

Introduction

Syrian Refugees' Encounters with the Education System in Their Initial Resettlement in Canada

Anna Kirova
University of Alberta
akirova@ualberta.ca

An Overview

This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* is dedicated to studies exploring the multiple challenges faced by Syrian refugees in their initial encounter with the Canadian education system. Schools are considered by scholars as sites for social-emotional support for refugees and war-traumatized youth (Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Despite that, only 3.6 percent of the humanitarian funding worldwide is allocated to education, even in times of crisis (UN Children's Fund, 2017). The multi-year conflict in Syria has made it the greatest producer of refugees internationally (UNHCR, 2018); the number of displaced Syrian refugees has surpassed 5.6 million, almost half being children (UNHCR, 2017). According to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees are those escaping persecution or armed conflict and are unable or unwilling to return home out of danger; people who are escaping persecution, torture or cruel and unusual punishment (UNHCR UK, n.d.).

In response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, 57,815 Syrian refugees were admitted to Canada between November 2015 and July 2018 (Government of Canada, 2018), 34% of whom were children under 15 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2017). Many were resettled in major urban areas across Canada. Refugees can be resettled to Canada in three ways: through the Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) program (Government of Canada, 2016), the Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR) program (Government of Canada, 2017a), or the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program (Government of Canada, 2017b). However, resettlement experiences are not stress-free. Handling the stress of resettlement can be especially difficult for refugees with school-age children as many have experienced pre-migration trauma (e.g., mass violence, living in extreme poverty, spending extended period of time in refugee camps, etc.). Whatever the resettlement path, the pre-migration experiences of refugee families significantly impact children's resettlement process (Loewen, 2004) and shape their educational and psychosocial outcomes.

Although refugees no longer experience threats to their safety during resettlement, they are faced with the challenge of navigating an entirely new society. While Canada is one of the top ten migrant destination countries (World Bank, 2016) where more than one in five Canadians were born abroad (Statistics Canada, 2017), the large number of Syrian refugees has changed the communities as well as the schools in the urban centers in which they settled. Recent refugees' resettlement experiences need to be examined in light of negative media depictions, partisan and political discourse, and the worldwide rise of nationalism. As a result, discrimination,

particularly for Muslims (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015), and acculturative stress (Kia-Keating, Ahmed & Modir, 2016) are common experiences during resettlement. Although pointed in the opposite direction—that is to welcome Syrian refugees, the Canadian media’s campaign to mobilize the public and professional supports for the Syrians, was also politicised, and created a perception within the refugee community that the Syrians are given preferential treatment (Stewart et al in this volume), which made establishing relationships with other refugee communities more difficult. At the same time, the need to understand the unique experiences of the Syrian refugees and support them during their initial resettlement led to some grassroots initiatives involving cultural brokers from ethno-cultural communities, settlement organizations and NGOs that collaborate with local schools to meet the complex needs of the refugee students. Innovative models are emerging and flexible, context-specific approaches are being piloted.

The goal of this special issue is twofold. First, it aims at documenting the issues encountered by the Syrian refugees in their early stages of resettlement into Canada’s cities and their initial experiences with the education system across provinces. Second, it aims at critically examining conventional educational policies and practices as well as exploring new possibilities for the education system to play a more central role in providing welcoming and supportive learning environments for all students.

This special issue includes five original Canadian research studies conducted in four Canadian provinces: New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. These studies’ participants were Syrian refugees that fall into the age categories of children, youth and adults between ages 10-50 who attend public schools and/or language-training programs. Teachers, school administrators, settlement workers and multicultural health brokers who provided support for the Syrian refugee families as they navigated the multiple systems, one of which is education, were also participants in these studies. In addition to providing a comprehensive background of the conflict in Syria (Stewart et al in this volume), all articles include helpful, current statistics regarding the number of Syrian refugees in Canada as well as in the provinces in which the studies took place. The articles also point to the heterogeneity of the Syrian refugees regarding their religion, ethnicity, education and/or linguistic backgrounds. Each article focuses on specific aspects of Syrian refugees’ integration, and the role the school system played in it, including a critical examination of existing policies and practices. The articles also provide descriptions of emerging local “best practices” that are being piloted, and/or offer suggestions how to improve the existing ones. Thus, the individual articles as well as the volume as a whole contribute to the much needed scholarship concerning the specific issues faced by Syrian refugees and provide recommendations for addressing the shortcoming of the existing education system. In the following section of this introduction to the special issue, I will attempt to highlight some of the main themes that emerged from the five studies included in it.

