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Support for refugee students in a Newfoundland high school: merits and ramifications

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Abstract

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador has seen a 35% increase of newcomers over the past decade. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015-2016, the province more than doubled its refugee intake in 2016-2017. Most of the refugees have been resettled in the provincial capital city, St. John's, a relatively small urban centre. As a result, the local school system experienced unprecedented challenges in providing support to refugee students. This paper reports a case study which aimed to identify the commendable practices that were available to refugee students in one high school in St. John's to help them succeed at school and integrate into community; analyze how the tailored policies and programs were implemented in the school; and discuss the impacts and ramifications of having only one 'model' high school for refugee students in the city. Themes discussed include the benefits of a whole-school healthy ecosystem, the dilemma of centralizing the support specialized for refugee students in one high school, and schools as a hub for refugee students with mental health difficulties. Implications for multicultural educational policies and programs are discussed.

Keywords: newcomer support, high school, refugee students, mental health, whole-school healthy ecosystem

Introduction

Conflicts and persecution around the world affect societies not only in those regions but far beyond. At the end of 2018, 70.8 million people have been involved in forced migration, and 30 million of them are refugees (United Nations, 2019). As an important member of the United Nations humanitarian resettlement efforts, Canada has received an unprecedented number of refugees, many of whom are under the age of 18. Research has shown that refugee youth are often faced with numerous obstacles to integrating into Canadian society such as language barriers, educational gaps, social exclusion, and financial constraints (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011). Moreover, refugees who settle in Canada's smaller centres often experience additional challenges (Li, 2012; Li, Doyle, Lymburner, and Ghadi, 2015). In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the number of newcomers has been steadily on the rise, with more than a 35% increase rate over the past decade compared to the previous one. Most of these newcomers settle in the province's capital city, St. John's, a relatively small urban centre (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). In response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015-2016, the province more than doubled its refugee intake in 2016-2017. As a result, the local school system experienced an unprecedented challenge in providing support to refugee students, which we investigated in our three-year project.

Existing research-based literature highlighted the gaps and issues in facilitating the integration of refugee students, such as language and social challenges (Li & Grineva, 2016), parental support issues (Li *et al.*, 2015), education and employment opportunities (Li and Que, 2016), and racial discrimination (Baker, 2012). Over the years, progress has been made to improve programs and services for refugee students in the province, but a positive report on the progress is lacking. This paper reports a case study in which we sought to 1) identify commendable practices of support refugee students in a high school in St. John's; 2) analyze how the tailored policies and programs are implemented in the school; and 3) discuss the impacts and ramifications of having only one 'model' high school for refugee students in the city. We aim to provide educational policymakers and educators with an overview of the programs and services that positively impact refugee students in small centres while identifying some of the issues that need further attention.

Theoretical and Policy Frameworks

Our study was informed by two important frameworks: the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) as a theoretical framework, and the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) framework (Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health [JCSH], 2016) as the policy framework. The former conceptualizes a set of nested systems, ranging from the 'micro' to the 'macro' that influences human development. These systems include the microsystem (i.e., interpersonal relationships), mesosystem (i.e., connections among microsystems), exosystem (e.g., community agencies and governmental organizations), macrosystem (i.e., culture and societal norms), and the chronosystem (i.e., environmental changes over time). The bioecological model postulates "development is a function of the forces emanating from multiple settings and from the relations between these settings" (Bronfenbrenner, 1999, p.17). Given the interconnectedness of the systems, the model allows for the

examination of the school within the greater context of refugee students' needs, circumstances, and its surrounding environments.

While looking into the specific school system, we appreciate the insights of the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) framework which "is an internationally recognized approach to supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated and holistic way" (JCSH, 2016, What is Comprehensive School Health section, para. 1). The CSH framework underlines the interdependence of students' physical and emotional health and academic achievement, emphasizing that "healthy students are better learners, and better-educated individuals are healthier" (JCSH, 2016, What is Comprehensive School Health section, para. 5). Further, the CSH framework asserts that schools play a vital role in helping students improve their academic achievement and promote their health and well-being. The CSH Framework consists of schools' efforts in four pillars: social and physical environment (e.g., positive and caring learning environments); teaching and learning (e.g., classroom discussion on health guided by school healthy policies); healthy school policy (e.g., policies and practices that promote student's health and build a welcoming school environment); and partnerships and services (e.g., collaboration between schools and health authorities and other community organizations) (Healthy Schools BC, 2013). "When actions in all four components are harmonized, students are supported to realize their full potential as learners - and as healthy, productive members of society" (JCSH, 2016, What is Comprehensive School Health section, para. 4).

