"I Belong to Nowhere":
Syrian Refugee Children's Perspectives on School Integration

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Abstract

Since 2011, the armed conflict that began in the Syrian Arab Republic has displaced an estimated 12 million Syrians, forcing them to seek refuge in various countries around the world. Over half of those uprooted are children. Education is key to integration of refugee children and is considered critical in bringing back a sense of normalcy, routine as well as emotional and social well-being in the lives of refugee children. In Canada, integration of Syrian refugee children in the public school system has, therefore, been identified as one of the vital aspects of their settlement needs. This article examines the challenges experienced by newly arrived Syrian refugee children as they struggle to integrate to the Canadian school system. We have conducted five focus groups with twelve Syrian refugee parents and eighteen Syrian refugee children between the age group of 10-14. Our research shows that Syrian refugee children not only find it difficult to make friends with local students but are also subjected to constant bullying and racism that affect their sense of belonging and connection. Making the views of these students explicit, we hope to provide a starting point for not only understanding their experiences in more detail, but also for developing educational strategies, resources and policies that might best meet the needs of these students and future refugee children and youth.

Introduction

> This is nowhere…this is in my mind…I belong to nowhere. (A Syrian
> refugee boy speaking of his school experience)

The above statement was made by one child from our research focus groups, a recently resettled young refugee who came to Canada from Syria when he was 12 years old. Unlike a voluntary immigrant, a refugee is one who is forced to leave her/his home country and who either is unable or unwilling to return (UNHCR, 2007). Since 2011, the armed conflict that began in the Syrian Arab Republic has displaced an estimated 12 million Syrians, forcing them to seek refuge in various countries (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Over half of those uprooted are children, who, traumatized by war had to leave their home and live in camps and

resettlement countries (Adelman, Alboim, & Molloy, 2015). The crisis in Syria has severely affected the education of these children (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015), which is key to their integration and is critical for bringing back a sense of normalcy, routine, as well as emotional and social well-being in the lives of refugee children as well as their families (UNHCR, 2011). Yet, there is little data globally on refugee children and education (UNICEF, 2017). Additionally, despite the importance of education in emergencies, only 3.6 percent of the humanitarian funding in the world is earmarked for education in times of crisis (UNICEF, 2017). There is, therefore, a pressing need to advocate for refugee children's education and sharing of international expertise to help implement quality learning opportunities for the displaced and the uprooted children.

In Canada, integration of Syrian refugee children in the public school system has been identified as one of the vital aspects of their settlement needs (Alberta Government, n.d.; Chuang & Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance, 2010). This is in context of the fact that it has been often argued by scholars that historically, the primary focus of federal refugee resettlement programs has targeted adults' labour market integration, assuming that programs and services will trickle down from parents to children (Crowe, 2006). Our research focuses on the perspectives of refugee children, as they have received less attention overall than adults in research on settlement and integration of refugees.

This paper, therefore, explores the initial integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in schools in a city in Western Canada, particularly in their first year. The findings discussed in this paper are of considerable significance locally and globally. Locally, as of August 2018, more than 58, 600 Syrian refugees made Canada their home and approximately 47 percent of these were children under the age of 17 at the time of arrival (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018b). Yet, the Canadian school system in various parts of the country continue to face challenges in facilitating the smooth transition of these children to the new school system (Ratkovic et al., 2017). A lack of understanding of refugee students' education, social integration, and wellbeing in publicly-funded education systems is what has led to such challenges. The focus of our research was on one city in Western Canada, however, findings are of considerable relevance to other cities across Canada where the Syrian refugee student population is increasing and placing new pressures on policy makers and education systems.

Emotional, Linguistic, Academic and Social Challenges of School Integration

As primary care institutions, schools are considered important sites of socialization and sources of stable social support as refugee children acclimate to Western societies (Hyndman, 2011; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Yet, refugee students in Canada are not a homogeneous group and their strengths and needs vary depending on their age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and/or linguistic backgrounds (Kanu, 2008). Because the Syrian conflict began only recently, the literature on Syrian refugee children and their educational and settlement needs and challenges in Canada remain very limited (Aslam, 2016; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). A review of the broader literature on the settlement and integration of other refugee children in Canada (e.g. Africans, Sudanese, Somalians, Afghans) points to the multiple barriers that might affect Syrian refugee children's school integration as well, especially, in their initial years of re-settlement.

