SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: THREE PROMINENT ISSUES

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This article focuses on the initial integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in schools in Canada. 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.

Cet article porte sur les expériences initiales d'intégration des enfants réfugiés syriens dans les écoles du Canada. Notre recherche montre que les enfants réfugiés syriens ont non seulement du mal à se faire des amis avec les élèves locaux, mais qu'ils sont également victimes d'intimidation et de racisme constants qui affectent leur sentiment d'appartenance et de connexion.

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. Over half of those uprooted are children, who traumatized by war had to leave their home and live in camps and resettlement countries. The crisis in Syria has severely affected the education of these children, 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.

For these reasons we pursued a Social Science and Humanities Research Council grant to explore the initial integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in schools in a city in Western Canada, particularly in their first year. We conducted 5 focus groups with 12 Syrian refugee parents and 18 Syrian

refugee children between the age group of 10-14. The focus of our research was on Calgary, 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.

Schools can have a stabilizing effect for children by allowing them to make new interactions, relations and social participation, which are vital for not only making friends but also achieving academic success. Our research found that schools provided varying opportunities for refugee children to socialize and make friends. Our participants were excited and happy 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. Nonetheless, they faced many barriers affecting their social integration.

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. 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 et al., 2010, p. 6). Children should be able to bond and bridge with their new peers. However, many participants in our study identified the challenges refugee students face in making friends. Most refugee students lived in neighborhoods where there was a predominance of an Arabic speaking Syrian population that did not provide them with much opportunity to gain friends outside of their own community. In school, 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 others like themselves, there were many others who wanted an opportunity to interact with what they called "Canadian" students.

Thus, we argue that schools need to ensure that Syrian students, and other refugee children, 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. 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 et al., 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 just because they were new in the country. While all bullying can be distressing, race and religion based bullying is particularly disturbing. Prejudice among children against Arab Muslims has been identified in other studies as well. 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 the school. 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.

DISCRIMINATORY ATTITUDE OF TEACHERS

In terms of social integration, children were upset by the lack of support they got from teachers when they were subjected to discrimination and bullying. 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. 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. In our study children reported how teachers often lacked proper interventions when it came to addressing bullying or racist remarks. Students believed that teachers failed to take much action because they were refugees, hinting that discrimination extended beyond unconscious or subtle bias. 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.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

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. 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-emotional wellbeing. For teachers working with students in these contexts this poses an incredible tension as they struggle to create conditions in which students can participate in classrooms, and at the same time meet these students' particular social needs in ways that are not underpinned by deficit assumptions. Furthermore, teachers and school personnel should be geared towards developing interventions that would incorporate strategies that can reduce prejudice in school settings. 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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