While the former framework focuses on human development and the latter highlights student well-being, both guided us to explore the integration of newcomer students from refugee backgrounds in our school system comprehensively, positioning them as members within bigger socio-cultural contexts and the local systems, with personal histories and challenges all nested.

Literature Review

Determinants of mental health problems suffered by refugee youth

Resettled refugee youth suffered significant mental health problems, which primarily resulted from pre-migration traumatic experiences and post-migration discrimination (Beiser and Hou, 2016; Walker and Zuberi, 2019). Consequently, mental health problems gave rise to higher levels of emotional problems and aggressive behaviour among refugee youth (Beiser and Hou, 2016). Jorden, Matheson, and Anisman (2009) further classified trauma as collective trauma, such as warfare exposure, life in refugee camps, and ethnic discrimination, and personal trauma, such as the death of loved ones and accidents. In their study of Somali refugees in Ottawa, Canada, Jorden et al. (2009) found that collective traumatic experiences were only related to poorer integration into the host society; however, personal traumatic experiences were more likely to result in depression among Somali refugees. Persson and Rousseau's study (2012) of 111 migrant and refugee adolescents in Montreal also found that refugee youth who had experienced personal trauma such as persecution and violence prior to resettlement were liable to be suffering from serious emotional problems. Guruge and Butt (2015) emphasized that the age at which refugee youth experienced the trauma should be considered because the impact of collective trauma on refugee youth varies according to age.

Discrimination is significantly associated with post-traumatic stress and depression among refugee youth (D'Abreu, Castro-Olivo, and Ura, 2019). Shakya et al.'s (2010) study revealed that refugee youth are likely to experience discrimination from teachers, administrators, and their peers in school and face discrimination in community, which "can have adverse impacts on youths' sense of identity and well-being and can make schools an alienating and even unsafe space" (p. 73). Female refugee youth are more likely to suffer discrimination and exhibit depressive symptoms because of their physical-cultural distinctions such as wearing a hijab (Ellis et al., 2010). Further, perceived discrimination contributes to refugee youth's maladaptation to school (Buchanan, Abu-Rayya, Kashima, Paxton, and Sam, 2018). Shakya et al. (2010) concluded that discrimination is one of the barriers that prevent refugee youth from achieving their educational aspirations.

There are few counselling services for refugees after their arrival in Canada to proactively help them deal with trauma (Kanu, 2008). Unfortunately, mental health services are rarely seen in school, which is due to the ignorance of some of the teachers and administrators on refugee youth's pre-immigration traumatic experience and its impact on their integration into Canadian society (Stewart, 2012). Some principals and teachers who participated in Kanu's study (2008) recognized the need for counselling services for refugee students and called for in-school psychosocial counselling programs.

Academic challenges faced by refugee youth

Previous studies revealed that resettled refugee youth are likely to have significant educational gaps due to their limited or interrupted prior schooling (Kanu, 2008; Guo, Maitra, and Guo, 2019; Li and Grineva, 2016; Li, Que, and Power, 2017). The provision of catch-up classes, accelerated learning programs, language courses, and other forms of specialized programs are some of the ways to help refugee students fill their gaps in education (Anselme & Hands, 2010). However, these specialized programs are less likely to adequately meet the needs of refugee students (Li and Que, 2018; Schroeter & James, 2015). For instance, a study of refugee students in elementary and secondary schools in a smaller Canadian city found that the ESL program was understaffed and the ESL student-teacher ratio in one high school was as high as 45:1 (Li and Que, 2018). In addition, Kanu (2008) found that refugee students who were placed in ESL classes tended to feel isolated from students in mainstream classes because they had few chances to interact with their Canadian-born peers. Further, Ferede (2010) found that refugee students are more likely to be enrolled in basic education tracks from which they could not earn the credits for entrance to colleges and universities. Schroeter and James (2015) warned that there is a tendency to consider refugee youth as students who are not interested in pursuing higher education, and the specialized program would make the younger generation of refugee youth follow their ancestors' trend of taking low-skill jobs, which would result in "further social exclusion or marginalization" (p. 36).