Main Themes Across Studies

“Triple trauma”

As multiple studies in the extant literature revealed, children fleeing war-thorn regions experience physical and psychosocial issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressive symptoms and anxiety (Murray, 2016; Hadfield et al., 2017), withdrawal, attention

issues, a generalized sense of fear, irritability and agitation, increased dependency on others, and interpersonal challenges (Henley & Robinson, 2011) that are often not attended to. Consistent with the findings of these studies, the participants in two of the articles in this volume (Stewart et al. and Massfeller & Hamm) provide examples of their “triple trauma” – a term coined by Jan Stewart in 2017, to describe the effects of Syrian refugees’ migration journey from fleeing Syria, to arriving to a transition country such as Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey, and adjusting to life and school in Canada. Each stage of the journey presented a different set of struggles and sources of trauma. While in both studies the student participants’ recollections confirmed what prior studies have identified as traumatic pre-settlement events, Massfeller and Hamm’s study added important personal details about these experiences including “*being shot at while walking*”, working without pay in Turkey because of his young age (14 years), and witnessing his father not being paid for four months of work and therefore not being able to provide for his family.

However, recalling such experiences was not easy for the participants. The researchers in both studies indicated that there was a palpable hesitation and reluctance on the part of the participants to discuss personal issues and cautioned about the need to proceed research interviews with heightened awareness of possible re-traumatization, or securing the availability of a trained psychologist during the interviews. Participant reluctance clearly indicates that pre-migration and pre-settlement experiences still have an impact on the daily lives of the Syrian refugee children and youth. What could be alarming, if shared among refugee youth in other settings, is the lack of accessing or seeking assistance for a counsellor or a social worker due to stigma related to getting help or support, as reported by Stewart et al.

However, both Massfeller and Hamm and Stewart et al. demonstrated that because of the negative pre-settlement experiences, their participants were very aware and deeply appreciative of the different, much more positive treatment they and their families have received in Canada and valued the opportunities to pursue their dreams: “I am happy because I’m with Canadians”; “It is a better life. And better life is better place, better food, better safety, and of course better education”; “We expected to find our dreams, and everything, and we came, and it was more than what we expected” (Massfeller & Hamm, in this volume, p. 40). Guo et al.’s study (in this volume) also found that in general, their participants felt “safe, secured, and far away from the war because “there are no fighting and no machine guns” (p. 56). There was also a desire to “move on” expressed by some of the participants in Stewart et al.’s study, and “live a better life” (Massfeller & Hamm, p. 39).

Moving on for school-age children and youth, however, may also be filled with traumatic events such as bullying, racism and discrimination in school as Guo et al.’s study demonstrated. Some of their participants (ages 10 to 14) experienced ethnic-religious discrimination when they were “beaten up and told to go back to their country” while attempting to pray outside the school building (p. 58). Guo et al.’s study participants also believed that their teachers “often lacked proper interventions when it came to addressing bullying or racist remarks” (p. 59). Children’s social isolation, lack of friends and emotional struggles in school were also a concern to their parents interviewed in Guo et al.’s study, who reported their children to feel “overwhelmed” or “crying” because they had “no one here, no friend, and no one” (p. 57). By this, the parents meant their children’s lack of Canadian friends in school; the Syrian families were mostly

clustered in a particular area of the city and spoke Arabic to each other all the time, so making friends in school was an issue. In Yohani et al.'s study (in this volume) the cultural brokers facilitating the initial resettlement of Syrian families with young children reported that some of their clients too were feeling the burden of social isolation and some were exhibiting symptoms of depression. However, unlike the youth in Stewart et al.'s study who did not seek help due to stigma, the brokers were able to make referrals and get help to these families, including a young mother who was suffering of depression.

Making friends and overall social integration in the school environment or the larger society was recognized by all studies included in this volume as being related to Syrian refugees' ability to communicate in English. In the early stages of resettlement, learning to speak English was experienced by the participants as a burden and a barrier.

Language as a barrier and as a facilitator of integration

Since migrant source countries, including Syria are primarily non-English-speaking, the number of English language learners (ELLs) in Canadian schools is growing (Kaplan et al., 2016). However, not only children and youth were faced with challenges as learners of English; their parents too were faced with their own challenges related to lack of employment due to low level of English language competency, despite their attendance of the federally-funded language-training programs. For school-age children and youth in the studies conducted by Stewart et al, Guo et al, as well as in Massfeller and Hamm, their low competency in English language presented barriers to making connections with their peers, and to express themselves. Although language was commonly seen as a barrier, the children and youth in these studies had different responses to that barrier: from stopping to speak for a long time out for fear of being ridiculed again by some of his peers and feeling depressed about it (in Massfeller & Hamm), to feeling powerless and having low self-efficacy (in Stewart et al.), to feeling motivated to learn English: "I want to learn English, I want a friend ... a friend Canadian. I want friends(s) in Canadian, but I don't speak English..." (in Massfeller & Hamm, p. 35).

