# Academic and Social Adjustment of High School Refugee Youth in Newfoundland

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*This article addresses the complex academic and social adjustment issues of newcomer youth of refugee background at a high school in Newfoundland and Labrador, a province where the newcomer population is small but the percentage of refugees in relation to all newcomers is high. Data for this qualitative study include documents from educational authorities and ESL teachers, field notes of classroom observations, qualitative survey questionnaires from 15 newcomer students, and interviews with 6 students of refugee background and 3 teachers. We found that these refugee youth were challenged due not only to language difficulties and educational gaps, but also to differences in educational systems, school cultures, and student-teacher dynamics between their previous schooling and what they encountered in Newfoundland. They had to cope with social isolation and different practices of body language, dress code, personal hygiene, and sexual orientation. The study also identified inadequacies in the current curriculum, teacher in-service education, and diversity initiatives in the school system.*

*Cet article porte sur les enjeux complexes liés à l'adaptation académique et sociale que vivent de jeunes réfugiés dans une école secondaire à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, une province où les nouveaux arrivants sont peu nombreux mais où le pourcentage de réfugiés parmi les nouveaux arrivants est élevé. Les données pour cette étude qualitative incluent des documents provenant d'autorités scolaires et d'enseignants d'ALS, des notes découlant d'observations en classe, des questionnaires qualitatifs auprès de 15 élèves nouvellement arrivés, et des entrevues auprès de 6 élèves réfugiés et de 3 enseignants. Les résultats indiquent que les jeunes réfugiés sont confrontés non seulement à des difficultés linguistiques et des lacunes d'éducation, mais également à des différences dans les systèmes éducatifs, dans les cultures scolaires et dans la dynamique entre les élèves et les enseignants qui distinguent leurs expériences pédagogiques précédentes de celles qu'ils vivent à Terre-Neuve. Ils devaient faire face à l'isolement social et aux pratiques différentes relatives au langage corporel, au code vestimentaire, à l'hygiène personnel et à l'orientation sexuelle. L'étude a également identifié des lacunes dans le programme d'études actuel, dans le perfectionnement professionnel des enseignants et dans les initiatives scolaires portant sur la diversité.*

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is the least diverse among the Canadian provinces, with 98% of the population being white, English-speaking Christians originally from Europe (Statistics Canada, 2012). In recent years, more immigrants and refugees (referred to as "newcomers" in this article) have come to the province as a result of humanitarian efforts and the movement of immigrants to smaller centres in Canada. What is noteworthy is that refugees have constituted a high percentage of the newcomer population in recent decades (Burnaby, Whelan, & Rivera, 2009). For example, refugees accounted for 20% of the annual entry of newcomers between 2010 and 2014, higher than the previous years in the province and the national average of 9.4% (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015). To respond to the growing numbers in the previous years, the NL Department of Education (DOE) published a handbook "to guide administrators and teachers in the reception and orientation of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and their families" (2010, p. 1). The capital city, St. John's, located on the island of Newfoundland and with a population of 106,172 in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2016), receives the majority of the newcomer population and provides most of the services. English as a second language (ESL) courses are offered in schools from kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12), mostly on an itinerant basis. In particular, a Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) program was, at the time of this study, established in one middle school (Grades 7–9) and one high school (Grades 10–12) to support students with educational gaps, and most of these students, who are the focus of this study, are of refugee background.

Studies on newcomer support in smaller centres are limited in number, and the few local studies point to the insufficiency of support programs for K–12 refugee students (Burnaby, 2010; Sarma-Debnath & Kutty, 2006). At the high school level, youth experience concurrent intellectual growth, physical changes, and identity formation; educational gaps, if any, also become most salient at this stage (Asher, 2008; Hersi, 2005; Kanu, 2008). This study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by the high school refugee youth in their new academic and social lives in Newfoundland.

## Literature Review

### Academic Adjustment and Contributing Factors

Studies on academic achievements of high school immigrant students have identified factors influencing their academic performance and engagement, among which is the link between English language proficiency and academic performance (e.g., Chow, 2000; Mullins, 2010; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). For example, Mullins (2010) found that English-speaking Caribbean and African-born students were more likely to go to college than non-English-speaking peers in their ethnic groups in Toronto. Njue and Retish (2010) indicated the

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same trend in their study of African immigrant students at an American high school. Some Canadian researchers further pointed out that refugee youth with limited literacy skills in their first language and/or English are very disadvantaged and challenged, causing high drop-out rates (Derwing, Decorby, Ichikawa, & Jamieson, 1999; Watt & Roessingh, 1994, 2001) and gang involvement (Ngo, Calhoun, Worthington, Pyrch, & Este, 2017; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Immigrant students' cultural perceptions of education are usually shaped by their experiences in their home countries. For example, students from cultures that highly value formal education, especially East and Southeast Asian countries with a Confucian educational heritage, tend to perform well academically (Chow, 2000; Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2010; Garnett, 2010; Mullins, 2010; Toohey & Derwing, 2008; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). The American high school students of African origin in Njue and Retish's (2010) study had a "deep-seated desire to acquire education" (p. 366) because they came from environments where opportunities to obtain education were scarce and going to school was equated with higher social status.

