RACISM & DISCRIMINATION FACED BY RACIALIZED NEWCOMER REFUGEE YOUTH IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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This paper explores the unique challenges faced by racialized newcomer refugee youth in the Canadian education system, emphasizing how systemic racism and discrimination impact their integration process. Despite Canada's multicultural identity, these youth often encounter barriers related to their racial identity, immigration status, and cultural background. The article examines the intersectionality of these challenges, particularly in areas like education and employment. It offers policy recommendations such as anti-racism training, culturally responsive services, and advocacy efforts to address systemic issues. By fostering inclusivity and supporting refugee youth, Canada can ensure their successful integration into society.

Canada has long been known for its multiculturalism policy, welcoming newcomers from around the world. Despite this reputation, racialized newcomer refugee youth face significant barriers to settlement, largely due to systemic racism. These challenges are especially pronounced in the school system, where factors such as racial identity, language barriers, immigration status, financial instability, and social isolation intersect. Using intersectionality to examine how race influences the experiences of newcomer refugee youth in the education system is crucial. This approach helps us to understand their settlement journey, the challenges they encounter how the settlement sector can foster greater inclusivity to ensure their successful integration into Canadian society.

According to data from Statistics Canada, refugee youth make up a notable portion of the overall refugee population in Canada. Specifically, about 20% of refugees are under the age of 18, highlighting the significant presence of young refugees within the broader refugee demographic. This statistic emphasizes the importance of targeted policies and programs to support the integration and development of refugee youth in Canada. However, due to structural barriers, newcomer refugee youth often fall through the cracks. The settlement process for newcomers typically involves several stages: pre-arrival preparation, arrival and initial adaptation, integration, and long-term adjustment. Each stage presents unique challenges, but for refugee youth, these challenges are amplified due to their intersecting identities and subjective life experiences, such as the trauma of displacement and resettlement.

During my work as a School Settlement Worker from 2015 to 2022, my substantial experience with newcomer Syrian youth was an introduction to the magnitude of systemic

discrimination in supporting refugee families, largely due to a lack of funds and resources. A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada, modified by Leah K. Hamilton, Veronis, and Walton-Roberts provides a comprehensive overview of how Syria experienced one of the world's largest conflicts in recent years, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that displaced millions. During the 2015 Canadian election, the Liberals promised to resettle over 25,000 Syrian refugees. From November 2015 to January 2017, over 40,000 Syrian refugees settled in Canada (Hamilton, Veronis, and Walton-Roberts 2020) Notably half of these refugees were under the age of 18 at the time of arrival, compared to non-Syrian refugees (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2020). Given these numbers, it is important to acknowledge that Canadian schools welcomed a higher number of Syrian refugee youth in recent years. This population often came from conflict zones and experienced trauma while leaving home and during their migration journey (Sullivan and Simonson 2016). There was hardly a plan of action on how to settle these youth within the school systems. From my discussions with some of the schools I worked at, many were not prepared or trained on how to support these students beyond enrolling in school. This phenomenon unfortunately persists with students arriving from Afghanistan and Ukraine. The burden often falls on settlement workers, counselors, and teachers, who spend a large portion of their time ensuring students understand their courses and adapt to life in high school.

According to some students' narratives, not all teachers are culturally sensitive or understanding of their unique challenges, such as fear of asking questions, lack of understanding of course material due to stress, and minimal student-teacher time. Hadfield, Ostrowski, & Ungar (2017) explain that Canadian teachers lack cultural competency in dealing with refugee youth. Due to the lack of such training in the school system, refugee students experience higher mental health challenges. The pressure to learn English quickly and efficiently is problematic for many refugee youths, and these intersecting stressors create barriers to successful social and academic integration and academic integration in school. In Ontario, students in grades 9 and 10 are segregated into three streams: "essentials" (local workplace programs), "applied" (for colleges), and "academic" (university). This system can be detrimental for newcomer youth as they may be placed in the lower stream if they lack certain prerequisites (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). This type of structure in the education system can impact young adults' career choices and hinder their socioeconomic success, particularly for refugee youth. This suggests that discrimination is embedded in how the education system favours specific groups of people over others.