Research shows that there are four domains of challenges faced by refugee children in Canada: emotional, linguistic, academic, and social. First, scholars point out that pre-arrival trauma, conflict and violence can cause severe stress for refugee children and affect their cognitive functions and academic performance (Kaplan, Stolk, Valibhoy, Tucker, & Baker, 2016). Refugee children often become mentally withdrawn in class, aggressive towards their peers or find it difficult to concentrate (Yu, 2012). The level of trauma that Syrian refugee children have suffered from can be gathered from the result of a very recent study conducted in a camp in Turkey. In the study, almost "half (45%) displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) – ten times the prevalence among children around the world…[and] one-quarter reported daily psychosomatic pains in their limbs, with one in five suffering from daily headaches" (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015, p. 1). Such increased levels of depression and PTSD can cause learning disabilities among these children once they arrive in Canada (Rossiter, Hatami, Ripley, & Rossiter, 2015; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Yu (2012) points out that refugee children need more psycho-emotional support but their specific needs are often ignored in Canadian schools. Teachers and administrators may not be familiar with the specific needs of their refugee students due to inadequate professional development and training (Fantino & Colak, 2001), a lack of experience with PTSD (Almqvist & Broberg, 1999), and racial discrimination (Schroeter & James, 2015).

Second, language distance can also cause difficulties for refugee children. For example, Kaplan et al. (2016) point out that children educated in Arabic may have "greater difficulties in a Raven-like inductive reasoning test" in a new school system because such tests require "identification of rules from left to right, whereas Arabic script is read from right to left" (p. 93). Coupled with that, lack of English language, illiteracy and little or no formal schooling can further exacerbate the barriers to refugee children's school integration by affecting their ability to learn a new language (e.g. English or French) and cognitive test performance (Ayoub, 2014). They are more likely to fail or drop out altogether (Masinda, Jacquet, & Moore, 2014; Stewart, 2011).

A third barrier to school integration is the expectation on the part of the children to adapt to new teaching practices, school routines and learning styles in the host country (Yu, 2012). Furthermore, older youths who immigrate to Canada in their mid to late-teens or early adulthood with little or no English and limited formal or interrupted education face additional disadvantages such as ambitious academic goals and aspirations, graduation requirements, social isolation and low self-esteem (Ministry of Education, BC, 2015). A fourth concern is a lack of positive connection with new school peers. Several studies showed bullying is a common problem experienced by refugee children (Fandrem, Strohmeier, & Roland, 2009; Richman, 1998; Rutter, 1994). Refugee students often interpreted acts of bullying as actions committed in response to their skin color and non-Christian religious affiliation (Abada, Hou, & Ram, 2008). Bullying can exacerbate acculturation challenges and lead to low self-esteem, stress, depression, poor academic performance, school dropout, substance abuse, and behavioural problems among refugee children (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Furthermore, discrimination that many refugee students experience in Canadian schools from their peers, teachers and administrators also lead to their isolation and discourage their involvement in the receiving society. Ryan, Pollock, and Antonelli (2009)

through their study indicate how refugee students in Canadian schools often feel uncomfortable expressing their issues and concerns to teachers and administrators who are primarily English speaking, and racially white. Children can feel distanced from their parents who lack English language skills and may not be familiar with the Canadian school system. The problems of the refugee children thus often remain unnoticed by both school personnel as well as parents, and affect their sense of belonging and connection (Francis & Yan, 2016).

