Syrian children were enrolled in public schools throughout Regina after an assessment and school orientation. *The Regina Leader-Post* reported on the shortage of English as an additional language (EAL) teachers, quoting Saskatchewan's Immigration Minister as saying that, "One of the most significant determinants of success for new arrivals is language." (*The Regina Leader-Post*, February 11, 2016). A representative for the Regina Public School Teachers' Association also expressed concerns over the lack of supports for assisting the children with language (EAL teachers) and the effects of disrupted schooling and trauma (educational psychologists, educational assistants, and behavioural therapists). (CBC News, March 21, 2016). Due to the tight time frame, teachers and school administrators were expected to address a complex set of resettlement needs and challenges with little or no advance preparation and training.

Scholarship suggests that refugee children often have negative experiences with teachers and peers. They may experience racism and discrimination related to linguistic, religious, racial, and cultural differences (Oikonomidou & Karam, 2020). However, the existing research on refugee children's schooling largely excludes the multi-dimensional nature of their experiences by focusing on resettlement in the post-migration context (Dryden-Peterson, 2015, 2016; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Furthermore, while the educational experiences and stories of refugee youth have been well-documented (for example, Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015), there is very limited scholarship on young refugee children's schooling from their own perspectives. By focusing on the experiences of one individual group, Syrians, we avoid advancing the misconception that refugees are a homogenous group (Rutter, 2006). We also note that there are differences within each of the Syrian families that participated in this study as related to their immigration histories, educational experiences, and gender differences. Critical elements of these specific experiences have broader implications for understanding pre- and post-migration educational gaps and provisions (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Literature Review

In her work with immigrant populations in the United States, Drachman (1992) developed a three-phase framework: pre-migration, transit, and resettlement. These phases characterize common transitions which can influence the adaptive processes of newcomers. Many factors including age, family composition, socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, cultural characteristics, occupational histories, rural/urban backgrounds, belief systems, and social supports interact with the migration process and influence how the individual or group experiences each stage (Drachman, 1992). However, refugees do share the common experience of a physical move from one country to another that involves pre-migration and transitional experiences before resettlement.

Pre-Migration Phase

The pre-migration phase includes the social, economic, and political experiences refugees had in their home countries. These circumstances might include war and violence, as was the case for many Syrian refugees, in addition to loss of status, property, educational or employment opportunities, and familial and social support networks. Rizkalla et al. (2020) met with mothers to discuss their children's experiences in wartime Syria. These mothers gave details about violence and war atrocities their children witnessed, issues with providing basic needs such as food and protection from the cold, physical abuse at the hands of the Syrian regime, separation from family members, incarceration, and sexual violence. Prior to the war, Syria had an admirable public education system with an overall literacy rate of 86 percent and high educational enrolment in elementary (92 percent of girls, 97 percent of boys) and secondary school (70 percent for each gender) (Charles & Denman, 2013). During the conflict, though, large numbers of children dropped out of school and many schools were destroyed (Khansa & Bahous, 2021). Such disruptions in schooling have had lasting implications for the children.

Transit Phase

The transit phase includes some of the trials that refugees endure when fleeing their homelands. The drowning of three-year-old Alan Kurdi while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea is one such example. Wilson et al. (2010) indicated that refugees in

“transition countries” are perceived as “stateless” individuals with fewer rights and opportunities (p. 46). All of our participants went either to Lebanon or Jordan, though Syrians have dispersed to many countries in the region. Syrian refugees live in the community at large with host nationals or in a refugee camp (Lebanon does not have refugee camps).² Studies demonstrate that Syrian children transiting in these countries experience higher rates of poverty (93 percent in Jordan), increased familial instability (domestic violence, harsh parenting styles, intergenerational trauma), child labour, loss of a sense of safety, susceptibility to health issues, and significantly higher rates of mental illnesses such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression as compared to back home (Mangrio et al., 2018; Rizkalla et al., 2020). These children have been impacted by their own traumatic experiences as well as those of members of the family (Rizkalla et al., 2020).

In transition countries, refugee children may have limited or no access to schools. Fewer than 40 percent of Syrian children were estimated to be enrolled in school (Culbertson & Constant, 2017). According to Culbertson and Constant (2017), Syrian refugee children encountered barriers to accessing schools in Jordan and Lebanon related to space shortages, expensive transportation, lack of parental documentation, child labour to ensure familial survival, early marriage, high school fees, proper grade placement, and safety concerns (Culbertson & Constant, 2017; Hattar-Pollara, 2019). In Lebanon, for instance, the effects of the long-running civil war have decimated the public-school system and the majority of families choose to send their children to private schools (Khansa & Bahous, 2021). As Buckner et al. (2017) explained, a national educational policy initiative, Reaching All Children Through Education (RACE), was aimed at enrolling Syrian refugees in the existing school system incentivized by the financial support of international organizations such as United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, national policies were unevenly enacted in local districts and many children still did not have access to schooling. “Unofficial” schools run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and proximal to refugee settlements have also operated in some regions of Lebanon and Jordan (Buckner et al., 2017).

Demands on the system necessitated a “second shift” which accommodated host country children in the morning and Syrian refugee children in the afternoon, thus stretching existing resources. Refugee background children have also been found to experience substandard instruction and learning environments compared with children in the transit country (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). In the Jordanian context, Syrian children felt that they were treated differently than host country children, asserting they were “less likely to learn through creative approaches, to use resources in their schools such as libraries and computer despite their availability, and to partake in activities” (Salem, 2021, p. 11). In her research alongside teachers who worked with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Adelman (2018) found that Lebanese national teachers tended to emphasize academic development of more critical skills (such as reading) over the short-term, while Syrian teachers prioritized the complex social-emotional needs of their students – related to living in poverty, experiences of racism and discrimination, and the effects of trauma –

2 Transition countries of residence for Syrian refugees prior to coming to Canada included Jordan (48%), Lebanon (37%), Egypt (8%), and Turkey (5%) (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention though it has agreed to a number of protections for refugees. It hosts the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR, n.d., UNHCR, 2021).

and modified their instruction accordingly. The chronically underfunded public system in Lebanon lacks qualified teachers, has an outdated curriculum and textbooks, and the dominant pedagogical approach is teacher-centred rote learning (Adelman, 2018). Teacher exhaustion and large class sizes were prevalent (Adelman, 2018), which was an additional barrier to accessing education, particularly for refugee children. While the language of instruction in Syria is Arabic, classes in Lebanon are in English, Arabic, and French, thus contributing to linguistic barriers (Charles & Denman, 2013). Finally, refugee children also suffered bullying, violence, social exclusion, and hostility at the hands of their local peers (Rizkalla et al., 2020; Salem, 2021).

Resettlement Phase

The final phase of immigration, resettlement, is often characterized by both opportunities and challenges in the host country. On the one hand, refugees may experience opportunities such as increased security and access to medical care, as well as improved educational prospects. On the other hand, they may also experience poverty, interracial conflict, family instability, lack of transportation, psychosocial distress, un(der)employment, intergenerational conflict, and language barriers (Nsonwu et al, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). To a large extent, leaving family and community members behind in the transition to new homelands like Canada has a serious emotional impact on refugees which often goes undetected and unaddressed (Wilson et al., 2010).

Schools are often one of refugee children and families' first points of contact with institutions in their new country (Adams & Kirova, 2007), and therefore have the potential to provide resettlement supports (Due & Riggs, 2016; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). However, while refugee children may have improved educational prospects during resettlement, they also experience specific challenges due to disruptions in their schooling, language and cultural barriers, and the lasting effects of trauma (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Gagné et al., 2017). Learning the language is the biggest challenge to refugee children and youth, who report slow progress (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). However, knowing the language is crucial to developing the relationships with peers that facilitate learning and integration (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Refugee children and youth also commonly experience bullying, racism, and discrimination (Matthews, 2008), which can lead to mental illness (Beiser et al., 2015). This issue can be particularly acute for Muslim refugee children and families as certain practices, such as wearing a *hijab*, prayer, or fasting for Ramadan, distinguish these children from their peers, provoking Islamophobic sentiments (McBrien, 2005). Due and Riggs (2016) reported that refugee children felt that teachers were critical in contributing to their sense of safety (particularly at recess and other unstructured times) and described a caring environment as one in which "their identities and experiences are reflected in school practice" (p. 198).

