THE EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN AT SCHOOL IN CANADA AND GERMANY: INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN, PARENTS & EDUCATORS

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Recently, there has been an increase in the number of Syrian refugee children in Canadian and German schools. The current study examined the challenges they face in adapting to a new learning environment. To do so, language and literacy measures in English and German were administered and interviews were conducted with children, parents and teachers. Overall, we found that majority language learning presented a significant challenge for refugees. As expected, children's performance on the English and German measures revealed significant gaps in proficiency relative to native speakers. Parents reported that lack of majority language proficiency was an impediment to involvement in their children's schooling. For teachers, limited proficiency was a barrier to establishing relationships with refugee students. Moreover, the educators reported having no professional development specific to refugee children. The practical implications of this study include the use of small-group instruction and in-class supports that bridge the home and school.

Récemment, on a constaté une augmentation du nombre d'enfants syriens réfugiés dans les écoles canadiennes et allemandes. L'étude actuelle a examiné les défis que représentent pour eux l'adaptation à un nouvel environnement d'apprentissage. Dans le cadre de ce projet, des évaluations linguistiques et d'alphabétisation en anglais et en allemand ont été effectuées et des entretiens ont été menés avec les enfants, les parents et les enseignants. Dans l'ensemble, nous avons constaté que l'apprentissage de la langue de la majorité constituait un défi important pour les réfugiés. Conformément aux attentes, les scores des enfants quant aux niveaux d'anglais et d'allemand ont révélé des lacunes importantes en termes de compétences par rapport aux locuteurs natifs. Les parents ont rapporté que le fait de manquer de compétences dans la langue de la majorité constituait un obstacle à leur implication dans la scolarité de leurs enfants. Pour les enseignants, une compétence linguistique limitée constituait un obstacle à la création de liens avec les élèves réfugiés. De plus, les éducateurs ont déclaré ne pas avoir reçu de formation professionnelle spécifique aux réalités des enfants réfugiés. Sur le plan pratique, cette étude préconise le recours à l'enseignement en petits groupes et au soutien en classe qui fait le lien entre la vie familiale et l'école.

INTRODUCTION

The civil war in Syria has led to the displacement of millions of individuals. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 5.6 million have been displaced externally (UNHCR 2019). Canada and Germany opened their doors to Syrian refugees in response to this crisis. By 2019, Canada had accepted more than 50,000 Syrian refugees (Government of Canada 2017), while more than 270,000 Syrian refugees had been resettled in Germany (BAMF 2019). Refugees must learn to adapt to life in the host country; for refugee children, this means adapting to the school environment. To understand the challenges they face, we interviewed Syrian refugee children and their parents from four families (8 children, aged 9-16 years; 7 parents) in Toronto, Canada and three families in Munich, Germany (6 children, aged 12-15 years; 8 parents). Language and literacy measures were also administered to the children in the language of the host nation (English or German). Principals (2 in Toronto; 1 in Munich) and teachers (4 in Toronto; 3 in Munich) of some of the children were also interviewed with an eye towards examining their experiences integrating at school.

Both countries have programs to support the language and literacy development of newcomer children. In Canada, the children involved in this study were enrolled in either an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Development (ELD) program upon arrival. Five of the eight child participants were still enrolled in these programs at the time of the study. The ESL program offers English-language support for immigrant children with age-appropriate schooling in their home country. Children initially spend the bulk of the school day in an ESL classroom with a dedicated ESL teacher. As their levels of English proficiency increase, ESL class time is decreased until students are fully transitioned into age-appropriate classrooms. Children may be placed in an ELD program instead of an ESL program if they had limited prior schooling. The ELD program is meant to provide intensive support for language and literacy development. Five of the eight children in Canada were placed in an ESL program upon arrival. The other three were placed in an ELD program.