In all three studies, the English language instruction the students were receiving in school was described as ineffective in giving them what they need in order to both feel good about themselves and make connections with Canadian-born peers. In contrast, the role of Canadian-born peers in improving their language skills was prized highly. In Massfeller and Hamm's study for example, one of the participants shared the enormous positive impact a Canadian friend had on her English proficiency "Like 75 percent my English (improved) because of her, and the rest because of EAL classes." It is worth noting the clever use of hand-held electronic devices (i.e., cell phone) that the Canadian-born student used to begin translating to and from English while communicating with the Syrian-born student. Syrian students recognized, however, that not everyone may want to become their friend and have suggested that they must ask "can I be your friend" (in Massfeller & Hamm, p. 36) in order to have a greater chance of making one.

The perceived inadequacy of their English language classes was addressed in Stewart et al.'s study by piloting an innovative program in which Syrian students were paired with a first-year education student participating in the University of Winnipeg "service learning" program. After

a few weeks, the pilot program was modified to involve not only one-on-one language learning activities but also “group activities such as dancing, going out for food, curling, and watching hockey games to assist getting kids together” (p. 21). The modified program therefore recognized the social nature of language learning, and the importance of peer relationships to make it meaningful to both groups. It also addressed the overwhelming desire, expressed by most of the school-age participants in the studies included in this volume, to have Canadian friends.

Academic challenges

The impact of low level of English language proficiency on making social connections was only one side of the multiple challenges foreign/additional language learners face in any educational context; it also affected the academic performance of the Syrian students. Academic struggles were exacerbated by Syrian students’ level of English, but they were not the only reason for them. Educational gaps are well-documented in the existing research on Syrian refugee children (e.g., Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015), especially for the 14-18 demographic whose schooling was interrupted not only due to the war in their home country but also because of lack of access to schools in the transition countries such as Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan. The Canadian studies included in this volume provided examples, in students’ own words, of how the limited English they felt they had was preventing them to participate in class: “In math class, I am shy because I’m scared my English is bad” shared a 15-year-old student, participating in Massfeller and Hamm’s study (p. 36). In addition, children often struggle to understand and complete their work because they did not understand what was being asked of them (in Yohani et al. in this volume). Stewart et al.’s study showed that some students were surprised when placed according to their grade, “I thought that they will teach us the material that we missed, but I was surprised to be placed in grade eight” (p. 22). Thus, the present policy forces students to cope with two aspects of learning at the same time—“learning the language and learning the material they had missed during the years of displacement” (Stewart et al, p. 22).

Despite research showing that newcomer students placed in grades with “an ill-matched level of academic challenge may feel as though there is no way forward” (Miller, Ziaian, & Esterman 2017, p. 7), the Canadian school system places them in the grade appropriate for their age, regardless of their educational background. Previous Canadian studies have shown that many newcomer parents prefer their children be placed in a grade that corresponds with the amount of formal schooling they have received and feel their children are predestined for academic failure (Rossiter & Derwing, 2012). The findings of most current studies strongly suggest that this policy should be reconsidered if the school system is to support learning and integration of refugee students, especially in light of yet another educational policy—the mandatory age cap according to which students “age out” of the school system without having the skills or language ability to go on to additional training” (Stewart et al, p. 22).

Yohani et al’s study (in this volume) pointed to another aspect of refugee families with limited English skills—a reliance on their young children in navigating life in Canada.

“I feel like the kids here have a lot on their shoulders because a lot of the parents are illiterate even in their first language, so they’re expecting their

grade 3-ers and grade 4 children to read the mail and make their parents understand what's being said.” (Broker 4; Interview) (p. 93)

Such experiences are common among refugees and impact family dynamics. Shifting familial roles creates tensions and additional stress in these families, weakening the family bonds, and affecting refugee families' sense of belonging and connection to their host country.

Language learning, linguistic capital and identity shifts

Becoming a student again, after a number of years of working since the age of 10 or 11 to support the family in transition countries prior to arriving in Canada, has been identified as a challenge by some students in Stewart et al.'s study. As a result, some have opted out of school to join the workforce which leaves them with minimal training and limited English language proficiency that in turn severely limit their future earning opportunities beyond minimum wage. In this sense, language as capital or “linguistic capital”, which is a central theme in Ghadi et al.'s study (in this volume), and is defined as “the fluency in, and comfort with, a high status...language which is used by groups who possess economic, social and political power and status in local and global societies” (Morrison & Liu, 2000, cited in Ghadi et al., p. 70), is out of reach for some refugees.