Refugee children can potentially have a complex range of needs that schools and teachers may not have the resources or training to address (Essomba, 2017; Fazel, 2015; Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). As Due and Riggs (2016) note, teachers do not feel equipped to care for their refugee students owing to a lack of support and training, especially as related to trauma and cross-cultural safety. Given the language barriers, it is

important that teachers' efforts to connect with students not be solely reliant on using English (Due & Riggs, 2016; Hurley et al., 2011). Furthermore, some of these needs are not detected because the pre-migration histories of refugee-background children are generally inaccessible to their teachers (Kovinthan, 2016; Puig, 2002). However, focusing exclusively on needs and gaps can advance a deficit view of refugee students, which conceals their rich cultural and familial assets as well as the strength and resilience built through their migration experiences (Cho et al., 2019). In their research, Cho et al. (2017) found that the teacher participants overwhelmingly perceived their refugee students and families as deficient. Participants focused on "problems" such as lack of knowledge of school norms, difficulties interacting with peers, having a negative attitude, low ethical standards, and issues with self-regulation. These views are perhaps a reflection of the lack of specialized training and resources available to support teachers. In contrast, an asset-oriented perspective centres children's resources and competencies in curriculum and pedagogy.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The overall purpose of this study was to address these research gaps by examining refugee children's educational experiences in each context: Syria, transition countries, and in elementary schools in Saskatchewan. The objectives of this study were to: 1) Gain an understanding of refugee children's varied experiences with schooling in diverse contexts; 2) Identify funds of knowledge that these children have developed through their educational experiences in each context; and 3) Understand the ways in which the children, their families, and/or their teachers have mobilized, or could mobilize, these funds of knowledge to enhance the children's learning experiences in Saskatchewan public schools. The broad research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How have refugee children experienced elementary schooling in their home countries, in transition countries, and in Saskatchewan?
2. What resources or funds of knowledge have these children accrued during their schooling in these contexts?

To address these research questions, we applied an interpretive methodology, which allowed us to conduct interviews aimed at understanding the participants' perceptions of their educational experiences in the pre- and post-migration phases.

Methodology

This qualitative study was framed by interpretive inquiry which is informed by philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer (1977) posited that hermeneutics became necessary with the emergence of the written tradition because the reader is separated from the writer and their intended meanings. The issue of translation, “of making what is alien our own,” or at least coming to understand it better, is particularly complex in cross-cultural research (Gadamer, 1977, p. 19).

Themes of Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher developed three key themes of hermeneutic interpretation (Smith, 1991). The first theme considers the importance of history and language. Gadamer’s (1972, 1977, 2004) concept of *tradition* suggests that researchers and participants each bring their own histories, cultures, beliefs, ideologies, values, experiences, and knowledges to their work together which influence how they perceive the world. These traditions are located within a horizon of past, present, and future. The past contains our own *prejudices*; a word which often carries a negative connotation, but is productive in this case. It allows the researcher to understand and misunderstand the phenomenon under study because we shape it to fit our own prejudices which have, in turn, been shaped by our tradition (Packer & Addison, 1989; Smith, 1993). Ideally, research dialogues with participants will allow us to understand one another and fuse our horizons (Gadamer, 1975). The researcher must ensure that their perspectives do not prevail over those of the participants, particularly when participants are members of minoritized groups. Therefore, as Bhattacharya (2020) described, “prejudice is a form of awareness that allows us to understand our perspectives and their limitations, provided that we remain open to ideas beyond our horizons” (p. 8). The second theme, Smith (1991) explained, is that interpretation is a creative act which attempts to “show relations between things in new ways” (p. 186). The interpreter accesses multiple methods, strategies, theories and perspectives in order to better understand that which they are studying and create meaning. The final theme advances the aim of coming to a more holistic understanding by considering relationships between the parts and the whole (Smith, 1991). That is, one interprets meaning by moving “between the particular expression and the web of meanings within which that expression is embedded” or the context (Smith, 1993, p. 187). This process facilitates an understanding of how each of the stories shared by a participant fit within a larger narrative (Ellis, 2009).

Methods

Participants

Our main study participants were Syrian children who were enrolled in a Saskatchewan public elementary school and had attended school prior to coming to Canada (preferably in Syria and in a transition country). We also spoke to their parents and, where possible, their classroom and/or English as an additional language teachers to gain further insights into the children's experiences with schooling. The Syrian refugee participants were recruited through connections we established with adults in the community in Regina while engaged in two previous projects (Kikulwe et al., 2017; Ghadi et al., 2019). A total of eight children from four different families, all of their mothers (four) and fathers (four), as well as some teachers (four classroom teachers and three English as an additional language teachers) agreed to take part in the research. The parental consent forms were translated into Arabic as well as explained to each parent in Arabic. The children gave assent to the research and these forms were written in English and explained in Arabic and English. The adult participants were given a small gift card to thank them for their participation and the children were given a gift that could be shared with their siblings. The following table outlines Syrian refugee participant information.

Table 1. Participant Information

Parents	Children	Syrian Context	Transition Context
Amira (mother) Adnan (father)	Iman (Grade 3) Hamid (Grade 6) Five girls, two boys in family.	The family lived in the rural context and farmed. They fled to Jordan in 2013.	In Jordan, the family lived in the community for three years and the children attended public school. They migrated to Canada in 2016.
Elham (mother) Hassan (father)	Tahir (Grade 4) Four boys, one girl in family.	The family moved between rural and urban contexts. Hassan was a teacher. He worked in Lebanon for awhile and sent money home, and the family migrated there in 2012.	The family lived in a small village within the community until 2016, when they came to Canada. The children spent two years in a local public school, then the parents kept them home for two years (the children worked).
Layla (mother) Yusuf (father)	Salma (Grade 4) Mustafa (Grade 6) Six boys, three girls in family.	The family lived in the rural context where Yusef worked as an electrician. They fled to Jordan in 2013.	The family lived in Jordan, first in a camp, and then in the community in a city. The children attended a local public school. They came to Canada in 2016.
Rona (mother) Omar (father)	Maryam (Grade 8) Rahim (Grade 4) Four boys, three girls in family.	The family resided in a rural setting where Omar worked various jobs – electrician, builder, and bus driver. They escaped to Jordan in 2012.	The family lived in a refugee camp in Jordan for three and a half years and operated a store in the camp. The children missed one year of school (the first year). They came to Canada in 2016.
Basma (mother) Waleed (father)	Dina (Grade 7) Three boys, three girls in family.	The family lived in an urban context, where Waleed worked as a painter. They fled for Jordan in 2013.	In Jordan, the family lived within the larger community. The family came to Canada in the earliest wave of migration in late 2015.

Additionally, three English as an additional language teachers (Naomi, Shelby, and Katherine) and four classroom teachers (Luke, Jessica, Laura, and Jen) were able to participate in the research. All names used in this report are pseudonyms. We have not given descriptions of the schools to ensure the privacy of our participants, but the participants attended one of three schools; two of which had a comparatively large immigrant/refugee student population.

Data Collection

In this methodology, interpretative interviews are used to learn about the lived experiences of the participants (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994). Using Seidman’s (2013) approach to phenomenological interviewing, we arranged a series of three open-ended interpretive interviews with each parent and child. Although the purpose of the study was not to document the children’s experiences in Saskatchewan schools over a particular time period, we arranged these roughly at the beginning, middle, and after the end of the 2018 - 19 school year. We conducted a single interview with each of the teachers available and willing to participate in the study. The participants were asked about their preferred location for the interviews and all of the mothers wished for us to come to their homes. The two female researchers, Christine and Katerina, visited each home alongside a female interpreter (Safaa) to interview the children and their mothers. The male researcher, Daniel, and research assistant, Needal, met with the fathers in various locations. All of the parent interviews were conducted in Arabic with interpretation as this was their preference. The

children chose to be interviewed in English, but there were times in most interviews where the conversation switched to Arabic or the interpreter explained a question in Arabic. The teacher interviews took place in the schools and were conducted in English.

