TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM FOR REFUGEE WOMEN AND FAMILIES

Ryan Drew began her career at S.U.C.C.E.S.S. 17 years ago. As the Best Practices Coordinator for Language in the Immigrant Settlement & Integration Program, Ryan supported the training of the Language staff, contributed to proposal development, and the implementation of Best Practices across service regions. In 2015, Ryan was appointed the Regional Manager for the Tri-Cities Immigrant Settlement & Integration Program overseeing settlement and language services in the region. In this role, she implemented new and additional programming to further serve the needs of newcomers in the Tri-Cities region. Now, in her new role as Program Director of the Immigrant Settlement & Integration Program, Ryan is looking forward to continuing to support newcomers to BC with quality settlement and language programming that will assist in their settlement and integration process.

Settlement and adaptation can be particularly challenging for refugee families who have low to no English language ability. Government statistics indicate that amongst resettled refugees who have come to Canada since 2015, 62% are unable to speak an official language. English language learning is a fundamental settlement need and also one of the key facilitators of social and economic integration in Canada. S.U.C.C.E.S.S. has identified crucial areas where major settlement and language learning needs of refugee families intersect. These intersections include family supports (including childminding and school attachment), employment, health, and family literacy needs. In order to develop service approaches that are highly responsive to the needs of refugee women and families S.U.C.C.E.S.S. presents integrated and cost effective service approaches that are essential to innovative and effective language programming and are highly responsive to the needs of refugee families. This presents the first step towards developing a responsive English Language programming model to support refugee settlement in Canada.

L'établissement et l'adaptation peuvent être particulièrement difficiles pour les familles de réfugiés qui ont peu ou pas d'aptitudes en anglais. Les statistiques gouvernementales indiquent que parmi les réfugiés réétablis qui sont venus au Canada depuis 2015, 62 % sont incapables de parler une langue officielle. L'apprentissage de l'anglais est un besoin d'établissement fondamental et l'un des principaux facilitateurs de l'intégration sociale et économique au Canada. S.U.C.C.E.S.S. a identifié des domaines cruciaux où les principaux besoins d'établissement et d'apprentissage des langues des familles de réfugiés se recoupent. Ces intersections comprennent les soutiens familiaux (incluant la garde d'enfants et l'attachement à l'école), l'emploi, la santé et les besoins d'alphabétisation de la famille. Afin de développer des approches de service qui répondent bien aux besoins des femmes et des familles réfugiées, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. présente des approches de service intégrées à bon rapport coût/efficacité qui sont essentielles à une programmation langagière novatrice et efficace et répondent très bien aux besoins des familles de réfugiés. Ceci constitue la première étape vers l'élaboration d'un modèle de programmation de langue anglaise adapté pour soutenir l'établissement des réfugiés au Canada.

The literature demonstrates a myriad of examples of the daunting challenges and barriers refugees face in their host countries. These barriers include language difficulties, financial challenges, cultural differences and housing shortages, among others (e.g., Morris, Popper, Rodwell, Brodine & Brouwer, 2009; Simich, Beiser, Stewart, & Mwakarimba, 2005; Murray and Skull, 2005; McKeary & Newbold, 2010). Refugees, as a socio-demographic group, have common needs and similar barriers which are experienced differently by women and men, and have different impacts. In the literature that focusses on the language learning needs of refugees as a homogenous group, often the complex and gendered needs of refugee women are overlooked or obfuscated. Cognizant of how refugee women's settlement needs and experiences are qualitatively different from those of men, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. conducted focus groups with refugee women to explore their perspectives and experiences with accessing and attending English language training – a central element in their settlement journey. The results of this research highlight the need to develop responsive settlement language programming to ensure refugee women have access to language learning services that are responsive to their experiences as refugee women settling in Canada.

METHOD

For this research, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. employed a research methodology that utilized qualitative investigation by conducting a focus group to explore their experiences and perspectives on accessing services intended to support newcomers in their settlement journey.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. conducted a focus group in November 2016 with fifteen refugee women participants to determine the needs, challenges and English language learning goals of refugee women. The focus group session was conducted in the province of British Columbia, in the city of Surrey. A total of 15 refugee women participated in the focus group, with over 70% of respondents being refugees from Syria (11); the remaining from Iraq (3) and Eritrea (1). 80% of participants (12) had been in Canada for six to twelve months. Over 70% of participants (11) were government-assisted refugees (GARs). In this focus group, 60% of participants were aged 25 to 44 with 1 participant between 18-24 years, 2 participants between 45-54 years, 1 between 55-64, and 2 were 65 years and above.

RESULTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

Settlement goals facilitated by improved English language Capacity: The participants in the focus group identified specific settlement goals particular to their socio-demographic group that they thought would be best supported through their participation in tailored English language learning opportunities. Their goals included: attaining employment, securing Canadian citizenship, independently navigating the Canadian healthcare system, assisting their children with school work, and establishing connections to other women in the community to facilitate feelings of belonging.

Participants also identified and discussed their specific needs for acquiring English language skills, and their barriers to learning English language.