Various models of publicly funded elementary school programming have been developed to meet the needs of newcomer children to Germany. In Bavaria, the state in which Munich is located, children enter a two-year transitional program that focuses on German language instruction conducted in small groups. Children are automatically enrolled into mainstream classes after two years in the transitional program. It is possible, however, for children in the primary grades to be immediately integrated into mainstream German classes. These children receive additional support through school- or home-based programs. The six children in our study had attended a two-year transition class and were enrolled in mainstream classes at the time of the interview. All of them had limited schooling in Syria.

CANADA

Performance on English standardized measures of language and literacy suggests that refugee children's English proficiency was much lower than that of the normative samples which consisted of native English-speaking children. This is expected considering that the refugee children had only been in Canada for three years. On the other hand, all the refugee children performed well in tests that did not require complex English language skills, such as processing speed and rote memorization. These findings were corroborated by teacher interviews. Teachers indicated that refugee children generally understood mathematical concepts and were able to solve numerical problems; however, they were hampered by limited English proficiency when asked to solve language-based mathematical problems or verbalize their thinking. Most of the refugee children voiced a strong interest in less academic subjects such as visual arts and physical education.

Some refugee children experienced difficulty in adapting to the routine of a school day. One mother reported that her son was not prepared for the length of the school day because he didn't attend school before arriving in Canada. The child was often exhausted after he came home from school.

> [...] he hesitates because the school day is long. He says that, 'I'll go from 9 to 3 or 4, it's a long day.' He gets bored. (Mother, via an interpreter)

Similarly, another child with no prior schooling found it difficult to balance her responsibilities at home with her work at school. At home, she supported her family by doing chores and supervising her younger siblings. These tasks became burdensome when she was attending school full-time.

The teachers we interviewed found that the Syrian refugee children were quieter than their peers in mainstream English classes. However, refugee children participated more fully in small group activities in their ESL classes. ESL teachers set up small groups as a means of facilitating student communication. These peer interactions enabled refugee children to bond with their classmates, all of whom were from immigrant or refugee families. One child recalled the friendships she made by attending these small-group classes.

> [...] because we always together, we have like too much class together. We have like three class together, yeah and we sit together, we share our food, everything together, we're like best friends.(Child, Age 16)

All educators understood that refugee parents, like all parents, want to see their children succeed at school. However, because of their low levels of English proficiency, refugee parents were less involved in their children's schooling than non-refugee parents. For instance, one teacher noted that refugee parents were less likely to ask about school transitions

(e.g., elementary to secondary school). Due to a lack of English proficiency, refugee parents had trouble communicating with teachers and could not extensively support the academic development of their children.

The language barrier also prevented the educators from developing a strong bond with refugee students and their parents. Although interpreters were available at school, they were not frequently used. Teachers only made use of interpreters for events such as parent-teacher interviews. As a result, they described their relationships with the refugee students as "weak". One home-room teacher spoke about the challenges she experienced in connecting with and motivating refugee students due to the language barrier.

> I'm big on that connection and that motivation so if you can't communicate with your teacher then it's that much harder for you to figure out how you're going to connect and therefore, how the teacher is going to help motivate you. And know what you're interested in and figure out what's going to pull you in. (Homeroom Teacher)

The educators reported that they had not received sufficient training to work with refugee children. For instance, the homeroom teachers indicated they were not previously aware of the migrant status of their students. However, they also pointed out that they might not have had time to attend training if it had been made available.