During each home visit, the children and their mothers were provided with a list of pre-interview activities and asked to complete one before we started. Pre-interview activities allow the participant to recall and reflect on significant experiences before the interview (Ellis, 2009). They were always given three choices of pre-interview activities using various modes of expression (writing, drawing, filling in a chart, making a timeline, etc.). Such an approach is very effective with both children and adults (Ellis, 2006) and, when used with refugee participants, allows them to determine the direction of the interview and broach potentially traumatic topics in their own time (Massing, 2015). For example, one of the choices for the first interview was to draw a good day and a bad day in school. There was no direction given as to which school the children needed to focus on, so if they were uncomfortable sharing their experiences in the transition country or in Syria, they could convey their experiences in Canada. As interviewers, the context they chose to focus on gave us a sense for what they were willing and able to discuss with us. We then began with broad, open-ended questions related to the chosen pre-interview activity ("Can you tell me about what you drew/wrote?"). Each visit lasted approximately 2-and-a-half hours as the interviews were interspersed with times for completing the pre-interview activities, visiting, eating snacks, and chatting with other children in the family. Several of the siblings insisted on completing pre-interview activities or interviews even though they did not meet the criteria for participation. We included them, but have not analyzed or shared their data. The fathers and teachers were each interviewed separately for 30 - 45 minutes, but did not complete pre-interview activities. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated (if necessary). The data for the project consisted of these interview transcripts as well as the written texts and artistic data produced in the pre-interview activities.

Data Analysis

Using the hermeneutic circle, we moved back and forth between data collection and our own emerging interpretations of the data following two arcs (Smith, 1993). In the forward or projective arc, we cast our prejudices – emerging from our own traditions – onto the phenomena to work through possible interpretations of the data (Packer & Addison, 1989). Since people tend to relate meanings to their own "framework of personal beliefs," there is a tendency to apply these prejudices to the experiences or statements of others (Prasad, 2005, p. 33). However, without these frameworks of understanding, a researcher has no basis upon which to build a new understanding or come to a shared understanding with the participant(s) (Smith, 2002). We developed broad categories and our readings of the transcripts allowed us to generate possible codes. Then we engaged in focused coding by applying the codes to the transcripts, in the process revising and adding to our list of codes. In the backward arc, we aimed to reveal ways in which our prejudices might have limited our initial interpretations or uncover surprises (Packer & Addison, 1989). We creatively engaged with the data to see which of our interpretations were confirmed, which were clarified, which were contradicted (Ellis, 2011). Our research conversations with participants allowed us to engage in continuous dialogue between our points of view (forward arc) and evaluation of the interpretation (backward arc) (Packer & Addison, 1989). The analyses of the data in one set of interviews informed the development of pre-interview activities and possible questions for the next interview. The entire process unfolded as a spiral, then, wherein the findings in one loop informed the next.

Findings

Transition Phase Challenges in Schooling

Host countries have taken some steps to enrol Syrian children in formal education such as opening schools in camps and opening second shifts at schools to accommodate more children and to keep them from falling behind. However, consistent with the literature, various barriers caused disruptions in the children's schooling including substandard instructional conditions, loss of motivation, and discrimination and abuse.

Disrupted Schooling

Four of the five families participating in this research lived in rental homes in the larger community rather than in a refugee camp. Their enrolment in community public schools was thus dependent on funding from the UNHCR which, as Tahir's mother Elham noted, meant that the children often didn't start until November or December when the "UNHCR would pay the school on their behalf." For this and other reasons, some children only had a few months a year in school if they were able to attend at all. Rahim and Maryam's father Omar explained that for their first year in the refugee camp, his children did not go to school at all. In this regard, Rahim's mother stated, "When we moved from our hometown in Syria, they (children) couldn't study, and they had to stay at home, they lost a whole year of schooling." Rahim and his elder brother found jobs to help earn money for their parents and siblings. Walking to school was an enormous challenge, especially during the winter where children had to travel several miles in freezing weather, often without proper winter clothing due to familial financial constraints and arrived in a classroom without proper heating. Here, Salma emphasized that "the school was far from the house. None of us liked this, we did not have buses to go like here [Canada]."

Substandard Instructional Conditions

The high number of refugee children crowded in classrooms was an immediate crisis that many of our participants frequently talked about regardless of where they resided. To lighten the burden of the large numbers of Syrian students flooding their already underfunded local schools, Jordan and Lebanon created a double-shift schedule to accommodate Syrian students. Of course, this resulted in little class time and additional hardships for families.

Syrian children often attended the second shift in the afternoons when, in Elham's words "the teachers were tired and can't provide our children with a proper learning experience ... they [the teachers] would just sit and tease or boss the kids around." These shifts could be disruptive to the family's schedule, as Dina explained: "Mohammad [her brother] used to start school at 8 in the morning and come back home at 12, then I went to school and came back at around 4:00." Within these packed classrooms, it was extremely difficult for students to concentrate on their schoolwork, as Maryam elaborated on here: "There was a lot of students there, they're always talking. They are never quiet for a minute, the teacher can't [control them]." Maryam's mother Rona amplified: "That was for four years. Four years from her life lost." Her story was not uncommon among the other participants.

Loss of Motivation

With overcrowded schools, reduced class time, and long walks to school, many children didn't see the point of going to class. Children who chose to depict "a good day and a bad day in school" for their pre-interview activities typically drew or wrote about a "bad day" in the transition context and a "good day" in Canada. In his drawing, Mustafa illustrated his feelings in each context, showing himself with a sad face in Jordan and a happy face in Canada where learning was "fun" and he enjoyed being at school.

Figure 1: Mustafa's "Bad Day" and "Good Day" in School



Mustafa explained: "I stayed there [Jordan] for 2 years but I didn't learn anything until I came over here. It's not that good. I didn't learn anything there." Maryam echoed Mustafa's words, stating: "I wasn't really understanding when they teach science or math." Tahir's father Hassan pulled the children out of school in part because they were not learning anything.

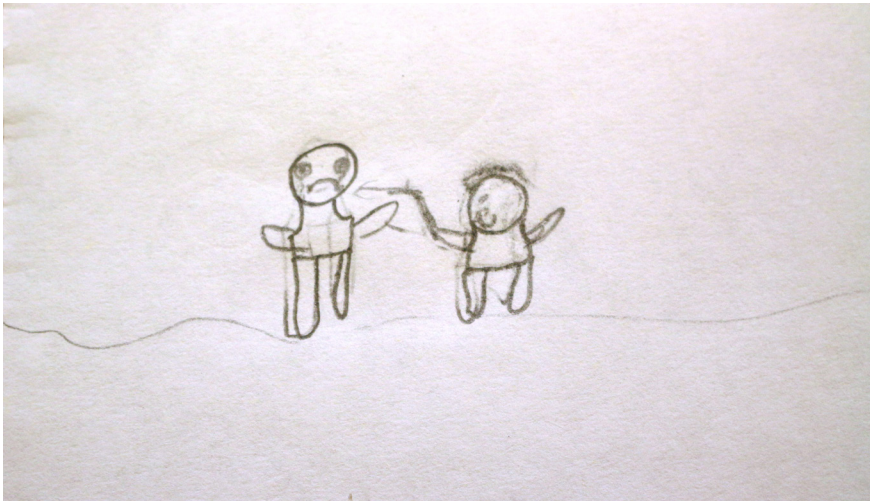
Discrimination and Abuse

As a refugee child, being forced to flee your home, school, friends, and families often result in negative and painful impacts that persist for a long time, but transition country schools were not necessarily safe spaces. Many of the children in our study reported that they suffered from bullying and harsh disciplinary practices such as corporal punishment. In this regard, Dina explained:

Sometimes when we had homework to read, she [the teacher] reads for us and then we repeat after her and then we read it at home, we need to come back to school and read everything right. If we read it and have one mistake, she stops us and hits us ... The teacher got this metal stick and then she covered it with tape so that parents don't know that it was a stick.