Needs for Language Instruction: Participants reported that they want to learn English that is directly relevant to the tasks of daily living. These included: English language pertinent to shopping, banking, socializing, health and health care; looking for housing and communicating with landlords along with accessing government services; inter alia. Participants reported the need to strengthen their computer skills and vocabulary for common technology-related information. For social situations, participants reported the need to learn about cultural norms in terms of appropriate and inappropriate conversation topics and words, as well as typical etiquette. In addition, participants reported a need for a teacher who spoke their first language in lower level English classes to facilitate their learning. Some participants reported preference for slower paced classes, while others wanted classes that were more intensive. Participants also reported wanting more activities and interactive components in the classroom, such as discussions and learning about/with English media including television shows, movies, and news reports. Furthermore, some participants reported wanting to focus more on writing, while others, particularly older participants, wanted to focus more on speaking skills in a less structured format.

Barriers to accessing English language training: Despite having clear settlement goals and specific needs within English language classes, focus group participants and frontline workers also identified a variety of significant impediments to accessing English language classes and moving towards their attainment of their settlement goals.

Participants identified long waiting lists for Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes as the primary barrier affecting their English language learning along with an insufficient number of childcare spaces. The participants reported that without childcare support to attend language class, those mothers with pre-school aged children would not be able to attend. A related point is that participants mentioned the lack of English classes for clients with special needs. Still on the learning environment, some participants described how the lack of more gender-specific classes or activities make English learning less accessible to women with the barrier of not being fully able to openly discuss and

learn about services, resources, and information that could support their health and well-being. Finally, participants also reported that inclement and severe weather often prevented them from attending classes as the majority either are required to walk or are unable to afford the public transit cost to travel to language classes.

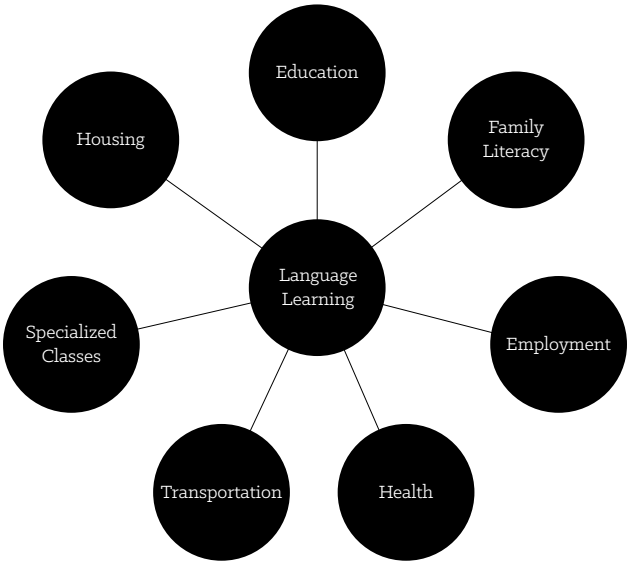
DISCUSSION

The Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program — an Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funded language training activity — is designed to assist immigrants and refugees to overcome language barriers, facilitating their integration into Canadian society; however, this program does not appear to meet the unique English language learning goals, needs and challenges of refugee women who participated in the focus group. According to Bettencourt et al. (2003), "LINC was premised on the idea that the ability of newcomers to communicate in one of Canada's official languages was the key to integration…" (p.xiii). The mandate of the LINC program is to provide basic language instruction to adult newcomers in either of Canada's two official languages (English and French) and to facilitate the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees into Canadian society (Cleghorn, 2000; Papillon, 2002; Thomson & Derwing, 2004; Fleming, 2007). The LINC program is generic and is generally not tailored to meet the needs of any specific newcomer group, rather it embraces all eligible newcomers. A case in point is that the LINC program has a general set curriculum following monthly settlement themes such as housing, transportation, education, health, banking, etc. Classes run on specified days and times and learners are required to regularly attend class on these prescribed days. Often, refugee women have insurmountable challenges that prevent them from attending classes regularly or from attending at all. These challenges include child care, insecure housing, health issues and transportation costs, among others. It is within this context that the LINC program does not fully meet the specific needs of refugee women that we recommend innovative English Language programming that is more responsive to the needs of this socio-demographic group.

RECOMMENDATION – THE LANGUAGE RESPONSIVE INTEGRATED APPROACH

The responsive language program recommended addresses the key identified access barriers of refugee women, their settlement goals and their English language training needs. This approach is targeted for this particular group and provides integrated settlement services as well as delivery methods that reduce barriers to support improved outcomes for refugee women. The model of such an approach is presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: LANGUAGE RESPONSIVE INTEGRATED APPROACH (S.U.C.C.E.S.S.)



Each of the components of the model works to facilitate access to language training and/or accelerate progress towards a settlement goal for refugee women. Each of the components will be expanded upon to demonstrate the responsiveness of the integrated approach.

