Refugee Resettlement Policy

School Supports for Youth

CYR RC
The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition

Contents

Executive summary

Interventions that build bridges between educators and other supports within a community are needed to help children and youth succeed at school. A whole-community approach includes leveraging community support to bridge communication gaps between schools and families, supporting home language maintenance, and building greater diversity and representation in school staff and educators.

This policy brief summarizes the conversation from an episode of CYRRC's podcast, *The Refuge*, between Dr. Andrea MacLeod - professor in Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Alberta; Kathleen Vyrauen - co-chair of the Newcomer Education Coalition and Project Manager with Immigration Partnership Winnipeg; and Jayesh Maniar - English as an Additional Language and Newcomer Education Consultant for the government of Manitoba on how to improve school supports for newcomer children and youth.

Introduction

Children and youth who come to Canada as refugees have often experienced adversity, such as interrupted schooling, exposure to violence, separation from family, extended stays in refugee camps, and poverty (Hadfield et al., 2017). They have experienced forced migration; many have experienced war and conflict, trauma, loss, and grief. These experiences can lead them to act out or withdraw, which has been identified by teachers as a key challenge in the classroom (Jowett et al., 2020). When students have experienced interrupted formal education, this also creates unique language, academic, and literacy learning needs (Jowett et al., 2020).

Post-migration experiences, such as the struggles of acculturation to a new society and school system, can also impact refugee children's mental health and wellbeing, which then effect their success in school (Hadfield et al., 2017; Jowett et al., 2020). Older youth can face additional challenges, such as pressure to earn an income and translate for their families, which affects their academic efforts (Jowett et al., 2020). At school, experiences of discrimination can negatively impact newcomer children and youth's academic persistence (Nakhaie et al., 2022). Adverse experiences can also impact children's ability to learn the majority language and succeed at school, making it crucial that children are able to access supports for their psychosocial and language development (Paradis et al., 2022).

School's modes of communication with newcomer families can pose another significant barrier to children and youth's success at school. Newcomer youth and their families report experiences of miscommunication and disappointment with the Canadian school system, specifically around age eligibility for high school or credit requirements for post-secondary education (Jowett et al., 2020). Experiencing a lack of support, learning plateaus, and limited opportunities due to these communications is associated with youth dropping out, not pursuing higher education, developing mental health issues, and gang involvement (Jowett et al., 2020).

What school supports are needed?

A whole-community approach

With a whole-school approach, all staff, not just those specifically responsible for English as an Additional Language (EAL) programming, are orientated towards the specific needs of children and youth with refugee experience. This requires professional training for all teachers and staff in language and literacy instruction and trauma-informed practices (Jowett et al., 2022), as well as support through policies and funding (Cole et al., 20013).

A whole-community approach also extends communication and collaboration through the community more broadly to support children and youth most effectively. Adverse experiences – such as trauma, interrupted schooling, and discrimination – create complex issues for children and youth's integration and success in school which require multi-level partnerships between schools, different levels and departments of government, service providers, ethnocultural communities, and parents and families (Jowett et al., 2020).

🔍 **Example: Reviving Hope and Home (RHH) for High-risk Refugee Mothers Program**

In partnership with Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC), the Mothers Matter Centre (MMC) piloted the Reviving Hope and Home (RHH) for High-risk Refugee Mothers program as a way to better reach Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) mothers participating in the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) program. To support the school-readiness of children 3-5 years old and the ongoing settlement challenges of GAR families, RHH offered more flexibility in HIPPY delivery by home visitors, a pool of financial resources for RHH families, an assigned community navigator to facilitate the settlement support system, and a portable device for each family to access settlement resources and increase their digital literacy. The individually-tailored support from home visitors and community navigators, who were themselves immigrant mothers, was key in providing the wrap-around support for families that ensured their children had all the pieces to succeed at school.

Improving communication with families

Parents with refugee experience support their children's education, but language barriers, cultural differences in how education is delivered, and post-migration stressors can prevent parents from becoming involved in their children's learning to the degree that is expected in Canada (Jowett et al., 2020; MacLeod et al., 2020a; 2020b). Teachers and administrators need to work with families with refugee backgrounds – which can involve translating documents that are sent home or using plain language which is easy to understand, providing interpretation and/or childcare during parent-teacher interviews, and recognizing that parents have themselves been through trauma and are adjusting to a new culture while learning a new language. Cultural brokers who are trusted members of the community, can be even more effective. These individuals can translate not only the language, but also the way the school system works and the expectations involved. To connect with parents, it is necessary to seek partnerships with community organizations and ethnocultural community groups who are able to provide that cultural bridge.