One father confirmed that "the teachers were generally rough." Children who chose to depict "a good day and a bad day in school" for their pre-interview activities typically drew or wrote about themselves being hit by a teacher. Tahir explained his illustration as follows: "They were, like, laughing. They were happy because they were hitting us."

Figure 2: Tahir's "bad day" in school



The children in our study indicated that this form of physical abuse often resulted in them feeling anxious, afraid, and despising school altogether. Maryam elaborated: "For me, I was going to learn, but the teachers are so mean. I didn't like the school there; it was just something boring to go to. I didn't learn anything." Instead of helping these vulnerable children, teachers were reported to humiliate them, and others had already developed negative opinions of them. For instance, Rahim reported that "teachers thought that we were people that don't know anything, they have to be judge on us or something like that." This was echoed among some of the parents. Elham asserted, "Back there [Lebanon], we thought that our children would be treated fairly. Unfortunately, they were treated terribly. Once they knew that they were Syrian, they treated them as if they didn't have any kind of human value." Sadly, the parents were usually hesitant to file an official complaint against the school or the teacher in fear that their child would be hit again in retaliation.

Academic Concerns

Challenges posed by space limitations and resource constraints are obvious, but these students face a more fundamental problem of missing out on years of schooling experience. As noted previously, in 2014, fewer than 45 percent of school-aged Syrian refugee children were enrolled in formal schools in Jordan (UNICEF, 2015). Once in school, adapting to a new curriculum and catching up with peers were some of the concerns that our participants relayed to us.

Adjusting to the host country's curriculum was a challenge for Syrian children, particularly for those who had experienced disrupted schooling. In one case, Dina stated:

In Jordan, they gave us like these huge books, and we were only in grade one. And we had to learn that whole story in like one weekend. They didn't give us the verbs; they didn't give us things like that. They only taught us how to read that's all.

Rahim similarly talked about how he had to read at a higher level while Maryam struggled to understand both science and math due to the overwhelming amount of information that she had to memorize. The teachers seemed to lack the preparation and teacher training to address these issues. As one father, Omar, clarified: "For teachers, it didn't matter if you knew how to teach or if you were qualified, it depended on the connections you had to get appointed as a teacher."

Participants also talked about the amount of homework they had to complete at home which quite often did not correspond with their academic ability. Mustafa, who was in Grade 3 in Jordan, commented: "We used to read so much [in Jordan]. More than high school." The amount of homework that the children took even concerned the parents of our participants. Amira, Iman and Hamid's mother, asserted:

In Jordan, they used to get lots of homework. They didn't have to do anything else. From when they leave school to late in the evening or even before they go to sleep, they would be studying and doing their homework. You know all of this. They also had to memorize a lot.

However, the Syrian children continued to lag behind their peers in their host countries and struggled with basic literacy in both Arabic and foreign languages.

Resettlement Phase Challenges in Schooling

Challenges in the resettlement period predominantly revolved around issues related to learning a new language (English) which created difficulties with learning classroom norms, academic issues around language supports, fear and anxiety, and social isolation. However, cultural and religious discontinuities were also a dominant theme and will be discussed in relation to gender norms, religious rituals, and cultural inclusion.

Learning a New Language

Arriving from non-English speaking countries, the Syrian children who resettled in Canada were faced with serious hardships in acquiring English as an additional language which correspondingly had an impact on their school adaptation, academic achievement, social integration, and peer relations. Our research found that while our participants had various opinions about their schools in Canada, they all agreed that learning a new language was the main obstacle that they had to overcome before being able to function within their new school system. While each of their schools had EAL teachers, their time was stretched. One EAL teacher, Naomi, described how the sudden arrival of Syrian children was overwhelming because she had to support the classroom teachers in the transition: "So, basically, I was staying late after school, creating materials and organizing materials for use in the regular classrooms so that the classroom teacher would really know what to do." The large class sizes also served as an impediment to differentiating instruction to the extent that EAL teacher Shelby would have liked.

Difficulties with Learning Classroom Norms

One of the major concerns raised by the children was not having the language competence required to learn classroom norms to fully participate in class experiences. In this regard, Iman recalled her first day at school, "Like, when I came to school on the first day all the kids talking, and I was just not understanding." Similarly, Dina confirmed: "So, in Syria, we knew more words and we knew more the language and stuff, so it was easier for us, like, to study and talk to the teacher and things like that but, like, in Canada it's kind of difficult." Tahir did not wear his shoes in the school, not realizing that this was required, and commented that on one occasion six or seven students had to go outside without shoes during a fire drill. Tahir's mother, Elham, affirmed that it is important to explicitly teach them school norms and practices via an interpreter because they do not have the language to understand. This transition to a new context was confusing for the children because they were unable to ask questions to clarify rules, norms, and directives in the school.

Academic Issues around Language Supports

The ability to navigate the content in their home languages supported the children's efforts to keep up with their classmates academically. Maryam described how she was initially allowed to work with another Arabic-language speaker who translated and explained class assignments, but her teacher then withdrew this crucial source of support from her. Tahir further amplified: "When we speak in Arabic, they [the teachers] think we are saying something bad." Iman's teacher, Jessica, experienced a conundrum in that she wanted them to feel comfortable speaking their languages, "but at the same time I know that it causes problems ... because some of my girls will talk to each other in their language which makes other people feel left out, making them think they are talking about them and so on." The EAL teachers often filled the gap, translating important course content to students even though they had their own lessons to teach. As Naomi explained: "What I find with that is that they will bring their questions. All the questions that they've gathered all day, they'll ask you because they're embarrassed ask these questions in front of their classmates in case it might be a stupid question or you should know the answer." The children all wished for some kind of interpretation to ease their transition. Salma affirmed

that she wanted to be a teacher when she grew up because she knew how to “explain it for them [newcomers], make it easier.” For their part, parents desired to understand more about how to support their children with their schooling, but their own English language skills were an impediment. For instance, Dina’s mother, Basma, lamented that she would “love to have more contact with the teacher to see what my children require of me. I would love to help Dina ... I can’t read the notes she [the teacher] sends home.” Amira was concerned that Iman and Hamid did not get homework so she did not know what they are learning or how she could help.

Fear and Anxiety

The children’s lack of English gave rise to feelings of isolation, fear, and not belonging in Canada. Elham explained:

When a newcomer arrives in Canada, he or she doesn’t know anything about the culture of the country, not to mention the language which is, in my opinion, the main obstacle to fitting in. For example, when a child starts school without much English, they become very shy or overwhelmed, it’s really difficult for that child.

Maryam worried about speaking because she believed that the other children would laugh at her. Moreover, Tahir mentioned that he felt afraid while at school: “I don’t feel safe because I’m worried about my English.” Similarly, Dina talked about feeling nervous when in class, “I feel that sometimes, I feel I don’t understand so I just ask the teacher and if I feel I don’t understand, I feel like I’m not good at English, or I need more practice.” In one instance, the teacher assigned Maryam to work with a boy and she did not understand the assignment so her partner did all the work. The next time, “The teacher put me with a girl to do something, and she (the partner) went to the hallway. Here was a bunch of people and they start saying, “Oh God, you have this girl. Oh God, she doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t understand. You’re going to do everything by yourself But I survived it.” This instance contributed to her negative sense of self worth and she was anxious about speaking in class. When asked to describe what worried her at school in the pre-interview, she wrote the following: “I don’t like to do a presentation because of my language. I am not really good at speaking [English] so I get scared of people laughing at me.” A number of other children cited their fear of giving a presentation in class, even once they spoke English quite proficiently.