The literature highlights four domains of emotional, linguistic, academic and social challenges facing refugee children in Canada. This paper reports findings of one domain, social integration of Syrian refugee students. School integration is a two-way process that requires mutual adjustments by both refugee students and teachers (Hamilton, 2004). Not only must students adapt themselves to the new school environment, but also teachers need to adapt themselves to the diverse refugee populations in school. This paper provides educators, service providers, and policy makers with a better understanding of the larger contexts of Syrian refugee students' schooling (e.g. their backgrounds, pre and post migration experiences, barriers to educational success) as well as new directions for facilitating their successful school integration through coordinated programs. As Wilkinson (2002) asserts, positive performance in schools can impact long-term social, political and economic integration of refugee children; this success will, in turn, impact upon the nation's future (Willms, 2010). Moreover, there is little research on refugee children's experiences from their own perspectives as they adapt to new schools (McBrien, 2005; Prior & Niesz, 2013). This paper crucially addresses such a gap by encompassing the critical dimensions of school integration from the Syrian refugee children's point of view. Inclusion of Syrian refugee children's voices will provide educators with a nuanced understanding of children's lived experiences in schools, inform policy decisions, and also challenge the dominant Western narratives of refugee children as 'helpless' and 'victims' (Erden, 2017).

Methodology

The study was conducted in a city in Western Canada that has a growing population of recently arrived Syrian refugee adults and children. We conducted two focus groups with twelve Syrian refugee parents and three focus groups with eighteen children. Focus groups were used to obtain an in-depth understanding of perspectives as this research approach provided a secure setting for participants to express their ideas about sensitive issues and sparked comments between participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). We used a combination of professional networks and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants (Creswell, 2007). The focus group discussions lasted from approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours.

All parent participants, 6 male and 6 female, came under Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) program. Of these, seven received elementary education, three had high school diplomas, one had a bachelor degree and one had a master's degree. In Syria, the adult males were primarily business owners (e.g. clothing merchant) or in skilled trades such as driver, TV mechanic, and plumber. The female adults were homemakers and mothers. The length of stay in Canada ranged from eleven months to one year.

The children participants, 13 male and 5 female, reported being between the ages of 10 and 14. We chose this age group of children as recent statistics suggest that nearly 60 per cent of Syrian refugee children settled in Canada are 14 years or younger (IRCC, 2016). Also, this is a transitional age from adolescent to adulthood, when children experience unique challenges in overcoming a number of developmental and adjustment issues (Francis & Yan, 2016). Except for one child, all children went to school in Syria and subsequently lived and attended school in refugee camps located in Jordon or Lebanon. The length of stay in Canada ranged from five months to one year. When interviewed, all children were enrolled in a separate program offered by the public school system. The program was specially designed for children with interrupted schooling due to the events in their country, who have limited or no literacy in English or their first language, are recent arrivals to Canada, and may have a refugee immigration code and/or be assisted by refugee settlement services. At the school district reception centre, the students were assessed by an English language learning specialist with the assistance of an interpreter. Based on the result of the assessment, the specialist recommended this program to the parents. This program was offered in only a few locations in the city, so this meant that their children took lengthy bus rides-sometimes over one hour-to school. With the consent of parents, the students were placed in a congregated setting. The subjects they learned included English Language, Math, Social Studies, and an option, such as Art or Computer Technology. The focus in classes was English language development. Each student's progress was recorded in a Student Growth Plan. The students were assessed according to the Alberta ESL Benchmarks (Alberta Education, n.d.) and additional learning indicators such as oral fluency, reading, writing, and problem solving set up by the school district. The students stayed in the program up to twenty months and they exited according to individual growth. Some exited within the first six months to a year and some took the entire twenty months. The teachers and educational and English language learning assistants were offered professional development in supporting students who had experienced trauma, such as how to respond to students' basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), social-emotional needs (e.g., social support), referral to mental health services, access external stakeholders to support students and families and teachers' self-care. Some schools also had partnerships with In-School Settlement Workers, a program funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada that places trained settlement workers into schools in order to provide assistance to students and their families to become familiar with school systems and get access to various settlement services.

The focus group interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (mostly Arabic) so that they would feel comfortable expressing difficult or culturally embedded ideas (Davies, 2008). For each focus group, a native Arabic speaker was present to help with translation. Each focus group session was digitally recorded with parents' written consent, transcribed verbatim and translated. The translation of transcripts from Arabic into English was verified by a professional translator.