Example: Winnipeg School Division – Intercultural Support Workers

Intercultural support workers are members of the Winnipeg School Division's Newcomer Service team who provide contextual, informational, and cultural support to students, parents, and schools. They receive formal interpretation training and provide support through home visits, helping parents understand the school system, understanding the concerns and cultural perspectives of parents, assisting with parent-teacher conferences and counselling, and referring students and parents to services. However, they are only present in a few schools of one division.

"[H]ow many other parents would you be able to reach if you had something as simple as this, this connector that was able to bridge the gap between a formal system and an ethnocultural community"

- Kathleen Vyrauen

Valuing home language

Research has shown that children's first language development can positively affect their second language learning (Cummis, 2000; MacLeod et al., 2020b). Furthermore, supporting and valuing the first language can help children succeed at school, ease acculturation stress, promote a sense of belonging and bolster children's confidence (MacLeod et al., 2020b; Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Teachers can play a key role in making children and parents feel like their home language is valued by encouraging students to speak in their home language and by translating assignments into their home language.

Example: The StimuLER Program

StimuLER is a community-based program to support children with refugee experience in the development of their first language and the learning of their second language, be it English or French (the name, StimuLER, reflects the French verb "to stimulate" and integrates a French acronym for the language of refugee children). StimuLER builds on first language knowledge to introduce the language of schooling and collaborates with school personnel, community organizations, and parents. This program has helped children become more confident speaking (MacLeod et al., 2020a) and involves parents in a learning environment where they can interact and ask questions about the school system without language barriers (MacLeod et al., 2020b).

Representation in schools

> *"[W]e hear it from students firsthand that they want to feel that connection to their teacher. They want to see themselves represented. They feel like they'll be more comfortable to express if they have a need if it was somebody that knows what they're going through"*
>
> **- Kathleen Vyrauen**

Newcomer youth's educational success depends on a school environment that encourages diversity and supportive teachers (Nakhaie et al., 2022). Having ethnoculturally diverse leadership, staff, and teachers is key to ensuring that all students feel a sense of belonging at school, which is fundamental for children's learning (Jowett et al., 2020). Research shows that representation in schools matters; one way to achieve this diversity is by hiring internationally trained teachers.

Example: Hiring Internationally Trained Teachers

A superintendent in Winnipeg allocated funds to hire ten internationally trained teachers as interns at half salary. These teachers were paired up with another teacher and spent a year learning about the school system in Canada. The following year, these 10 teachers were given priority in hiring. This program provided peer mentorship opportunities for internationally trained teachers, gave them experience in a Canadian classroom, provided opportunities for full-time employment, and ensured greater representation in those classrooms.

Example: The Newcomer Education Coalition's State of Equity in Education Report

The Newcomer Education Coalition's State of Equity in Education Report promotes evidence-based strategies for the development and implementation of equity-based education programs and policies in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The strategies are based on a survey of the six school divisions in the city of Winnipeg and the faculties of education at universities of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Saint-Boniface, and Brandon. Their report is updated each with with data updates on employment equity and student representation.

Policy Recommendations

> Partner with community organizations, ethnocultural communities, and service provider organizations that are helping families with refugee experience. Allow community into the classroom to provide support and cultural bridging (Jowett et al., 2020).

> > An initial step that can be easily taken is to allocate a budget for supplementing criminal records checks for community members who want to volunteer in classrooms, as the fee associated with these checks can be a barrier.

> > Meaningful partnerships with community requires an investment in community-based supports.

> Invest in professional development for all staff in trauma-informed and culturally informed practice, as well as language and literacy training (Jowett et al., 2020).

> Value the home language and the language of school equally and implement programs that help children, youth, and parents feel like their home language is an asset.

> Collect data on the diversity of teachers, administrators, school boards, and school trustees in order to measure and monitor diversity and representation within the school system.

> > In Manitoba, the Newcomer Education Coalition's State of Equity and Education Report is a good resource.

> Include training in English as an Additional Language (EAL) with newcomer students and families for Bachelor of Education students.

> Provide greater opportunities and recognition for internationally trained educators.

> Understand that layers of support will be needed for newcomer families, such that more services are needed at the beginning which can be scaled back as families settle. Provide funding for these initial services with the understanding that not all families will need all services all the time, but a higher degree of initial support for higher-need families makes a greater difference (Masahiro & Ohta, 2021).

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