Assets and strengths of refugee youth

While the challenges faced by refugee youth in the host country were well documented, the assets and strengths of this group of youth were accentuated in a number of studies. For instance, the bilingualism or multilingualism of many refugee youth can positively influence their cognitive development (Bigelow,

Vanek, King, & Abdi, 2017). Balancing between home culture and host culture can promote self-awareness and flexibility in problem-solving (Morland, 2007). In addition, as Sersli, Salazar, and Lozano (2010) emphasized, many refugee youth were determined to take advantage of the peaceful environment in Canada to achieve success in life by focusing on education. A study by Halcón et al. (2004) on trauma and coping of Somali and Oromo refugee youth in the United States showed that many of these refugee youth were coping well after resettlement as they experienced low levels of social, psychological, and physical problems, and the researchers highlighted that refugee youth were likely to gain strengths through surviving wars and torture and the resettlement process. Easter and Refki (2004) also emphasized that successfully overcoming immigration-related challenges can empower immigrant and refugee youth.

Methods and Data Sources

This study employed a qualitative single-case design (Yin, 2014). Case studies are suited to gaining an in-depth understanding of a case by collecting data from multiple sources and perspectives (Creswell, 2008). This case study is conducted in a high school in St. John's, Newfoundland. We chose this school because it is renowned for its comprehensive support and services for newcomer students from refugee backgrounds. Using semi-structured interviews, we collected data from 20 newcomer students, three newcomer parents, three Canadian students, six educators and community supporting staff, and one officer from local educational authorities. All interviews were audiotaped and lasted approximately one hour. We do not provide further information about the participants for the purposes of anonymity. In a small centre, newcomer students in a certain cohort and individuals involved in newcomer support can be easily identifiable.

A constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data. This inductive data analysis approach "can and is commonly used with any narrative or textual data" (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 594). We conducted data analysis simultaneously with data collection through four steps. First, we read the first interview transcript to identify the main points. Next, we read and coded the second interview transcript with reference to the first list of main points. Then, we compared the two lists and merged them into one master list of themes. Last, the master list was revised while coding the rest of the interview transcripts. Triangulation by collecting data from different groups of people with different perspectives, and thick description by presenting findings with quotes from the participants were employed to increase the credibility of the findings.

Results and Discussion

A whole-school healthy ecosystem

The findings of this study identified numerous commendable practices that have contributed to the development of a whole-school healthy ecosystem. Within the school, specialized academic support programs were developed to help refugee students fill their educational gaps and improve their language, counselling services were made available to refugee students to help them navigate through high school, and efforts were made to celebrate diverse cultures and foster a welcoming environment.

Furthermore, a network of external partnerships ensured that refugee students were provided with access to recreation, extra guidance and academic support, and medical services.

According to the school's staff, the school began to adopt a comprehensive approach from the realization that the standard curriculum was not meeting the needs of the refugee students. Students would routinely "meet with frustration and increased anxiety" when placed in mainstream classes. This anxiety led to school disengagement and poor attendance amongst refugee students. In response, the school added extra English as a second language (ESL) classes, introductory technology classes for students with limited exposure to technology prior to resettlement, and the Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) program. The LEARN program was designed to improve the literacy, numeracy, and content knowledge of refugee students who have significant educational gaps, and acts as a bridge to their inclusion in mainstream classes. One teacher likened the LEARN program to "a godsend" for the refugee students "because now they feel they are meeting with success." An afterschool homework program was also offered to refugee students to provide extra academic help. One ESL teacher stated, "anybody who needs help with a test coming up, it's there for them when they need it." In addition, one guidance counsellor was working closely with refugee students, helping them improve academic performance, supporting personal development, and promoting mental health and wellbeing.