We employed an inductive analysis strategy to analyze the focus groups (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), throughout the study as the data were collected and processed. This was accomplished by searching for domains that emerged from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to collection. Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller subcategories and whose relationships are linked by a semantic relationship (Spradley, 1980).

Analysis of the focus group data with parents was used to develop follow-up questions for focus groups with children. Specifically, we employed thematic analysis to understand the initial integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in schools (Patton, 2015).

There are some limitations to this study that should be taken into account. First of all, we conducted the study only once, catching a snapshot at a particular moment. A longitudinal study to follow up with the Syrian refugee children would provide richer insights. Moreover, absolute confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed for group interviews, since participants may know one another's identities and, though we may ask participants to keep the discussion confidential, we cannot control what is said outside the group.

Social Barriers to School Integration

Schools can have a stabilizing effect for children by allowing them to engage new interactions, relations and social participation, which is vital for not only making friends but also achieving academic success (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006). Most of the children, having arrived from a war torn country, had seen enormous amount of death and destruction. During the focus group interviews, they shared some of the most poignant stories of having lost their grandparents, uncles, friends; experienced bombing of their school buildings; walked miles to escape from the terror in Syria, moved through different countries and lived in camps with serious deprivation. Given these circumstances, once they arrived in Canada, they were generally relieved to be in a place where they felt safe, secured, and far away from the war because "there are no fighting and no machine guns."

Our research found that schools provided varying opportunities for refugee children to socialize and make friends. Most participants felt safe in their schools to be far away from camps where most of them had a negative experience. In Canadian schools, they were making new friends from different backgrounds, attending birthday parties of their new friends, playing hockey together, attending music and gym classes as well as swimming lessons. These social activities were key to bringing back a sense of normalcy in their lives. One child participant commented how an Arabic teacher who spoke both Arabic and English helped her connect with other girls from different classes in school. Parent participants appreciated settlement agencies helped them prepare for the paperwork to register their children in school, interpreted for them during parent-teacher conferences and organized recreational or educational activities outside of schools for their children in collaboration with the City Recreation or the Public Library. Nonetheless, the children faced many barriers affecting their social integration.

One of the major concerns raised by the children was that their feelings of isolation, separation and not belonging in Canada, exemplified by the powerful statement at the beginning of the paper. Such concern was confirmed by the parents. For example, two parents expressed concerns about their children experiencing emotional troubles, or a desire to return to Syria:

> [The first few months] It's very heavy…But not because maybe before we came here, he [his son] was sad because he left his friends there, school and everything he knows, but because we came here, there was nobody. (PFG#1)

He [her son] was depressed to the point that he would wake up at 1:00 am in the morning and told him, 'Dad, I wanna go back, when are we going back to Syria? (PFG#1)

Other parents reported that their children were "overwhelmed," "got lost" and were "crying for the first month" because they did not "have anyone here, no friend, and no one" (PFG#2). One parent said moving from Syria to Canada was "changing the child's life-dictionary, from Arabic to English…It was difficult because everyone spoke English. It was strange for them. They felt like strangers" ((PFG#2). Uprooting from their home country inhibits children's psychosocial transition and socialization in the resettlement country (Groark et al., 2011; Pastoor, 2015). The students spoke to the need for more support in the classroom and in connecting with other students. They were looking specifically to teachers for support in facilitating this connection. Our findings showed that three major factors seemed to contribute to their social isolation and separation: difficulty in developing friendships with local students, bullying and racism, and discriminatory attitude of teachers.