The nature and content of the language instruction classes was perceived as being limiting rather than empowering or enabling. For example, for some of the participants in Ghadi et al.'s study whose age ranged between 25 and 50, being a student in adult English language classes offered in the city of Regina, felt that they were “not taught the actual language-the street language-that we need to survive” (p. 74), and therefore were not going to acquire the “right” linguistic capital needed for employment. Moreover, the student identity was compared by many male participants with their Syrian identity as “hard-working,” independent men, proud to be husbands and fathers and provide for their families. Having worked many different jobs in different countries on the way to Canada, many believed that learning English on the job in Canada will be a better way of achieving their primary goal (i.e., “through working we will learn everything”), and that they “don't need to be fluent to get a job done” (p. 75). Most employers' requirement of having at least level 5 in order to be employable, seemed unrealistic and out of reach to many after 15 months of English language classes. Because the traditional identity of a Syrian man as a breadwinner and provider was replaced by that of a student, dependent on government subsidies while taking English language classes, many of the female participants “infantilized their husbands, comparing them to schoolchildren: “They go to school like little children and come back to do nothing” (p. 77). They wanted their husbands to go to work instead.

While employment wasn't a priority for most of the female participants in Ghadi et al.'s study, women too were dissatisfied with the type of English they were learning in their classes. They felt that “*if they would teach us how to speak in different situations, at the mall, at the hospital, that would be much more beneficial*” (p. 75). However, as a group, the participating women were “less pressured and discouraged than men because their primary focus was their child-rearing responsibilities” (p. 77), and thus, their identities as Muslim wives and mothers was, for the most part, intact. They were even able to use some of their linguistic capital from “*back*

home” and start selling Syrian food within the Arabic-speaking community. Despite these small jobs within the community, and the discomfort caused by the mixed gender classes they were attending, the women, unlike their husbands, were very motivated learners of English because knowing English would allow them to continue to care for their families—shopping, doctor’s appointments, etc. However, as Yohani et al.’s study (in this volume) demonstrated, in the early stages of resettlement, the Syrian mothers of young children needed a lot of support from the cultural brokers in order to fulfill their roles in the host country with very limited English language skills. In dealing with the school system the cultural brokers who participated in their study shared that parents reported being unable to understand what is required of them, filling out school forms or understanding teacher’s homework requests.

The studies included in this volume indicate that the current structure and content of the English language courses for school age students and for adults are not meeting the social, academic and/or employment needs of the Syrian refugees, and that new approaches must be considered and implemented. These must include, as per participants’ input, other Canadians, not only the teacher, and many social opportunities to practice in meaningful social situations what is being learned in class. Mentorship programs (piloted in Stewart et al.’s study), bridging or workplace embedded programs (recommended in Ghadi et al.’s study) are better positioned to provide both bonding and bridging relationships (Putnam, 2000) with the broader host community and facilitate integrations based on a sense of belonging.

Role of Teachers and Community Workers

Schools can be sites for social-emotional support for refugees and war-traumatized children and youth only if school personnel are well-informed and competent in meeting the complex needs of students from such backgrounds. Lack of training and information about refugee experiences is a key challenge that teachers encounter in their practice (Miller et al., 2017; Nagasa, 2014; Shallow & Whittington, 2014), including frailer to select culturally appropriate materials, which in turn can lead to noncompliant behaviours among students (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Lack of training is only one side of the complex challenges faced by the teachers while attempting to meet their refugee students needs. Another issue is the current composition of the Canadian teaching force. Because most Canadian teachers are white, middle class, as previous research has shown (Guo, Arthur & Lund, 2009), they don’t always understand the realities of their refugee students and their families’ everyday lives. Such lack of knowledge and understanding opens possibilities for negative misconception, based on stereotypes, and potentially for perpetuating discriminatory, racist and marginalizing practices. In Stewart et al.’s study, teachers felt insufficiently informed about the realities of their Syrian students and prepared to address their needs, especially recognizing their mental health symptoms. The teachers wanted to receive “more training about how to respond to children who have experienced trauma and how to best support students learning English while also teaching age-appropriate curriculum with limited or no resources” (p. 23). Yohani et al. (in this volume) also stress the need for educators to be cognizant of psychosocial impacts of refugee experiences on children and their families so that they be better equipped to identify and refer them to appropriate services if they cannot address their needs in the school context. The authors provided multiple examples of how an existing framework (i.e. RAISED Between Cultures), developed specifically for the purposes of guiding early childhood educators in identifying both the challenges and strengths of Syrian refugee