HOUSING

In the Metro Vancouver area of British Columbia, there is a significant need for affordable rental housing. In February of 2016, the Toronto Star reported that lack of affordable housing had left refugees stuck in hostels and hotels, delaying their chance to settle into Canadian life (Friday, Feb 5, 2016). Due to low vacancy rates and high rental costs, the ability to secure safe and appropriate housing has become more tenuous. As such, according to Francis and Hiebert (2014), immigrants and refugees have indicated that they: live in overcrowded and poor living conditions; experience discrimination based on family size as well as on race/ethnic/cultural/national background, and language/accent; and have even experienced homelessness. The ability to secure appropriate and safe housing can be affected by a number of factors, but a significant aspect is insufficient English language ability (Francis & Hiebert, 2014).

The proposed integrative program would determine the contexts and situations in which learners would need to use English language in securing housing for their families, and focus instruction on those contexts by bringing in *realia* and authentic materials that would build language skills while boosting confidence in using the language within these con-

texts. The classes would cover *case studies* based on student needs, such as, the process of finding housing, communicating with the landlord, information and referral to housing-related organizations, reading housing advertisements, etc. This would result in an emergent curriculum that would be adaptive to the ever-changing needs of learners.

EDUCATION

With a theme such as education, parents need to be supported and oriented on the expectations placed on parents' involvement with their child's education and how they can have conversations with teachers and school officials on their child's progress and learning. Akin to housing, the curriculum would cover case studies that support parents so that they could participate in their children's education such as parent-teacher interviews, student-led conferences, field trips, student absences, report cards, and volunteer opportunities at schools.

FAMILY LITERACY

Family literacy encourages families to learn together while addressing the barrier of limited childminding availability. Both parents and children increase their language and literacy abilities through participating in this type of programming. Classes would be less formal and tailored for families with young children (aged 3 to 5). This model can, however, be adapted for older school-aged children as well. In similar ways as the housing and education domains, the curriculum would make use of *case studies* that support parents to participate in their children's development: reciting nursery rhymes to their children, reading simple developmental books with their child, singing songs with actions, etc.

EMPLOYMENT

The refugee women who participated in the focus group reported a settlement goal of supporting their family financially by securing employment. In this connection, the proposed English language program would be tailored to develop occupation-specific language programs. The focus and thrust of the program would be developing curriculum focused on high demand occupations that match the background of the learners. For example, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. developed and implemented a program called Project-based Language Training – for Retail Trades and Construction. These programs were in high demand and demonstrated excellent outcomes among the learners. For students with lower language proficiency, classes could focus on sectors such as food preparation and processing or hospitality cleaning services (focused on language such as: small talk, giving/receiving instructions, workplace safety, etc.).

HEALTH

As established among the focus group, having gender-specific classes to enable open dialogue and discussion is particularly important, but especially in the area of health and healthcare access. One female participant, for instance, mentioned that she had left a class because she did not feel comfortable communicating freely with men she did not know. Not only would the participants gain language competence to independently navigate the Canadian healthcare system, but would also build confidence in seeking help and benefiting from community supports available. Women refugees would be empowered to utilize public services and resources that would improve their health and ultimately their settlement and integration. Further, refugee women would have an opportunity to expand their networks by connecting with other women in class, hence strengthening their community integration. As such, gender-specific classes focused on educating women on language that could be used to independently navigate the healthcare system while focusing on health-related topics such as: mental health, healthy relationships, emotional health, and reproductive health are critically needed.

TRANSPORTATION

One unique feature of the responsive approach is the delivery method. In traditional LINC classes, students attend class at a fixed location and time at the service provider's classroom/office space. For the responsive integrated approach, we suggest 'the mobile teacher approach' — the teacher travels to the learners and teaches those learners in their own communities. The teacher and the learners would use common spaces in buildings, or community organisations such as mosques and churches that would eliminate travel time and costs. By removing the burden and financial stress of traveling to a distant location, refugee women would be comfortable to attend language training. Further, these learners might also be able to garner the support of neighbours or friends living in their building to provide short-term childcare while these mothers attend classes.

SPECIALIZED CLASSES

Having the ability to offer specialized classes to meet the emerging needs of learners would not only help to increase language proficiency, but it is envisaged that even literacy would improve tremendously through intensive reading and writing classes; vocabulary expansion and basic computer skills training in partnership with libraries.

CONCLUSION

The settlement goals of women refugees are significant and varied. English language learning remains a key factor in facilitating viable refugee settlement and integration into Canadian society. In the context of English language training needs, settlement goals and access barriers were identified by focus group participants in this study. It was evident that generic English language training programs such as the LINC program do not adequately cater for the unique circumstances confronting women refugees in BC, and by extension in Canada. It is therefore necessary to create customized English language training programs such as the Language Responsive Integrated Approach which combines a variety of approaches and settlement service streams to accelerate the settlement and integration of refugee women. The approach provides English language training while simultaneously addressing barriers which may prevent this group from meeting their English language training needs and settlement goals that this demographic are striving to attain. It is envisaged that such programs would accelerate the settlement and integration of refugee women in Canada.

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