Difficulty in developing friendships with local students

Social bonding is a key factor for young refugee children to get established in a new country during their first few years (Beirens et al., 2007). Indeed, the wellbeing of the children is quite dependent upon the environment of the broader school community, "the extent to which it is welcoming, offering opportunities to become at home – to belong and flourish in their new host country" (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010, p. 6). Children should be able to bond and bridge with their new peers (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). However, many participants in our study identified the challenges refugee students faced in making friends. Most refugee students lived in neighborhoods where there were a predominance of an Arabic speaking Syrian population that did not provide them with much opportunity to gain friends outside of their own community. For example, one parent explained:

Not easy [for children to make friends], because here we live together with 8 other Syrian families. As you know they all speak Arabic. In school, not much. It was a new environment. (PFG#1)

In school, the concentration of refugee students in specific programs and the daily structure of educational spaces shaped the everyday interactional opportunities for refugee students. Since most of the students were in specialized English classes, they primarily interacted with other non-English speaking students with similar refugee backgrounds. While a few children actually liked being with their others like themselves, there were many others who wanted an opportunity to interact with what they called "Canadian" students. For instance, one child stated: "Only Arabic friends… We don't have in our class Canadian people" (CFG#2).

Thus, in line with Correa-Velez et al. (2010), we can argue that schools need to ensure that Syrian students can have both bonding and bridging relationships (Putnam, 2000). Bonding relationships with one's own ethnic community will be important for "learning from others like them about getting a feel for the game in the new country, and for the material resources shared among extended family and ethnic networks" (Correa-Velez et al., 2010, p. 20). However, bridging relationships with the broader host community will provide students with a sense of being at home in their new country (Correa-Velez et al., 2010).

Bullying and racism

An inclusive social community is key to Syrian refugee children's wellbeing (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Bullying and racism can be disruptive of such wellbeing. In fact, a growing body of researchers indicate that post migration stressors such as bullying or negative peer relationships can have a far more significant effect on the psycho-emotional health of refugee children when compared to pre-arrival trauma (De Haene, Grietens, & Verschueren, 2007). Some of our research participants shared their experiences of racist bullying that they were subjected to in Canadian schools. They mentioned how scared and unnerved they were from bullying and were picked on, evident in the following quote:

> They would pick on you sometimes because you are new, or you are not
> from their country, or you don't speak English and don't understand
> what they are saying, or because you are better. Another new student
> comes in the class and beats him because he is smarter. (CFG#2)

Along the same line, Rumbaut and Portes (2001) found that discrimination was a leading obstacle to refugee children's adaptation. While all bullying can be distressing, race and religion based bullying is particularly disturbing. Prejudice among children against Arab Muslims has been identified by other studies as well (Brown, Ali, Stone & Jewell, 2017). Children in our study recounted incidents of ethnic-religious discrimination when they were beaten up and told to go back to their "own" country when they attempted to pray outside of the school building:

> We were praying outside, me and my friends. And then I was done
> prayer. They were praying, my friends. Then the guy, with his group
> came and started bothering us. They said 'Get away from that place, and
> you are not allowed to pray and you are not allowed to do your things in
> here, and it's not your place and it's not even your country, so go back to
> your place…This country is for White people'. (CFG#2)
> You would be upset if someone asks you about your religion or make fun
> of you… They're racist. (CFG#2)

Similarly, Bourgonje's (2010) study of refugee students in Australia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom also found that they had to "combat prejudice and overcome social exclusion" (p. 7). In the focus group interviews conducted for our research, refugee children reported feelings of sadness, hurt, and anger resulting from the verbal assault and the actions of their Canadian peers. Like the Muslim youth in Baker's (2017) study, the Muslim children in our research "felt that they were being unfairly targeted due to their religion" (p. 9). Perceived discrimination among young refugees from the Middle East is associated with mental health problems and weakening of social adaptation (Montogomery, 2008). Developing strong social supports is clearly an essential component of refugee children's mental health. Specific work needs to be done to reduce discrimination in the community, educating teachers and parents in how children display trauma, and increasing resources to help adults cope with a traumatized child's behaviour.