The school not only focused on addressing the educational needs of refugee students but also paid attention to the celebration of its diversity. The school has created an International Club, with diversity celebration being one of its mandates. The club evolved from a peer-mentoring and orientation program that was initiated by several local Canadian students who wished to help new Canadians in school. According to one of the school counsellors who has been involved in this transition, the peer-mentoring and orientation program "would match a local student with a newcomer in a couple of days of orientation to shadow them for the day, meet them during their downtime – like before school, at lunch, after school, and even help them find the bus." Since a settlement worker was then housed in their school to bridge the gap between community and school, the program was morphed into the International Club focusing on "celebrating our diversity as a school and sharing some cultural awareness activities with the entire population of the school." The club met once a week to provide students with a safe place to socialize. It also held special events. For example, it celebrated different festivals throughout the year. At the time of our investigation, it was organizing a Diversity Assembly. As the school counsellor stated, the "big role" of the assembly was about "celebrating the uniqueness of our school that we are multicultural and we are really proud of that." The LEARN teacher added, "the Diversity Assembly, as a way to celebrate the diversity in school, has been recognized by people from government and the media. Students love it, and it's a good way to showcase the different groups we have here at school." In addition, the International Club organized general cultural awareness activities. For example, the school counsellor noted,

"At the beginning of the school year, we'll get a list of the new students that are attending, and we'll have a social where we invite the new Canadians, the new

students, and we welcome them and make them feel they're wanted and special, and that they have something to give to our school."

Furthermore, the school established a policy to reserve a minimum of two seats for refugee students on the student council to ensure they have a voice within their school. One refugee student who was a member on the student council stated that joining the student council was her favourite thing about the school. She said, "Members sitting on the student council definitely have creative minds. We put our ideas together. We are all like a big family in school."

The school has additionally established relationships with community-based agencies to further support the integration and development of its refugee students. For example, the school collaborated with the City of St. John's and the Association for New Canadians (ANC) to help students with financial need to avail of the city's Recreation Experiences and Leisure (REAL) program, which provided financial assistance for youth to partake in extracurricular activities outside of the school. A full-time settlement worker from the ANC was located at the school to provide refugee students with guidance on academic and non-academic issues. Specifically, the settlement worker helped refugee students become familiar with the Canadian school system, register for school, schedule academic assessments, select courses, and make post-secondary plans. The settlement worker also helped refugee students schedule medical and dental appointments, find a part-time job, and communicate with the school about any particular needs or circumstances that might impact the students' development. One teacher said,

"ANC provides the school with an invaluable resource that we wouldn't be able to function without in our school. We would lose them (refugee students) in the cracks. Bridging that gap between community and school is essential."

In addition, the LEARN teacher worked with nurses in the health system to make sure that refugee students were getting their vaccinations.

In a nutshell, the refugee students at this high school were surrounded by a combination of microsystems (i.e., close relationships with the ESL teachers, the LEARN teacher, and the guidance counsellor). These educators rendered comprehensive support to refugee students, helping them bridge their education gaps, improve their English, make academic and personal decisions, and build better mental health. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested, microsystems are the most important environmental system in human development. The refugee students, being in the centre of these microsystems, are more likely to succeed at school. In addition, the school and especially these specialized educators collaborated with the exosystems of community-based organizations to help refugee students integrate into the community, navigate the school system, and prevent diseases. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), exosystems have important indirect influences on individuals. As a result, the development of refugee students is further ensured by receiving support from communities outside of school.

The one and only school as a dilemma

The whole-school healthy system developed at the school where we conducted the investigation can be viewed by and large as a success story. The newcomer students had access to specialized

academic programs, counselling services, and a culturally diverse learning environment. They referred to their ESL class as “a family” and appreciated the multicultural nature of the school that afforded them the opportunity to make friends with those who could relate to their circumstances. Events such as the Diversity Assembly brought out the pride in the newcomer students of their own cultural heritage and their love for their home countries despite the current disturbing situation, as well as their deep appreciation of the safe and welcoming Canadian society. It also exposed the Canadian-born students to the diverse cultures of the world and enhanced their understanding of cultural diversity. The centralization of services also allowed close collaboration between the school’s teachers, specialists, counsellors, and community-based support agencies, enabling them to consult with each other on a regular basis “to make sure that the students have all of the resources they need to succeed in school.” Several participants affirmed the importance of having a settlement worker stationed in the school and noted that this would not be possible if the newcomer students were scattered across the different high schools in the area.