GERMANY

The results on standardized measures in Germany were similar to those in Canada. Performance on standardized measures of German language and literacy suggests that refugee children's German proficiency was much lower than that of the normative samples which consisted of native German-speaking children. Again, this is not surprising since these children had been living in Germany for only three years. Some of the refugee children performed well in tests that did not require complex German language skills, such as processing speed and rote memorization. Like in Canada, these findings were corroborated by teacher interviews:

> [...] there is a difference in subjects that can be learned by heart and those where you have to understand [...] concepts as in math. [...] There the child has more difficulties [...] than in rule learning or rote learning. (Teacher)

Teachers in Germany reported that Syrian refugee children were generally well-integrated in their classrooms. One child had even taken on a leadership role within his class. Syrian refugee children were described by their teachers as having positive social interactions with their peers; the children themselves expressed a love of school. However, the older students in particular participated little in class and were reluctant to engage in conversations with their teachers for fear that they would not understand the teacher or because they did not feel confident speaking German. Whereas educators reported that refugee students were highly motivated to learn, some observed that a few children had difficulty sustaining attention, struggling to concentrate on a task for an extended period of time and to carry it through to completion. The educators also mentioned that the refugee students preferred oral tasks to written ones. Like their counterparts in Canada, German refugee children particularly enjoyed non-academic activities such as physical education in school.

Not surprisingly, all refugee parents expressed a desire to see their children succeed. For instance, two mothers frequently contacted teachers to monitor their children's academic progress. However, refugee parents also mentioned it was difficult to find time to meet with educators because of conflicts with their work and childcare obligations. Parents expressed the belief that their German was not good enough to interact with teachers. Interpreters are available in schools but have to be booked weeks in advance. In addition, parents felt that they did not have the skills and knowledge to assist their children with their homework.

German educators were aware of the migrant status of their students. The German teachers all expressed concern that the standard curriculum was too difficult for their Syrian refugee students and that they would prefer that it be simplified. They also agreed that large class sizes in the mainstream German classes were an impediment to providing children with the individualized support they needed. Like their Canadian counterparts, the teachers felt they had not received adequate training to prepare them to teach these students nor did they feel they had formed strong relationships with them.

CONCLUSION

This study allowed us to glean important information about the educational experiences of Syrian refugee children in Canada and Germany. In both countries, majority language (English/German) learning continues to present a significant challenge for families. Standardized language and literacy assessments revealed significant gaps in majority language proficiency among the children relative to native speakers. While they may have developed a level of conversational fluency that permitted them to establish peer relationships, an important factor in school adaptation, their academic language skills have yet to reach a grade-appropriate level. This is to be expected: we know that school-based language skills (precise vocabulary, grammatically complex sentence structure, etc.) are slowly acquired, generally over a period of 5-10

years in a complete immersion setting (Cummins, 2008). In the case of Syrian refugee children, the challenge of acquiring academic language may be compounded by the effect of interrupted schooling, particularly among the older children. Without a solid home language base on which to build second language skill, these children may struggle to experience success in school. Yet teachers in Canada and Germany reported that they did not receive training prior to receiving refugee children in their classrooms. Professional development to prepare teachers to meet the specific learning needs of refugee children is badly needed in both countries.

Lack of majority language proficiency is mentioned in parent and teacher interviews in both Canada and Germany as an impediment to parent involvement in their children's learning and a barrier to establishing relationships. It is important, therefore, to bridge the language divide. Based on these findings, a number of recommendations can be made. First, schools are encouraged to make more frequent use of interpreter services. However, this may not always be feasible due to resource limitations. In these situations, schools might recruit parents who are more settled in the community to act as cultural brokers for newcomer families of an ethnic and linguistic background similar to their own. Moreover, educators can utilize a number of strategies to further the academic development of refugee students at school. For instance, teachers can make use of visuals and demonstrations to promote comprehension of academic language among students (Cummins, 2018). Teachers can also support language development in refugee students by encouraging them to use both their home language and the majority language on school assignments and tasks. Students who are given permission to use both languages will feel more motivated to engage with their schoolwork (Cummins, 2018). Schools are also encouraged to provide students with opportunities to further develop language and literacy skills in their first language (Cummins, 2018). This is especially important for students who did not have extensive schooling before arriving in the host country. Furthermore, refugee children should be instructed in small groups whenever possible. This allows the children to develop stronger ties with their peers and in turn, encourages the children to participate in the larger school setting.