Discriminatory attitude of teachers

In terms of social integration, what was further upsetting for the children was the lack of support from teachers when Syrian children were subjected to discrimination and bullying. For example, although some teachers become passionate advocates of refugee children and may work outside their academic role to support refugee families, others are quite reluctant to take

refugee specific characteristics into consideration (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). In our study children reported how teachers often lacked proper interventions when it came to addressing bullying or racist remarks. When children interviewees reported other students made fun of their religion, they were disappointed by some teachers' reactions. One student said:

>I was shocked by what the teachers said. You know what the teachers said? They said, 'it's okay. They [their peers] didn't mean it and they didn't know what they were saying'. I was just shocked. (CFG#2)

Students believed that teachers failed to take much action just because they were refugees, hinting that discrimination extended beyond unconscious or subtle bias. Our research found how children were sometimes subjected to stereotypical treatments in schools because of their refugee markers, the common assumptions of them being unruly/violent refugees. Two children commented on this:

>Like we don't really know why some people treat us like this Syrian refugees... well some people think that because we are from a country that had a war that we are monsters or beasts ourselves. Kind of bad people, you know? That's why I think Canadian people treat us badly. (CFG#2)
>Well I think because we are Syrian refugees. I think so. If I were Canadian and doing something, my teachers wouldn't treat me like that. (CFG#2)

One of the above quotes shows that the children were perceived as "monsters or beasts" for being Syrian and refugees. This finding is consistent with the extent literature, such as Zetter (1991) who commented that labelling is a form of stereotyping while Kumsa (2006) highlighted how the term refugee can signify a person as "stupid, misfits, ignorant, poor, and uncivilized FOB [fresh off the boat]" (p. 242). Collet (2010) argued that refugees "may suffer from a lack of understanding for their religion from not only their teachers and the school administrative and leadership staff but also their peers" (p. 193). The majority of Canadian teachers are White, middle-class, and appear to be disconnected from the lives of communities of immigrants and refugees (Guo, Arthur, & Lund, 2009). One child participant said: "My teacher does not know what Muslim means" (CFG#3). Similarly, Ahmad and Szpara's (2003) study found that the Muslim student interviewees in New York did not believe their classmates nor their teachers understood Islam and they believed that misconceptions and negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslim values were "pervasive" in schools (p. 298). Such misconceptions, stereotypes, and subsequent categorization of "refugees" in the host country particularly affect the way children perceive themselves (Kebede, 2010; Zetter, 1991, 2007). What becomes evident in the above comments from our research is the anger and frustration that the children have to live with every day while trying to integrate to the Canadian school system. Most importantly, children's sharing of their experiences reveal, in their perspectives, the lack of empathy and sensitivity that some teachers seemed to possess towards the Syrian children.

Conclusion and Implications

In term of social integration, Syrian refugee children in our study not only found it difficult to make friends with mainstream Canadian students but were also subjected to constant bullying and racism that affected their sense of belonging and connection. Many were ridiculed and

beaten up by other students during their prayers and told to go back to their own country. In addition to other students, the children also discussed concerns with teachers treating them unfairly. They believed this too was connected to being Syrian and a refugee. Particularly in handling concerns about bullying, some students felt that teachers did not treat the issue as seriously as they should – rather, teachers would dismiss it by saying that the students did not mean it, or that they should try to get along. Lack of religious accommodation in many schools coupled with the pressure to "fit in" thus threatened children's sense of religious and cultural identities, thereby posing further barriers to their socio-cultural wellbeing.

Although this study focuses on the perspectives and experiences of Syrian children in a city in Western Canada, what we have learned sheds lights on some of the overarching social factors that are involved in supporting teachers for students of refugee backgrounds within a public school system internationally, given a global increase in refugee student population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011). In considering the issues and needs of Syrian refugee children, schools need to keep in mind that that these children do not constitute a homogeneous category. They have a range of different needs, experiences and expectations that needs to be understood by the school system in order that they can help these young people settle, regain a sense of stability and begin to develop fresh goals and aspirations in their new environments.

This paper contributes valuable information for any school administrators, teachers, or education policy makers interested in enhancing their ability to work sensitively and effectively with refugee students. Several practical and policy recommendations for educational personnel are made to show how educators can connect to the cultural spaces and images of schooling and learning that are out there in communities of new Canadians.

