

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or  
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Social and Emotional Learning Difficulties of Refugee High  
School Students in an After-School Tutoring Program**

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**Abstract**

*School-aged children constitute a significant portion of the large number of refugees who have resettled in Canada in recent years. Due to the lack of cross-cultural competencies, a social justice focus, and transformative leadership skills, Canadian schools are often challenged to effectively address refugee students' socio-psychological problems. Moreover, educational literature and policy, which specifically target Canadian refugee students, are scarce. To help with the issue, this study examined eight refugee high school students through an online after-school tutoring program and evaluated their performances in the five domains of social-emotional learning competencies: social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and social awareness. The two researchers participated in this study as tutors and adopted observation as the main approach. Findings of the study revealed that refugee students' performances in these skills was not optimal, in general. Especially, there is a high demand in improving the refugee students' self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Most of them had good relationship skills as well as social awareness. Also, all the social-emotional learning skills connect closely with the refugee students' academic success.*

*Keywords:* refugee students, social-emotional learning, educational barriers, online tutoring, academic success

## **Introduction**

With the resettlement of more than 28,000 refugees in 2018, Canada has become the top resettlement country in the world (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). With a high influx of refugee students, the question of how to foster the resilience and well-being of this unique population becomes a great concern for Canadian educational systems. According to Ratković et al (2017), Canadian literature regarding K-12 migrant children's learning and well-being mostly focuses on the immigrant and/or English language learners, instead of refugee students. Also, many of the references, used in Canadian educational policy, come from other countries instead of Canada itself. To address the gap, this paper seeks to explore the social and emotional learning (SEL) difficulties experienced by refugee high school students, with the purpose of developing a better understanding of refugee students, especially in regard to their academic performance, and informing initiatives and policies that help them adapt to Canadian education, as well as to the society as a whole.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this paper is the five domains of social-emotional learning competencies which were identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

## **Literature Review**

According to Ayoub and Zhou (2016), refugee students' premigration experience was the main cause of their social, emotional, and academic difficulties that emerged when they attended school. Their research showed that refugee students experienced a lack of the basic necessities of life, interrupted education, violence and abuse, and traumatic refugee camp memories. Living in such an environment is more likely to cause loss of moral perspective and violent behaviours (Joyce et al., 2010). In addition, during the immigration process, separation from family members is another problem that adolescent refugees face (Joyce et al., 2010). Refugee students also confront considerable challenges after their immigration: unfamiliar socio-cultural background, language barriers, post-traumatic stress, acculturative stress and inter-generational stress (Cho et al., 2019; Joyce et al., 2010).

Refugee students urgently need to improve their SEL skills (Cho et al., 2019). Teachers participated in the study of Cho et al. reported refugee students' problems with SEL: the students tended to incorrectly assess their strengths and limitations; they were not able to control or regulate their emotions, attention, and behaviour; refugee students lacked the awareness to obey school social norms and rules; they treated their classmates impolitely; their behaviours did not meet ethical standards or responsibility expectations.

## **Methods**

The researchers were enrolled in the tutoring program as tutors and took the role of

complete participants for the whole study. Given the influence of COVID-19, the program, which was called Youth First, has shifted to an online format.

## Participants

**Table 1**

*Background Information of Participants*

Participants	Gender	Country origin	Grades	Years in Canada
1	Female	Iraq	Grade 12	4 years
2	Female	Syria	Grade 11	4 years
3	Female	Syria	Grade 10	4 years
4	Male	Syria	Grade 9	4 years
5	Male	Syria	Grade 11	4 years
6	Male	Syria	Grade 12	4.5 years
7	Male	Lebanon	Grade 10	1.5 years
8	Female	Colombia	Grade 12	1.5 years

## Data Collection

In this study, observation is the main approach for data collection. Brief notes were taken during tutoring sessions. The more comprehensive notes were finished, as soon as possible, after the session finished. Observations took place in three contexts: tutoring students in one-on-one meeting rooms, observing other tutors' meetings with students, and chatting and playing with students in the main meeting room.

## Findings and Discussion

### Self-Awareness

Current study showed that the refugee students had difficulties recognizing their strengths and weakness. Some students simply attributed their academic performance to teacher preference or their intelligence. For example, participant 8 talked about her grade in history: "I got a low mark; I think the teacher does not like me." According to the study of Liew, et al. (2008), students' self-perceived academic competence was positively correlated with later performance in the areas of both reading and mathematics. Therefore, participants' lack of sense of their academic abilities likely hinders their continued gains in achievement.