However, having only one school with such comprehensive support also had its drawbacks. One dilemma created from the “one and only” model revolved around the capacity of resources. Since all eligible refugee students were channelled to this school, the number of students availing of the services kept increasing. Without an increase in qualified personnel, resources have been stretched. While students praised the work of their teachers and the guidance counsellor, they often had to wait long periods of time for an appointment and expressed the need for more specialized classes. The school staff also commented on the shortage of resources. Although they believed that the current programs and services were excellent in design, they acknowledged the school’s growing needs for more of the same.

Having only one school to service a large geographical area also created accessibility problems. For instance, it required those living outside the school-bus zone to commute long distances to and from school using an inefficient public transportation service, which placed time constraints and financial burdens upon the students and their families. Some students spent almost two hours on each trip due to long intervals of buses and long waits at the transfer station. What bothered the students most was the bus fare, which was not provided to them free of charge. A monthly pass of the Metrobus is 53 dollars for children and 78 dollars for adults. It may not seem a lot for people with income. However, for these refugee families, it was a big expense that could have been saved for food or clothes. It was particularly a heavy burden for families with more than one child. Many teachers noted the issues around school attendance that could be remedied if adequate transportation was provided. Some refugee students simply lived too far to consider attending school an option and were essentially denied access to the support they needed. The school staff felt that full-time ESL classes and the LEARN program should be expanded to other schools to ensure that all students have access to the resources they need. However, such programs were not adopted by other schools around which a significant number of refugee families lived. ESL teachers are itinerant based in these schools, meaning that students are only able to receive ESL support two to four instructional hours per seven-day cycle. In terms of providing the LEARN program, the school district considered it an individual school’s choice.

However, schools were not in a position to hire qualified LEARN teachers and cover the cost incurred. Since other schools did not receive refugee students through official channels, they were not motivated to establish such a program.

Channelling refugee students into one school, while providing students in this school with a safe and welcoming place where ‘everybody can find somewhere to fit in,’ did not help with understanding cultural diversity in other schools in the neighbourhoods of refugee students’ residence. A large number of refugee families were relocated to areas where local students attend nearby schools. The presence of the newcomer youth in the neighbourhood but lack of their presence in the school might create a sense of cultural segregation and deprive the youth of both local and refugee backgrounds in the same neighbourhood of opportunities to interact with one another. Since many refugee students take part time jobs, school is the best, if not only, place for them to socialize with local youth of their age. Local students also miss the opportunity to observe, experience, and learn other cultures from the newcomer students. Even in the one and only high school with the most diverse student population, refugee students experienced difficulties making friends with Canadian-born students, partly because they did not attend the same classes. The ESL and LEARN classes, while providing needed support to the refugee students, also segregated them from the mainstream students. Although it was Canadian-born students who initiated the peer-mentoring program, its subsequent name change to the International Club “mistakenly” led many local students to feel that the club became exclusively for refugee students, leading to further segregation. The well-intentioned name change implemented by the school resulted in the unexpected loss of agency and ownership of the local students in the club they had initiated. Now, consider the other schools without newcomer students’ presence in a traditional monocultural environment. It should be a reasonable concern for all stakeholders that there exists a lack of ethnic presence in schools around which newcomer youth reside.

These dilemmas resulting from concentrating support for refugee students in one high school throughout the province requires attention from local educational authorities and other relevant policymakers that are part of the macrosystem in which the refugee students are situated. Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined the macrosystem as “a societal blue-print for a particular culture or subculture” (p. 1646). The macrosystem influences the other ecological systems, and in particular, the influence of the macrosystem could be perceived from how “the lower order systems” such as one classroom or one school function (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As a result, to optimize the function of the whole-school approach to support refugee students, policymakers need to ponder over whether to continue to centralize the support in one high school or make the support available in several other schools to remove systematic barriers. The best way to celebrate cultural diversity and fight explicit and subtle racism is through peer group communication and interaction.