First of all, teachers and administrators need to listen more carefully to refugee children's needs. Stewart (2010) states that "the education system must become more prepared and knowledgeable about the experiences and needs of refugee students to more adequately address their [diverse] learning needs" (p. 7). It is important to combine students' academic needs with their social and cultural needs. As teachers and administrators struggle to create conditions in which students can participate in mainstream classrooms, they need to ensure that such discourses of participation are not underpinned by deficit assumptions. Refugee children bring to their new schools in the settlement countries skills, abilities, and hope. Teachers have a key role to play in affirming children's educational aspirations by fostering their strength and agency rather than disconfirming their abilities.

Moreover, teachers and school personnel should be geared towards developing interventions that would incorporate strategies that can reduce prejudice in school settings (Turner & Brown, 2008). In order to ensure that Syrian refugee children integrate into the school with ease, it is essential that attempts are made to dispel negative preconceptions and alleviate prejudice toward them. One way to achieve this might be to teach all children about refugees at school.

Furthermore, schools should take a social inclusion approach to create an environment for active learning and socialization (Thomas, 2016). School can serve as an important site for

stability, support, and for building a sense of routine and belonging (Hyndman, 2011; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Along the same lines, Hamilton (2008) emphasized that "unless schools are safe environments in which children can flourish without being victimized, taunted, bullied, or at worst, physically harmed then the children will be seriously hampered in their attempts to learn and develop" (p. 87). Even though the importance of schools is well recognized, educational institutions, like other host-country institutions, often unwittingly replicate minority–majority tensions and become places where exclusion and discrimination are experienced at different levels by refugee children (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). Educators need to be aware of teacher bias and stereotyping of refugee children. Educators must provide inclusive and culturally safe school environments that would proactively address bullying and racial discrimination. Integrating refugee students should not only require the participation of refugee students themselves but require collective efforts of school administrators, teachers, support staff, and local students in building an inclusive school, where cross-cultural learning is encouraged. As Kirova (2015) put it, a commitment to ensuring that Arabic bilingual and Muslim teachers are well represented in the public school system is critical for providing educational equity to Syrian refugee students. Practical strategies include increased opportunities for interaction across different groups and establishing buddy systems, suggested by Guo and Guo (2017) in a different context. For example, a local peer can reach out to refugee students or a refugee student can participate in extracurricular activities such as school clubs and team sports.

Finally, in response to the recognition of religious diversity, public schools are required to provide institutionalized means for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups (Guo, 2015). These means include modifications of school curricula and provision of prayer rooms for Muslim students (Kanu, 2008). For instance, a parent interviewee in our study suggested:

> Because there is no place specified for prayer…Noon and afternoon
> prayer are in the school. We need to pray each one. I wish there was a
> small place that could be designated. Maybe this could be done through
> the principal. (PFG#2)

Collet (2007) argues that religion not only helps to ameliorate trauma but also has been shown to facilitate refugee resettlement and community building. As "sites of refuge" where religious identities can be expressed, schools have the potential to play an important role in supporting refugee integration (Collet, 2010). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) recognize that all individuals have the right to freedom of religion. At the same time, Canada's multiculturalism has been criticized because it "endorsed diversity in principle without actually changing any fundamental way how power and resources were distributed" (Fleras & Elliott, 2002, p. 56). In the current political climate of resurgence of White supremist rhetoric and the potential impact on non-refugee students' attitudes towards Muslim refugees, there is a need for "a critical examination of the dominant White, middle-class, Eurocentric culture" in school (Kirova, 2015, p. 249). For some participants, experiences of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia have negatively affected their sense of self and their school integration, which in turn impact educational outcomes. Thus the recognition of minority group special rights, particularly their religious-based accommodation needs in school, becomes crucial for a multicultural Canada (Kymlicka, 1995; Levy, 1997).

As Keddie (2012) points out, refugee children's education cannot be merely conflated with the needs of migrants, 'new arrivals' or 'ESL learners'. Rather, in order to create a just and equitable school environment for Syrian refugee children, teachers and school personnel can begin with a questioning of the mainstream discourses that curtail political, economic and cultural justice for marginalized students. Making the views of these students explicit, we hope to provide a starting point for not only understanding their experiences in more detail, but also for developing educational strategies, resources and policies that might best meet the needs of these students and future refugee children and youth.

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