Related to this theme of anxiety and fear, teachers reported seeing the effects of trauma and dislocation manifested in the Syrian children’s behaviour. Immediately after the arrival of the initial groups of Syrians, there were many fights on the playground as the children had witnessed violence in their home country and/or in transition country schools. EAL teacher Naomi described trauma as “the elephant in the room”:

Even after years of being in a safe place, I see a lot of anxiety that is going to be long term after effect of what they’ve been through ... generally, I think it is something that our system is not equipped to address.

Several children shared about instances when they were bullied (typically during recess or less structured times). Tahir was bullied by another child on the playground, an issue which remained unresolved even after going to the teacher. He disclosed that “he’s [the bully] Canadian and they [the teachers] don’t talk to [discipline] Canadians ... I don’t feel safe. I don’t want to go to school because of him.” Such instances exacerbated feelings of being “unsafe” in school.

Figure 3: Tahir’s Bully



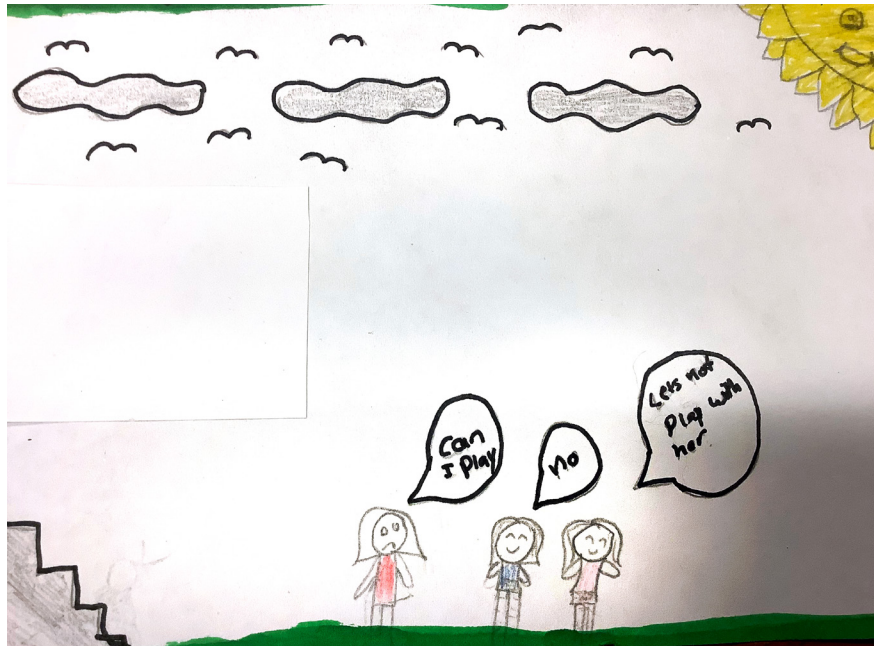
Social Isolation

Not having friends or feeling equipped to approach potential friends added to their feelings of anxiety as Iman described previously. Dina likewise couldn’t make friends when she started her school in Canada. “It’s like if you don’t know English, you’re probably won’t be able to say anything to them [other students]” she asserted. In one of the pre-interview activities, Dina wrote:

I was alone each recess and I didn’t have anyone to play with or talk with I was always alone, one day at recess I was playing with my sister [name] and girls came by me and started to talk about me that I play with small kids not with big kids then I felt so sad that they were making fun of me that I was playing with my sister. When I came back to the class I was so mad of the girls what they said about me so I told the teacher about what they said about me then the teacher said to them to say to me sorry and I forgive them but after they didn’t actually stop on doing that ...

One of the children felt that his peers were deliberately avoiding him because of his limited language abilities. "Some friends were rude after recess, so I played by myself. They wanted to play with other friends. I told, like, almost everyone in our class and they said, 'No'." Similar to Tahir's drawing, Salma depicted a bad day in school as one when other children would not play with her, as shown here:

Figure 4: Salma's Experience of Social Exclusion



While teachers can facilitate interactions in the classroom, recess seemed to be a particularly lonely time for our participants, particularly in their early years in Canada.

Cultural and Religious Discontinuities

It is without a doubt that a positive school experience plays a vital role in the cultural and social integration of these children in their new educational environment. However, schools may not always be accommodating to children or youth from refugee-backgrounds. In the case of our participants, who arrived from Muslim-majority countries, they were confronted by a school environment that, in some respects, did not understand the nuances of their cultural or religious needs. It should be noted, however, that the interviews with teachers yielded insights into the challenges they experienced with integrating large numbers of Syrian children on a tight timeline with large class sizes and very few resources and supports. One teacher, Laura, noted that in her school they had 25 new students start one Monday alone, with only one professional development day to prepare. Another teacher, Luke, shared that he had 32 students in a very diverse classroom and felt frustrated he did not have the time to get to know each individual student better. The EAL teachers seemed to assume a heavier load as described by Naomi: "I said to the supervisor, 'Which is my priority, teaching the kids or supporting the classroom teachers?' She said, 'Both, you have to do it all.'" Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) were assigned to support teachers, children, and families, but they split their time between numerous schools. Yet, as

Laura shared, their settlement worker, Siham, was absolutely essential in explaining cultural practices to teachers as well as assisting children and families with navigating schooling. These constraints suggest that, to varying extents, the issue of cultural inclusion was more complex than simply having teachers learn more about the cultures of their students, but rather is intertwined with overall deficits in funding and resource allocations.

Gender Norms

To start with, some of the older girls in our study discussed being uncomfortable interacting with students of the opposite sex. Iman's mother, Amira, explained:

The most important thing to know is that some of the traditions and beliefs are different from those of the Canadians. For example, girls in our culture aren't supposed to sit with boys. They feel shy and need to be separated. I try and explain to my daughters that we can't make friends with boys at a certain age due to our culture and religion.

She did not want her girls to go on school swimming trips unless it was girls-only. Maryam stated, "We have to do like play games and do sports and there's like boys and girls and I'm not used to them, so I don't like to play but the teacher makes me." Likewise, Dina mentioned that it was awkward using gender-neutral bathrooms at her school: "I don't like it. I wish it was separate [washrooms]." This notion was also echoed by Maryam who could not fix her *hijab* when boys were around in the washroom. "Sometimes I need to fix my *hijab*. Sometimes I don't feel comfortable to go to the washroom while boys are standing there," she stressed. These girls expressed that they were uncomfortable when they were compelled to work with boys and appreciated when teachers let them choose their groups. Iman explained that if the class behaved well, they could choose where they sat, otherwise the teacher would assign seats. Mothers similarly confirmed, in Amira's words, "they should know that our girls shouldn't have to sit with boys." Likewise, two families were uncomfortable that their daughters' class was going on a field trip without a female chaperone and would not sign the permission slip. The teacher, Laura, asked the settlement worker to reach out to find out why they did not want their daughters to go. Once she found out the reason, she then volunteered to chaperone and communicated this information to the families.

In this respect, clothing, especially the *hijab*, was another concern for our female participants. Several participants reported that they were teased for wearing the *hijab* and even harassed by other girls. For example, Dina's mother, Basma, shared about an incident where another girl pulled off her *hijab*:

During the second year, my daughter had to wear the *hijab* due to her age and one of the other girls in class used to look at her and even stare at her in a way that my daughter didn't like. One day, this girl walked towards Dina and pulled the *hijab* off her head. My daughter, of course, started to cry and the teacher started to calm her down.

Other participants reported that their friends at school were unfamiliar with their traditions. This was evident when some of Dina's friends asked her to take her *hijab* off to prove that she had nice hair and wasn't bald. In a similar sense, Maryam reported that her friends were amazed to see her hair:

Last time I took my *hijab* off in the washroom after gym, we had to change. I took it off, then my friends came and said, "Oh my God, your hair is nice. Why don't you just leave it like that? Why don't you take the *hijab* off?" I was like, "No, I can't. It's my religion, and also, if I wanted to take it off, I can't. My parents wouldn't let me."