Missing pieces for better academic support

While most of the refugee students were grateful to the availability of the LEARN program in the school and reported their improvement of literacy and numeracy skills and successful transition into mainstream classes, some students thought that they could have been better informed of the program. For example, one student told us that at first she did not know the LEARN was a “preparation class”

and she was not earning any credits from taking that class. Later on, she found out the “truth” through a friend who warned her not to get too comfortable in the class because, “If you don’t fight to move out of that class, you’ll remain in there. You’ll find yourself spending three years already in LEARN, but you haven’t done any regular courses.” After realizing the transitional nature of the program, she worked hard and moved on to the regular classes in one and a half years. She said, “If it was not my friend told me, I think even now I could have stayed in that class.” Although the LEARN teachers tried to be encouraging and accommodating to all students, some of the students desired “harsh words” and straightforward advice so they could make informed decisions. At first, it seemed that the students were inhibited from exercising their rights to educational choices. After double checking with the LEARN teacher, we learned that it was an issue of insufficient communication during a period of extreme confusion for the students and an overwhelming workload for the teacher. Such information was passed on to students when they arrived but was not repeated later on. Short staffing probably accounted for the gap in communication as the teacher’s workload was more than manageable.

In addition, the fact that the LEARN program is offered in only one high school across the province places refugee students who live beyond the school bus zone at a disadvantage. They may miss classes in the morning or not be able to come to school every day because the public transport is slow and expensive for them. The lack of transportation services also violates the inclusive education policies because those students are not fully included in our education system while they have to struggle to get up much earlier than their peers and have to pay for their daily school trips. In this regard, commitment to social justice, one of the features associated with successful practices to support refugee students identified by Taylor and Sidhu (2012), is not demonstrated by the local educational authorities. In Taylor and Sidhu’s study (2012), schools which were successful in supporting the schooling of refugee youth were committed to social justice in areas of education as well as in welfare provision. Transportation services are basic child welfare, requiring local educational authorities’ advocates.

Furthermore, the absence of in-class support fails to include refugee students in regular classrooms. Providing ongoing help with English for refugee students in mainstream subjects is suggested by Roxas and Roy (2012). ESL teachers co-teaching with the class teacher is one of the strategies to support refugee students in the mainstream classroom (Taylor and Sidhu, 2012). Without ESL teachers or other support teachers helping refugee students with language barriers or educational gaps, classroom teachers would likely feel incapable of educating refugee students, and those students would only be physically included in the regular classrooms rather than fully academically included.

Motivation, stress and mental health of refugee students

The refugee students were self motivated in their studies and thankful for having the opportunity to go to school in Canada. For example, a student who lived out of the school bus zone got up at 6:40 every morning to catch the 7:30 bus in order to get to school on time. She did not consider it a difficult task, saying, “I need to come to learn,” and reviewed her lessons every evening without fail. Most of the students in our study aspired to pursue a university education. One explained, “It’s just because where I come from, I have to work hard to get education and to help my family.” They were interested in going

to medical school to become a pharmacist, a nurse, or a doctor so that they would be able to help people, especially those in their home countries, where “a lot of people are dying from sickness.” A student’s view was representative of many: “I really want to become a nurse and to do something that doesn’t just benefit me, and I can go home and rebuild my country, in a way.” Another refugee student indicated that university education would equip her with the capability to achieve her goals to end corruption and ethnic divisions in her home country. It is obvious their earlier difficulties and the unfortunate state of their home countries gave them the internal drive to succeed and the empathy for the disadvantaged people who need help.

Meanwhile, these students shoulder more financial pressure than their Canadian peers as a result of being refugees before they came to Canada and their parents’ difficulties in obtaining gainful employment. Knowing the importance of education for their future upward social mobility, many of them suffered less-than-desired time for their studies because they had to take part-time jobs to support their families. Some worked after school, and others worked night shifts, sometimes from 9:00pm to 9:00am, on the weekend. In addition to supporting their family in Canada, some sent money back to relatives in their home countries. Many refugee students admitted that working while studying undermined their academic performance. A student who worked night shifts even fell asleep during examinations. There were only a few “lucky ones” whose parents were employed so that they were able to focus on school.

