

PURE Award Final Report

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INTRODUCTION

Alberta Education Annual Report for 2015-2016 indicates an enrolment of 1,250 resettled students with refugee experiences into Alberta schools (Government of Alberta, 2016). Children from refugee backgrounds experience significant adversity in their integration in Canadian society. The majority of the refugee children (70%) speak neither of Canada's official languages when they arrive in the country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). Further, they have little to no understanding of Canadian cultural norms and scholastic expectations (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Helmer & Eddy, 2003). Lastly, these youth have experienced traumatic experiences, and often suffer from extensive pre-settlement and post-settlement trauma (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016).

This report presents the results of a qualitative study that explored multiple facets of the educational experience of youth from refugee backgrounds participating in specialized programming within the Calgary, Alberta area. In particular, this article presents data and discussion regarding some of the interwoven challenges encountered by youth, families, teachers, and administration, as articulated and analysed from the interview data. This study confirms that improvements are needed in areas such as teaching strategies, teacher training, school inclusive practices, and systematic utilization of community services. Teachers also expressed the need to combat ongoing prejudice at the peer, teacher, and administrative level.

In what follows, I share the overall process underwent to come to these conclusions and recommendations and then focus primarily on the results from the thematically analysed data. Importantly, the data was thematised after a preliminary literature review was conducted (which also shaped the discussions in the interviews), however, for the sake of space in this report I animate what emerged in the data. All names, in the attributions, have been changed to pseudonyms selected by me (the researcher) as requested by the participants in the study.

PROCESS

The goal of this study was to understand the ways teachers are working with refugee youth in Calgary area schools. This was explored through the details of practices and observations performed by teachers who worked within classrooms with a high percentage of refugee students. Therefore, this thesis was qualitative, including a group interview of four participants as well as an individual interview totalling five participants in this study, all of whom participate in Calgary-area schools in some capacity with refugee youth.

Following ethics approval from the University of Calgary, participants were recruited via snowball email distribution. The five teachers who agreed and were able to participate were interviewed. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcriptions were then thematically coded through a series of reading and analysing to determine themes and subthemes. Copies of the final report were then provided to each of the participants to enable them to respond to the data, either to clarify misunderstandings or to add detail. Credibility and validity was ensured through frequent reference back to the original data, research questions, and literature review results.

RESULTS

All five teachers interviewed agreed that the support of refugee youth depended on a complex, multi-tiered system of supports that stemmed from: youth and their families; classroom techniques; the beliefs and knowledge of teachers; and a supportive and knowledgeable administration. Within these broad categories, three themes of: (1) classroom management, (2) discrimination, and (3) community resources were raised frequently, and will be discussed in depth as they relate to the student, teacher, and systemic levels.

Classroom Management. Students face a number of challenges that can make classroom management challenging, including both executive functioning and emotional dysregulation responses (Taylor); poor English language skills (Morgan) and a lack of or

different prior schooling (Taylor). As a result of this, refugee youth face profound dislocation (Kelly).

The five teachers interviewed agree that a multipronged classroom approach requires creating classroom culture, incorporating Trauma Informed Practices (TIPs), creating a language of feelings, teaching ELL techniques, and giving them a sense of purpose and engagement with the larger community.

Teachers themselves often struggle with classroom management of refugee students. The first barrier is understanding TIPs and the experiences of refugee youth (Morgan). A second barrier of effective teaching of refugee students is the secondary trauma that teachers themselves can develop while working with this challenging population (Taylor). An insulating factor to enable teachers to provide effective classroom management to refugee students with trauma is mutual support, allowing teachers to support each other (Taylor).

The families of refugee students often struggle with the same issues of acculturation and trauma that their youth do. Families are often struggling with post-settlement challenges, including financial and translation issues (Sam), as well as struggles within the school system itself (Jamie). Building individual relationships between teacher and parent, through both formal and informal avenues, is vital for student success. By combining strengths and knowledge, teachers and families can create an environment where students can thrive.

On the systemic level, classroom management can be enabled through administrative understanding of TIPs on an individual and group level, as well administrative support of proper staffing, training, and decisions.

Discrimination. When asked if discrimination against refugee students was present in the school environment, all teachers interviewed agreed that it played a role within the lives of these students. Their discussion of it resulted in three sources of discrimination: the student

level, the teacher level, and the administrative level. On the student level, discrimination came from both mainstream students (Taylor) and acculturated immigrant students (Jamie).

By taking a leadership role in the integration of students, teachers can facilitate this relationship building and decrease racialization and discrimination through three ways. The first is informal impromptu interventions (Kelly). The second is formal classroom management and project-based methods (Sam). The third is utilizing optional or extracurricular activities to break down barriers (Taylor).

Perhaps more concerning is the acknowledged prejudice at the teacher level. As a consequence, very few teachers had both the capacity and the interest in trying to bridge the gap between refugee and mainstream students (Jamie), or building relationships between teacher and refugee student (Kelly). All participants agreed that the solution was to decrease fear and ignorance, and increase understanding. Through understanding, prejudice will lessen and opportunities for connection will increase.

On a systemic level, ultimately, just as students take their cues from teachers, teachers take their cues from administration. Indeed, “it starts with the teachers and administration, and students see and hear it, it gives permission to perpetuate it” (Jamie).

Community Resources. Refugee students have a deep need for a variety of community resources. They often struggle with depression, ADD, trauma, behavioral issues, gang affiliation, language support, mental health, physical health, and family problems which need experts in order to treat or resolve. Getting family and student buy-in to access these services can take months or years. In addition, services for these students come in a bewildering amount of forms and agencies. Accurate, consistent translation services are particularly challenging. Navigating these services is often challenging to the extreme for ELL students and families.

Classrooms can enable access to these services by normalizing and facilitating access through field trips and classroom culture.

The plethora of community services is overwhelming for teachers, as each service requires forms and advocating to accomplish. In order to facilitate these services for their students, teachers must cultivate relationships, both with more senior teachers, and with community service liaisons. Lack of administrative support for the extra time and knowledge that service utilization takes makes optimal utilization far more unlikely.

As a consequence of this research, I recommend the following implications for future practice: (1) programs designed for refugee youth should include more volunteering and work experience for the youth to enable future employment; (2) teacher training at the post-secondary and professional level should be expanded to include diversity, basic ELL literacy, and TIPs; (3) education and facilitation should be increased on the administrative level; and (4) community services should be better coordinated to enable more effective utilization.

KNOWLEDGE GAINED

I gained valuable experience in vital research and educational skills through this project. Under supervision, I learned how to navigate the University of Calgary ethics board. I learned how to analyze the resulting data and reach useful and specific conclusions that have clear implications for further research and implementation. Moving forward, I will gain the experience of both publishing and presenting my results to my peers and practicing teachers. From an educator standpoint, this project gave me extensive knowledge regarding effective trauma--informed teaching, served to strengthen my own knowledge and practice, and enabled me to better support fellow teachers. This project supported my work in the classroom with diverse students from a variety of backgrounds. Further, it allowed me to network and gain valuable contacts among practicing teachers, as well as educational researchers who I can turn to for support.

References

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