Religious Rituals

Fasting, praying and practicing religious rituals while at school were other themes that some of our participants touched on. From the experience of our participants, it should be noted that their schools tried their best to accommodate those who fasted during Ramadan and those who had to pray while at school by assigning dedicated spaces for these purposes or allowing families to take their children to mosque on Fridays. However, for reasons discussed previously, according to our participants, teachers could be provided with more training and support related to how to include children's cultures or teach in a way that meets the unique needs of refugee students. Our participants felt that teachers understood little beyond the fact that they fast for Ramadan and they were eager to share more information and advice with teachers. For example, Mustafa stated that his teacher should know that "we can't eat gelatin, any pork."³ This was a common theme among the parents as well. Basma advised:

It would be a nice gesture if the teacher, a couple of days before Ramadan starts, talks and introduces the rest of the class to fasting in Ramadan. On one side, our children would learn not to be shy of what they believe in and on the other side, we as parents would feel more confident that the school is actually taking into consideration its students' values and religion.

Amira emphasized that "The most important thing [for the teachers] to know is that some of traditions and beliefs are different from those of the Canadians ... [teachers should] go to the internet and see how it says how we put *hijab*, how we pray, and how many praises and more things about our culture and our life before. It would be easier for them to understand how we are behaving here." In the same regard, Layla felt "it might be good to give them some time for praying." Although these were public schools, Christmas activities dominated in the classrooms throughout the month of December, causing confusion for our families as to the place of religious values and practices in the school. In one school, every child was given a cut-out of a Christmas tree and instructed to "decorate it" with their families and bring it back to hang in the hallway. Our participants in that school were unsure of what to do and why.

Cultural Inclusion

The typical approach to including the children's cultures in pedagogy and programming was a "culture day" or "mini-mosaic" where the children presented aspects of their culture including food, dress, and dance. As Iman noted, "it was fun ... but it was just that one day in the year." In her school, this event was initiated by the EAL teacher and when that

3 Marshmallows and many gummy candies typically contain gelatin made from pork which is haram or forbidden in the Muslim faith.

teacher moved to a new school the next year, they did not plan a culture day. The children had tremendous pride in their cultures and wanted to share with their classmates, even if only in superficial events like a culture day. The mothers concurred that it was important that the teachers consistently introduce cultural topics so the children are not always the ones having to share about their beliefs and practices. Maryam appreciated that her library had some books in Arabic, but noted that the curriculum and resources tended to focus on Pakistan or Afghanistan and portrayed their culture negatively which had a corresponding effect on the attitudes of other children. Referring to Malala's story, she contended:

They show us sad stories related to our culture. Like a story about how parents from Muslim countries would make their daughter stop attending school to work and how everyone beat her because she wanted to go to school without her parent's permission and things like that.

As Rona explained, relationships should be reciprocal: "It is not only important that we understand and know more about the Canadian culture, but as important for them to know more about us."

Transition Phase Supports and Resources in Schooling

In transition contexts, the families were overwhelmingly focused on survival – securing employment, finding a place to live, and navigating the new context – in the absence of their familial and social networks. The shared experience of dislocation seemed to bond together these already close-knit families. In spite of their own struggles, the parents sought to nurture a sense of security in their children and protect them from issues as best they could.

Family

In the transition context, the families were our participants' main source of support. The children were generally given a lot of homework and their parents kept close track of what they were learning and how they were progressing. In particular, in Salma's words, "My family helps me by letting me remember my work." As Adnan described: "I ask them about everything they do in school and if any one of them needs help. We all help out as much as we can. Especially in math, which I'm good at." Those parents who did not feel confident with the material or lacked time, secured other resources. As Amira explained: "I didn't really finish my studies so I would tell them to ask [their older sister] to help them. Their father would make sure they memorized their lessons. All of us would be busy helping them in one way or another." Omar commissioned a neighbor to help tutor their children.

Many of the parents were relentless advocates for their children even though they worried about the repercussions associated with speaking up. One mother, Amira, confirmed that she demanded to talk to her daughters' teachers almost every day and inquire about their daily progress: "I want to know what lesson they're taking. I don't want them to be left behind. I want them to keep up with their peers." One father, Hassan, explained:

My sons, when they didn't understand a certain thing in class, they would ask the teacher to explain more, but the teacher would say "No, go home and study more by yourself." They wouldn't help the Syrian students. After two years, I decided to keep my children at home.

Another parent went to the principal after his child was hit by the teacher and asked for an end to this practice.

Resettlement Phase Supports and Resources in Schooling

In the post-migration context, the participants referenced having a more expansive network of support consisting of family members, teachers, and peers. More crucially, though, the children themselves had many internal resources which sustained them through any difficulties they experienced.

Family

Family members retained a key role in supporting their children in the next context, though the nature of this assistance shifted somewhat as they too were navigating the new culture. Some of these notions were seen among the parents whose lack of basic English-language abilities made them feel that they couldn't help their children with their school work. Omar declared: "They [the children] help themselves, I can't help them, and I need someone to help me actually." One father, Yusuf, recalled that his children would:

just keep complaining about how they didn't understand ... me and their mother couldn't help them with anything because our language was terrible. It was really hard for us seeing them suffer and not being able to help them.

It was for this reason that Basma decided to attend English language classes at her local immigrant welcome center, as she explained here: "What made me even more worried was that I couldn't help them with their studies because of my English. That's why I decided to start learning English at the Regina Open Door." All of the fathers attended English classes, while for the mothers it depended on whether or not they had infants to care for at home.

Teachers

In spite of the challenges discussed previously, the children and parents reported that some of their teachers were crucial in contributing to a sense of belonging and feelings of safety at school. For instance, several participants reported that teachers engaged with them in conversations about their culture and religious practices. Most had a separate lunchroom for children who were fasting during Ramadan. According to Elham, one of the EAL teachers went above and beyond by fasting one day with her children during Ramadan and then her family insisted she come to their house to break the fast (Iftar). Finding places to pray in school was challenging given space constraints, but one family expressed that the school gave them permission to take the children to the mosque on Friday. Omar recalled that his son had a very minor injury at school and "his teacher stayed

with him and never left him ... It's as the teacher is his second parent." Finally, Basma praised the fairness extended to her children and their support for being who they wanted to be in a safe environment:

Here in Canada, I've noticed that whatever the child's appearance is, he is treated in an equal way. When you see how friendly the teachers are treating the children regardless of his/her religion, color or the clothes they are wearing, it makes you very happy.

The children and their parents also believed that the teachers provided a supportive environment in which to nurture their academic capabilities. In one example, Elham was astonished that the teacher recommended they have their child assessed for a learning disability and the school arranged for the assessment and supports. She shared:

When we came here and saw the degree to which they care about our children, we were amazed. When you compare the teachers and schools to what we have in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and even in Jordan, there's no comparison.

Each of the participants had teachers who offered continuous encouragement to them and made a special effort to engage with them. Mustafa expressed his gratitude for being able to be with the same teacher for two years due to this encouragement. Tahir appreciated his classroom teacher's efforts to teach him English: "My teacher this year. She helps me if I didn't understand it, she keeps saying it [repeating] if I don't understand it." Similarly, Iman acknowledged the support of her teacher, expressing that:

She gave me books every day. And she's nice. And I like her. My teacher also displayed my work on her desk. It was kind of encouraging. She taught me how to read, and she taught me how to be nice.