Life difficulties sometimes led to unbalanced feelings in them when they interacted with entitled Canadian peers. Some refugee students were annoyed about Canadian students’ complaints about trivial matters in life. One said, “All I feel is they have really good lives, and they still complain about it. I look at my life, and I feel really shitty.” Another student stated, “Canadian students should appreciate what they have because there is a lot of things they have but we never had.” In the extreme case, such type of complaints from Canadian students could be a trigger of refugee students’ aggressive behaviours. One refugee student who was separated from her parents while fleeing almost engaged in a physical fight with a few Canadian girls who were complaining about their own parents. “I usually feel like, what did I do wrong? Why am I not with my parents?” she said emotionally. Such emotional turmoil may increase the likelihood of mental health problems if undealt with. On the other hand, if it receives proper attention from the teachers and counsellors and is shared as a teaching point for social justice purposes, both the newcomer and the local students will benefit from the learning.

Common signs of mental illness were found in one refugee student who talked about her suffering from flashbacks of traumatic experiences. During a tour of a police station, she felt that the traumatic events were happening again and soon became unconscious after she was shown a gun. After that, she realized that she needed counselling services. She also mentioned that a few teachers in her school brought back her memories of war experiences when they taught students about war conflicts in Africa. She said, “You are reminding me of my past. I’m trying my best to forget it!” The student continued to suggest that their teachers should focus more on the causes of wars and the importance of building a better world rather than simply describing Africa as a war-torn area. This is a valid and thought-provoking point.

Refugee youth's suffering from mental health problems indicated a pressing need to provide appropriate counselling services targeting refugee students' traumatic experiences. Previous studies have reported a few school-based intervention programs for refugee students that reduced their psychological distress and help them better adapt to school (Birman and Chan, 2008; Ehntholt, Smith, and Yule, 2005; Layne et al., 2001; Rousseau and Guzder, 2008; Rousseau, Laurin-lamothe, and Saboundjian, 2012). However, not all school counsellors are trained to deal with migration-related, traumatic experiences of newcomer students, as evidenced in Li and Grineva's study (2016). We recommend that school-based counselling services should be made available to refugee students, and guidance counsellors should be provided with access to professional development opportunities focusing on approaches to address the mental health needs of these students. Further, the collaboration between school leaders, teachers, and staff is crucial to address the mental health issues among refugee students. A healthy school should take into consideration the wellbeing of all students and engage all stakeholders in the ecological systems of the students.

Significance, Implications, and Limitations

Development of programs for assisting newcomer youth's integration is an important area of educational research in a multicultural country like Canada. The study that this article reports is significant for multiple reasons. First, there is a paucity of research exploring the successful integration of newcomer youth in small Canadian centres with a rather homogeneous population (Quaicoe, 2009; Sarma-Debnath and Castano, 2008). Second, since the number of newcomers continues to increase in St. John's and other smaller Canadian cities, this article provides insight into commendable practices that school policymakers and educators can adopt to fulfill their obligations to newcomer students. Language learning through the ESL program and academic bridging through the LEARN program, combined with the settlement and recreational support from the government, worked together to create a healthy school environment with the most comprehensive support system in the province. Our study revealed the need for expanding these practices by increasing the number of support teachers and extending the programs to other high schools in the city. Other smaller centres could also benefit from setting up similar programs for newcomer students.

However, the data size of our study was limited due to the fact that there was only one model high school offering comprehensive support and services to refugee students coming to the province through official channels. Those privately sponsored refugee students who might be studying in other high schools were not identified at the time of our study. Future research is needed to investigate the educational experiences of the small number of refugee students in other high schools for comparison purposes. Secondly, given St. John's rather homogeneous population of European origin, the results of the study may not be generalizable to other Canadian cities with sizable ethnic groups and frequent ethnic interaction. Furthermore, we were only able to involve one officer from local educational authorities in this study. Future research should seek to include more policymakers to understand their perspectives and promote researcher-policymaker partnerships.

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