The students commonly declined to take steps to improve their performance. For example, when the tutor suggested that participant 2 use another way of expression in her English composition, because she was repeating the same sentence pattern, the student rejected the suggestion and said, "Ms., it is not a big deal." It was common that students came to seek help without doing their homework at all, because they did not believe that they could do it by themselves, even though they had such ability. Bandura (1997) emphasizes that

belief in one's ability influences his or her choices of activities and effort, engagement in the practical efforts to attain goals, academic interest and motivation, as well as the growth of cognitive competencies and achievement.

### **Self-Management**

Participants with low self-management skills usually did not know how to regulate their emotions. In addition to face pressures from academic work, refugee students have to deal with challenges in adapting to the new educational environment. Therefore, refugee students have more requirements for self-management than their peers. With respect to the current study, participants tended to overly rely on specific tutors. For example, Participant 1 usually asked to be matched with a specific tutor, and she would complain to the session coordinator if she could not get the tutor. Students' lack of confidence in their English proficiency also contributed to their lapses in self-management. Participant 7, for instance, would only accept tutors who could speak his mother tongue of Arabic, even though he could communicate with others in English with little difficulty. In addition, the students tended to lose patience easily. For instance, when the tutor tried to explain to Participant 6 how the present tense works, the student interrupted the tutor and asked, "What is the answer?" While other students who can keep positive emotions are able to positively participate in schoolwork, students who lack skills to regulate emotions may not have the personal resources to focus on classroom tasks (Denham & Brown, 2010).

### **Responsible Decision Making**

We observed that most participants refused to take the responsibility that they should have taken for their homework. They came to the tutoring session with the expectation to get their homework finished as soon as possible, instead of gaining new knowledge. Therefore, they expected tutors to solve every problem for them, and they accepted whatever tutors suggested without evaluation and reflection. When they were asked whether they agreed with the tutors, their responses were always, "Yes." However, when they were asked for further explanations, they always said, "I do not know," or "I just think you are right."

Difficulties in language acquisition and adaptation to a new educational system are the most likely cause of the refugee students' over dependence on tutors. Feelings of isolation, as well as negative feelings about, and attitudes towards, school may increase their reliance on instructors. According to Verschueren and Koomen (2012), although the instructor can be used as a secure base and haven, when students feel stressed, excessive dependence on instructors may greatly hinder them from exploring the school and social environment.

## **Relationship Skills**

Throughout the whole current research, it was evident that most participants possessed satisfying relationship skills. Students showed a great willingness to help other students. For example, Participant 3's spoken English was not good, and she was expecting a tutor who was able to speak her mother tongue, which was Arabic. However, tutors who knew Arabic were not available that day. Participant 7, who could speak Arabic, volunteered to serve as an interpreter to facilitate communication between Participant 3 and the English-speaking tutor.

Wentzel (1993) found that good relationship skills served much more than facilitating interactions with others. He argued that relationship skills both had a direct impact on academic achievement and academic preparatory behaviours, such as listening to instructions and asking questions. Hamre and Pianta (2001) explained that positive interactions with peers promoted positive behaviours through peer modeling. Also, cooperative students tend to share intellectual resources by interpreting teachers' directions and sharing academic resources, such as notes and books (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Sieber, 1979).

## **Social Awareness**

Current study findings showed that participants had good social awareness in various aspects, such as recognizing community (e.g., caring for the well-being of the tutoring program, as well as its members), appreciating diversity (e.g., showed great curiosity and kindness to people from different backgrounds), respect for others (e.g., asked others' opinion on chat topics and games), and perspective taking (e.g., concerned whether tutors were overworked).

Researchers are increasingly confirming that students' social awareness plays an important role in their concurrent and later academic success (Garner & Waajid, 2008; Izard et al., 2001). It is important to note, however, as the setting of the tutoring program was quite different from that of school, students' performances related to social awareness could change when they were sitting in classroom. Difficulties such as marginalization due to lack of English fluency, feeling different from peers, and struggling with a new school system are often far beyond what their social skills can handle (Hyman et al., 2000; Humpage 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Through observations in the online tutoring program, this study examined refugee high school students' SEL skills. Based on the CASEL theory, findings show that refugee students' performances on SEL skills are not optimal, in general. Particularly, there is a high demand in improving the refugee students' self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Most of them had good relationship skills as well as social awareness. The paper also discussed how the SEL skills affect refugee students' academic success. By determining how well these refugee adolescents are doing with their homework, current study has answered partly the question of how well they adapt to Canadian society.

The biggest limitations of this research are related to its unique online environment.

For example, students did not turn on their cameras for most of the time while attending tutoring sessions, and the researchers could only understand them through their voice and tone. As facial expression and body language play vital role in communication, the researchers' understandings could be misleading. Another relevant issue is that although all participants stayed in the same meeting room, physically each participant was in a separate space. They may act differently in a face-to-face group. However, due to the current pandemic, online communication will continue to be the new normal. Researchers are suggested to take this circumstance into consideration, when conducting relevant studies.

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