Maryam was grateful for her Grade 8 classroom teacher, Laura, who supported her development as a writer. She explained: "I never wrote stories in my other schools, but when I write she says you have a voice. And I was very worried about the spelling mistakes, and she says don't worry, just write." This teacher was instrumental in turning around Maryam's perceptions of her own academic capabilities. Layla and Yusuf were grateful for their children's school principal who kept in close contact with them and came to their home to teach their family how to use some technological applications they were using in the district. Basma discussed how moving to Canada has changed the trajectory of her children's future:

The gain is that they are receiving a great education in Canada as well as learning the language, the activities and the friends they have gained. Not to mention the safety that we have here. They have gained a better future. Even their teachers, you feel that they are more of a friend than a teacher in class.

According to our participants, some teachers also demonstrated care by playing games or sports with them outside of class or noticing their extracurricular achievements. Tahir recalled playing soccer with his teacher at recess and the praise he received, "My teacher

said to me when I get in Grade 5 in this school, they going to put me in the soccer team.” In the same regard, Dina remembered time spent with her teacher:

When I was at [name of school]; I always played tennis. We used to go into the classroom and play tennis and I used to play with my teachers. One time, my teacher took a photo of me while I was throwing the ball hard.

These personal interactions outside of the context of the classroom were particularly memorable to the children, and are consistent with Due and Riggs’ finding that teacher-student relationships be constructed in ways that are not reliant on speaking English. Overall, their parents talked about how these kinds of interactions contributed to their children’s engagement in school. As Layla described: “They were extremely happy. They even started to go to bed early to wake up for school, sometimes before school time. They were excited.” Rona affirmed that the children’s passion to attend school stretched to disliking holidays or parent-teacher meetings in which they had to stay home: “Here, the children love going to school, they hate it when they have to stay home.”

Peers

The study revealed that, like teachers, peers also played an important role in helping the children feel welcomed and valued. The participants overwhelmingly formed their closest friendships with other children from families with similar cultural and religious backgrounds, referring to them as “Canadian friends” as opposed to their “Syrian friends.” In one example, Maryam recalls when she first came to Canada, “when I first came, I had a difficult time making friends but now it became easier. At first, I thought I won’t get any Canadian friends but now I have a lot.” In another example, Iman revelled in the memory of asking some girls to be her friends, “There were some girls that I didn’t know, and they didn’t know me too so then like I said do you want to play with me and be my friend? Then like they said yes. At the recess, they played with me.” Rahim appreciated the time spent with new friends playing soccer at recess:

Figure 5: Rahim’s Peer Supports



The participants also showed pride in the number of friends they made as well as the diversity of their friends. In this regard, Hamid said "I have so much friends. My best friends, there's one from Pakistan ... and there's one from my country ... they're all the same religion as mine." Their Canadian friends, in particular, helped them develop their English language abilities, as Maryam explained: "My Canadian friends were helpful for me when I talked to them. My English improves a lot when they talk to me, and I don't understand a word, they don't say mind or something like that. They explain for me until I understand it just like my teacher." In the same sense, Salma asserted: "My friends help me when I'm hurt or when I'm in trouble. They also help me with understanding. Other students helped me when I came to Canada with language." However, Rahim described fellow Syrian Tahir as his "child teacher" who helped him with English when he first arrived, and Mustafa similarly aided new arrivals with translation. Tahir affirmed that other children "just read it [the content] and help me to write the answer." These experiences, according to a few parents, have helped their children to become independent learners, establish caring relationships with others, and make a smooth transition into the school. In this regard, Adnan stated: "My children now have many excellent Canadian friends and they accepted them as if they were one of them."

Self

The successful experiences of refugees in resettlement are without a doubt linked to their sense of self-efficacy. Believing in our capabilities to gain control over factors affecting our lives has always been an important factor that affects refugees' ability to smoothly integrate into one's surrounding environment. As observed in our study, student participants were faced with obstacles, such as language ability, which prompted them to become self-reliant with the goal of improving their own resettlement experience. Iman, for example, made it her goal to improve her English as fast as possible, "Because all the kids know [English] and I don't know that. And I'm telling myself I need to know that." Likewise, Dina had a binder that she carried around and was full of new words and meanings. "They gave me a binder that has a lot of papers to know about English and they used to be giving me letters or boards." Maryam studied extensively at home, using Google translate to work through the daily lessons and make sense of the vocabulary and content. Mustafa also cited the benefits of exercise on his well-being: "If you have gym before you do a test it will make you do better."

Refugee-background parents tend to have very high aspirations for their children, and all of our parents envisioned their children becoming doctors, engineers, or other professionals in the future (Isik-Ercan & Zych, 2012). The children had their own dreams and kept these goals in mind. Mustafa described himself as "the funniest guy in our school" and was considering becoming a teacher. More recently, he had been asked by the administration to help interpret for some new Syrian arrivals and he relished teaching them about school norms. His sister Salma similarly aspired to be a teacher to assist other newcomers in the ways she wished she had been helped. Iman hoped to be a doctor when she grew up, while her brother Hamid pictured himself as a businessman who would "help create things." In Tahir's case, he envisioned being a police officer with a "good life." Maryam strove to be a fashion designer because she was "good at drawing" and, while Dina had no fixed goal, her friends affirmed she should be an artist due to her skill in drawing. Finally, Rahim hoped to be a doctor because he liked "to help people." In spite of the challenges these children had experienced in their schooling, then, they perceived themselves as capable of pursuing further studies to attain their career goals.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore refugee children's transitions in schooling across multiple contexts. In transition countries, financial and other constraints caused short or prolonged disruptions to the children's schooling. They experienced inequities in their school experiences as compared to children from the host country, such as diminished instructional quality, inexperienced teachers, crowded and noisy classrooms, and abuse and corporal punishment at the hands of teachers and peers. These conditions led many of the children to feel unsafe in school and academic struggles caused some to lose their motivation to learn. The traumas and difficulties they had endured in transition country classrooms were very memorable to them even several years later. Yet, language was not an obstacle as they moved from one Arabic-speaking country to another.

However, the boundaries between their transition and post-migration experiences are blurred because the children all continued to experience residual effects of these experiences three-and-a-half years after moving to Canada. Learning English was the main challenge, though interruptions in their schooling had also caused learning losses to varying degrees. The children spoke about how not knowing English impacted their ability to navigate the subject area content, understand school practices and norms, and make friends. One child was compelled to repeat a grade while several others still lagged academically as compared to their classmates. While teachers in Canada were perceived as comparatively kind and caring, the children still referenced times when they felt fearful, anxious, or unsafe in schools with their peers and/or teachers. On the playground, the children's fears centred around being excluded in play or being bullied. In the classroom or school setting, these fears were expressed as being related to social isolation, nervousness when asked to speak in front of others, and marginalization or exclusion of their cultural and religious values and practices. Kirova (2001) found that newcomer children have experiences of loneliness in resettlement which they attribute, in part, to their inability to speak the dominant language and rejection or negative treatment from peers. Our participants had similar feelings, especially in the first year, but as they learned English some of their fears were allayed. While some children were initially allowed to speak their home language and were partnered with someone who could explain the class content and practices, the withdrawal of these supports was incredibly difficult for them. Newcomer et al., (2020) confirmed that being partnered with peers not only provides refugee children with needed linguistic and academic supports, but also contributes to their social-emotional well-being in the classroom.

Van Dussen Toukan (2019) contended that the focus on facilitating *adaptation* to the dominant normative values, language, and practices obscures the rich transnational resources refugee children bring to school. The children were proud of their culture, and wanted their teachers and classmates to include and learn about it to the same extent as they did other dominant practices and celebrations. McBrien (2005) explained that cultural misunderstandings can lead to prejudice and discrimination in schools, and this is especially evident for Muslim students whose religion is conspicuous by dress (the *hijab*) and rituals such as fasting and prayer. For the older girls, in particular, being asked to sit or work with boys or use same-gender washrooms often contributed to their anxieties. Attending to familial beliefs, values, and practices inasmuch as is possible is a strategy which allows refugee-background children to see themselves in the curriculum, while fostering attitudes of acceptance and tolerance in their classmates.