Moreover, I have often seen refugee youth experience discrimination and racism due to their religious beliefs, such as identifying as a Muslim, wearing a headscarf, or attending Friday prayers. Misunderstanding and feelings of being racially judged indicate that students cannot excel effectively in schools when they experience hostility. Such an atmosphere negatively impacts students' mental health, affecting their "grades and graduation rates, which limits post-secondary choices for immigrant youth (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä, 2020, 8).

Furthermore, I have also witnessed many refugee youths being exploited in their work settings due to a lack of knowledge about workplace rights and the ability to fight for fair working conditions. Newcomer youth are generally "vulnerable to workplace exploitation" as they lack information about Canadian employment standards (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020 14). Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä (2020) explain that if newcomer youth are placed in low-wage jobs, especially in areas where language skills are not a priority, we risk creating a "long-term cycle of precarity and poverty" (p.13). Due to structural racism in job recruitment, intersecting variables such as language, gender, and status all play a role in their socioeconomic pathway.

The settlement journey of racialized newcomer refugee youth in Canada is fraught with challenges, many of which stem from systemic racism and discrimination. Educators must uphold refugee youths' desire to learn and support their education by fostering a positive and encouraging environment. Everyone involved in the process, including administrative staff, teachers, settlement workers, and mentors, must remove any preconceived negative ideas and prejudice towards these students. Guo, Maitra, and Guo (2019) quote Stewart (2011), stating 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).

In the school system, teachers often struggle to understand the unique life experiences of refugee youth. Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä (2020) provide a comprehensive list of policy changes and recommendations, including fully funded settlement programs, better streaming methods, mentorship, teacher training, anti-racist policies, and much more, aimed at changing "societal attitudes surrounding immigrants, race, and ethnicity" (p. 15). We must understand that Canada's future economic growth will significantly rely on the contribution of immigrants. Therefore, as a society, we must make our education system inclusive to meet the needs of refugee youth who are going to be part of our future.

Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from the settlement sector, policymakers, and the broader community. By fostering inclusivity, advocating for systemic change, and providing culturally responsive support, Canada can better ensure that all newcomers have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to society. As a nation built on diversity, we must uphold the values of equity and inclusion, making Canada a true haven for those seeking a new beginning.

To combat racism and discrimination and support the integration of racialized newcomer refugee youth, the settlement sector must take proactive and systemic approaches to offer the following:

- **Anti-Racism Training:** Settlement service providers should undergo comprehensive anti-racism training to understand the biases and systemic barriers that racialized newcomer youth face. This training should be ongoing and mandatory to ensure that all staff are equipped to provide inclusive and equitable support.

- **Culturally Responsive Services:** Services should be tailored to meet the unique needs of racialized youth. This includes providing language support, culturally appropriate counseling, and community-based programs that reflect the diverse backgrounds of newcomer youth.

- **Advocacy and Policy Change:** The settlement sector should advocate for policy changes that address systemic racism and discrimination. This includes pushing for better employment equity policies, anti-discrimination laws in housing, and equitable access to healthcare and education.

- **Community Engagement and Empowerment:** Building strong connections between newcomer youth and their communities can foster a sense of belonging and mutual support. Community-led initiatives and partnerships with racialized communities can help refugee youth navigate the settlement process and build social networks.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implementing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of settlement services in addressing racism and discrimination is crucial. This includes collecting data on the experiences of racialized newcomer youth and using this information to inform service improvements and policy advocacy.

- **Public Education and Awareness:** Raising awareness about the contributions of racialized newcomers and the challenges they face can help combat stereotypes and foster a more inclusive society. Public education campaigns can promote understanding and solidarity among all Canadians.

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