families with children within the educational context, can be useful to other professionals working with these families. “**RAISED** between Cultures model outlines six important factors that, when considered by educators both together and independently, can contribute to children’s outcomes, and which make up the RAISED acronym: **R**eveal culture, **A**cknowledge pre-migration experiences, **I**dentify post-migration systemic barriers, **S**upport family and community strengths, **E**stablish connections between environments, and **D**etermine child outcomes together with families” (p. 90). This model (Georgis et al., 2017) was created as a collaborative effort among academics, immigrant service providers, working directly with ethnocultural communities, educators and policy-makers with the intention of supporting the development of a set of best practices for working with this population based on what is currently known in the academic and research literature.

All studies included in this volume that involved school-age children and their parents strongly recommend involvement of settlement workers, cultural support workers, community liaison personnel, and cultural brokers to bridge the existing gap between the school and the refugee students and their families. For example, Guo et al.’s study is situated in a school context that offered a program specifically designed for children with interrupted schooling and limited or no literacy in English or their first language, and who are recent arrivals to Canada. The program also included English language programs for the parents, and partnered with in-school settlement workers. The teachers in the program were offered professional development in supporting refugee students’ social-emotional needs, meeting their basic needs, or accessing external mental health or other services. Yohani et al.’s study provides specific examples within a conceptual ecological model of how cultural brokers can assist both the families and the school system. “By talking with the children and their families about their culture through and with cultural brokers, educators will reach a better understanding of each child’s needs and how they can best be met in a holistic and inclusive manner” (Yohani et al., p. 94). These needs are particularly complex for refugee children with disabilities who can easily fall through the cracks. Identifying challenges and barriers to accessing non-academic supports can be a difficulty for educators in regular schools. As Yohani et al.’s study demonstrates, the brokers play a key role in navigating the education system which often threatened refugee children with suspension instead of trying to work with the family to identify how to work more effectively with the child. Working alongside families to facilitate decision making that influenced child outcomes was an important role of the cultural brokers who participated in the study. An important aspect of the overall role of the cultural brokers is to guide both the parents and the teachers to understand that “parents’ conceptions of competence and their corresponding behaviors can conflict with mainstream (school) conceptions” (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007, p. 74).

Building on Strength to Foster Resilience

While challenges and barriers were at the forefront of all studies’ participants’ minds, the conceptual model provided in Yohani et al.’s study points to the need to recognize and build on refugees’ strengths. The authors identified adults’ pursuit of schooling as soon as possible upon arrival to Canada to improve their English and join the workforce, as well as families’ willingness to push through the many barriers that they face and ability to ask for direction when they need help establishing connections with other systems and environments, as examples of strength and resilience. In the case of the participants in Ghadi et al.’s study, women’s use of

their home-language capital to open small businesses to support their families is an excellent example of resourcefulness and resilience. In addition, the participants' resilience could be identified in the fact that they spoke openly about their English language learning needs and were not shy to be critical of the existing programs. In Massfeller and Hamm's study, one of the participants was supporting newcomer students who arrived at the school after him, and even demonstrated leadership by coordinating extra-curricula activities for all students. Speaking from his own experience, this student believed that it was important to provide more time and support to new Canadian students "beyond the first day or even first week welcoming" and certainly going beyond a "school tour" (pp. 39-40).

However, in most of the studies, the educators as well as the Syrian participants referred mostly to their challenges. While the focus on barriers and challenges, including language and mental health issues related to trauma is understandable in the early stages of resettlement, the disproportionate focus on such issues can prevent the recognition and support of the many strengths that immigrant and refugee families bring with them, such as resilience, hope, aspirations, strong community and familial networks, cultural wealth, first language, and bi-multi-lingualism (Georgis et al., 2017). Yohani et al. remind us that maintaining one's first language can help Syrian refugees to strengthen bonds and communication within their family and community and help children develop their second language, which will help them overcome aforementioned barriers of social isolation and language.

It would also be important to develop approaches to curriculum and pedagogy based on communities' and families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Moll et al. posited that these funds result from people's everyday life and daily activities and that individuals "consume and use" them. The authors defined funds of knowledge as the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) point out that "funds of knowledge do not exist solely within the mind of the individual, but rather they are distributed among persons, artefacts, activities, and settings" (p. 36). I am very hopeful that the next collection of Canadian studies on supporting refugee integration through education, will provide examples of curriculum and pedagogy based on their strengths and funds of knowledge.

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