Scholarship affirms that safe schools are imperative for refugee children, providing consistency and stability needed to support their learning (McBrien, 2011). Our participants shared about various resources and supports that had sustained them through their struggles. In the transition context, they were heavily reliant on their families, who assisted them with academics and provided a safe haven from the abuse they suffered or witnessed at school. In Canada, however, the children were able to expand their networks of support, referencing teachers, peers, and other Syrians who had helped them or made them feel cared for and capable. Consistent with other research (Strekalova-Hughes, 2017), the EAL teachers had more intercultural experience and professional knowledge, as well as more opportunities to connect with and support the children in a smaller group. There is a need for additional EAL supports in schools with newcomer students, as well as more funding for settlement workers who can speak the same languages as the children. The large class sizes and insufficient training and resources specific to working with refugee-background children impeded classrooms teachers' abilities to support the participants in the same ways. Due and Riggs (2016) found that showcasing children's strengths and talents, is integral to creating a caring environment for refugee students, yet these often go unrecognized (Cho et al., 2019). Teachers in these schools predominantly seemed to view their refugee students from a strengths-based perspective and, even though some of the children's assets were obscured due to language barriers, the children felt they worked to develop closer relationships. They cited numerous instances where their teacher spent time with them at recess, played with them, and affirmed their abilities. These interactions bolstered their confidence, and made them feel valued and included. As in other studies (eg. Strekalova-Hughes & Wang, 2019; Yohani et al., 2019), the children displayed remarkable resilience in adapting to two new countries and school contexts. Three years after their arrival in Saskatchewan, the children spoke English proficiently, boasted of having many friends, had been making academic gains, and had goals for the future.

Recommendations

The children and their parents generated a number of suggestions which could ease the process of adapting to a new school culture. We have summarized and added to these recommendations:

Language and Interpretation

- Learning English is a persistent challenge for refugee children and our participants relied heavily on English as an additional language teachers for assistance in understanding content taught in class. Similarly, classroom teachers asked EAL teachers for guidance in working with refugee students. Enhanced government support and funding for EAL teachers is crucial, as are smaller class sizes, especially in schools serving large numbers of newcomers.
- Teachers working with refugee students should be given access to specialized training and resources in the areas of language learning, intercultural communication, and trauma-informed practice. For example, in their home country, our participants experienced the impacts of war: school closures, violence, dislocation, and the loss of security and a sense of safety. However, in transition countries, they continued to experience many losses, including that of their social/familial networks. In these contexts, the children experienced interruptions in schooling, discrimination, bullying, and abuse at the hands of their teachers and peers.
- Settlement workers in schools are likewise essential resources for supporting classroom teachers and connecting with children and families. They can serve as a bridge between cultures. However, our schools only had a settlement worker for once a week which was insufficient, particularly at times when large numbers of refugees are entering schools.
- EAL teachers recommended breaking down tasks and using graphic organizers to meet the children where they are at. They also found the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) to be very effective. This model involves providing pictures of common objects, actions, or events with word labels to help with language acquisition. Students learn new words and phrases and can use the photos as a guide for writing or speaking. While videos are visual, our participants found the English to be too fast to help with their comprehension.

- Refugee children may be accustomed to different rules and routines. If classroom and school norms are explained by an interpreter, such as a settlement worker, in early weeks, it will ease their transitions. Children might also be assigned a buddy who is willing to guide them in early weeks and months.
- In the relative absence of formal language supports, peer support is integral to refugee children's sense of well-being and safety in the classroom. Teachers should seat/partner them with children who will make them feel at ease and assist them; ideally those who speak the same home language. Withdrawing or discouraging the support of Arabic-speaking peers was traumatic for our participants while they were still learning English. Additionally, students in other classes who speak the same language might be mobilized to show newcomers around, explain school norms, and interpret when crucial information is shared.
- It is important for teachers to find ways to connect with students that are not dependent on English language ability. The children felt happy and cared for when their teachers played with them at recess or watched their extracurricular activities even just occasionally.
- It was memorable to our participants when teachers emphasized or noticed their various strengths and achievements. For example, one teacher emphasized writing without worrying about spelling and grammatical errors. Our participant was able to share her experiences with her teacher and it increased her confidence in her abilities. Using alternative forms of assessing student learning may allow refugee students to meet outcomes without an overemphasis on their English abilities.
- Our participants were very self-conscious about their English. Presentations in front of the class were a particular source of anxiety for them. Teachers might find ways for them to participate that do not involve speaking in front of the class until they have gained more confidence in their abilities.

Academics and School Norms

- Refugee children may have experienced gaps in their schooling, missing months or years of school. The older children seemed to experience more difficulties than the younger ones for this reason. Due to language barriers, it may be difficult to ascertain what they do or do not know. As one EAL teacher noted, they are not just missing the vocabulary, but are also accustomed to a different, non-Roman alphabet and reading from right to left. Language can also mask learning concerns.
- Our participants also learned different course content back home or in transition countries. Some of the specialized vocabulary was unfamiliar even in their home languages (in science, for example). They often sought support from their EAL teacher because they were shy about asking questions in class. Classroom teachers can send home additional resources to fill these content gaps as families will also support their learning. Targeted peer support may also be useful.
- Recess was a favourite time for many of our participants, but it was also the time when these children experienced the most difficulties with bullying and exclusion. In early months, in particular, it may be helpful to increase recess supervision so teachers can model appropriate and inclusive behaviours.

Culture and Religion

- The children and families were proud of their culture and wished to see it reflected in schools; even if it was a superficial approach such as a mini-Mosaic or culture day. Ideally, they hoped for more opportunities to share about their culture in the school.
- Practices in public schools still predominantly reflect Christian beliefs, values, and holidays such as Christmas and Easter classroom activities. It is important for teachers and school personnel to consider how this focus excludes or marginalizes children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Our participants wished that schools placed equal priority on learning and teaching about their own religious holidays. They appreciated having spaces for prayer and fasting, but wished that school personnel would also learn more about the meaning behind their rituals and include/teach about their practices in the classroom. In particular, they wanted teachers to know they cannot eat pork, which includes products containing gelatin (marshmallows, gummy candies, etc.).
- The children need some accommodations when fasting during Ramadan. They may be tired and struggle with physical activity (particularly if they are not drinking water).
- Differences around gender expectations were particularly challenging for the older girls who would not typically be asked to work with or share washrooms with boys in their religion. If teachers are sensitive to these norms, the children can be eased into an integrated classroom with minimal discomfort.
- Although our participants were glad to share about their culture in school, the onus should not be on them to teach about their culture or address misconceptions such as why they are wearing a *hijab*. If classroom activities include learning about the cultural backgrounds of all students, it will foster a climate of respect and tolerance.

Family Engagement

- Our participants had accrued many assets through their migration journeys. They were strong and resilient advocates for their children and had learned to navigate schools in several contexts. It is important, though difficult given language barriers, to access their strengths.
- Our participants came from a context where family involvement in schooling primarily happened in the home. They were accustomed to working with their children on their homework. In Canada, they had little information about what their children were learning because elementary teachers typically do not send homework. If teachers can send home updates, textbooks, and student work, then families will feel more connected to what is happening in the school. Our participants' families hoped for their children to go to university and find professional jobs, but felt disempowered when they could not help them reach this goal.
- Families would appreciate sessions with interpretation related to classroom norms, particularly homework, technology, and report cards. They seek to help their children and be engaged in their education, but often lack the appropriate information about how to be involved. One principal did a home visit to teach the family how to use an application and this allowed them to understand what their children were learning.

- Our families were pleased and surprised that teachers and other school personnel cared deeply about their children’s well-being. These expressions of care provide a strong foundation for engaging them in school activities and learning. Since the families were not accustomed to entering school spaces, more encouragement may be needed. School events were appreciated by families as they felt welcomed. Securing interpreters or using technological tools for interpretation during these events ensures their full participation.
- Written, rather than telephone, communications from the school (including report cards) allow families to access translation online or via friends. These communications should be written in plain language.

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