Family socioeconomic status and parental support are other variables in students' academic achievements. Students from refugee families that lack financial resources are most vulnerable to dropping out (Chow, 2000). African refugee parents are challenged in providing academic help to their children because of their limited education and lack of family time as a result of working long hours in low-paid jobs (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010).

In addition, the design of the school curriculum is an important issue. Earlier studies (Brathwaite & James, 1996; Cummins, 1997) found a very low proportion of African Canadian teachers as well as systemic barriers in Canadian schools where curriculum failed to reflect African Canadian students' experience and represent their cultural heritage. More recent literature indicates that lack of support and lack of curriculum adjustment for ESL learners can be exacerbated in small cities and distant communities. For example, in Karanja's (2007) study of immigrant students in high schools in a small city in British Columbia, the high student-teacher ratio and mix of students from various grades and with varying English proficiency levels "made effective work challenging for ESL teachers and students alike" (p. 33). The ESL students tended to take nonacademic courses that "demanded less English" (p. 30) and jeopardized their future education and career options, while support from school administration and mainstream teachers was lacking.

## Social Adaptation and Negotiation of Cultures and Identities

While academic adjustment is a key indicator of newcomer youth adaptation to a new learning environment, social adjustment is no less important, as shown in a number of studies (e.g., Stermac, Brazeau, & Martin, 2008; Yeh, 2003; Yeh et al., 2008). Yeh and colleagues maintained that communication

can be a significant concern for newcomer students in developing relationships with their local peers (Yeh & Inose, 2002), and low English proficiency is partially accountable for such heightened intercultural competency concerns (Yeh et al., 2008). Other studies have indicated that newcomer youth with traumatic experiences may be faced with additional mental health issues that need to be addressed (e.g., Cole, 1998; Stermac et al., 2008). Refugees from war zones, particularly some African countries, experience difficulties in school as a result of cultural clashes and societal changes (Berthold, 2000; De Gourville, 2002; Hersi, 2005; Ngo, Rossiter, & Stewart, 2013). Their acculturative stress not only leads to difficulties in social adaptation but also heightens anxiety and self-consciousness in their interaction with peers (Yeh, 2003).

In a qualitative study exploring high school immigrant students' negotiation of identities in the contexts of culture, race, class, and gender, Asher (2008) noted that the Asian-American participants considered school more open and flexible than home with respect to academic achievements and career choices. They did not feel as much pressure from school as they did from their parents with regard to academic achievement and their choice of future professions. However, such flexibility of expectations at school did not mean that their histories and cultures were represented in the school's curriculum. Using Bhabha's (1994) conception of the "liminal space," Asher argued that the students, while developing hybrid identities and cultures, are likely to find themselves in interstices, or in-between spaces, which can turn into sites of struggle.

Oikonomidoy's (2009) study of seven female refugee students from Somalia in an American high school showed "their resistance to one-dimensional holistic assimilation into high school peer culture" (p. 30). These students adapted to some aspects of peer culture in order to interact with their classmates; however, they stressed the importance of the in-group support they offered to each other. The in-group support phenomenon among newcomer students is in line with the concept of building peer social capital (Goldstein, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999), which refers to "the exchange of scarce resources, based on relations of trust and solidarity, that permits people to attain goals they cannot easily attain individually" (Goldstein, 2003, p. 253). Goldstein's participants' use of Cantonese in a Canadian high school, which was not legitimated by the school policies, could be considered a means of constructing and investing in peer social capital in order to achieve academic success and meet social needs.

Stritikus and Nguyen (2007) maintained that to better understand how immigrant students adapt to the host school culture, it is necessary to account for their gender identity interpretation. They studied the transitions of 30 Vietnamese immigrant students to American schooling and the ways in which they formed cultural and gender identities. The students absorbed aspects of American cultural and gender norms but viewed themselves as Vietnamese. They partially complied with "the already ascribed notions of the

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good girl and the broken girl" (p. 884) in Vietnamese culture, wherein girls who were disobedient and hung out with boys were considered "broken." The students' interpretation of gender affected the formation of their cultural, ethnic, and academic identities in a context where they were marginalized in mainstream public spaces. While the girls learned to leverage the notion of gender equality to negotiate higher status within their Vietnamese circles, the boys viewed it as a challenge to their social status and power.

Factors influencing successful schooling and social adjustment are multiple, complex, and interconnected, as indicated in Kanu's (2008) study of war-affected African refugee students in two inner-city high schools in Manitoba, Canada. Kanu singled out three categories of challenges that newcomer youth faced in the process of integration into the host society: academic, economic, and psychological. Among the academic difficulties, the participants ranked separation from family/lack of family support and grade placement issues as the greatest. Economic challenges were linked to the lack of financial resources available for the refugee students and, consequently, the need to hold jobs after or at the time of study. Psychological challenges were related to the absence of treatment aimed at overcoming traumatic experiences and achieving a sense of safety while adjusting to a new culture. Kanu stressed the fact that neither the refugee students nor their family members had been provided with services to cope with their traumas since their arrival in Canada.

In the context of Newfoundland and Labrador where the traditional population is highly homogeneous, research is starting to gain momentum in exploring the social, economic, cultural, and educational situations and implications of the growing newcomer population, particularly the refugee population. A few local researchers reported issues such as immigrant employment (Sarma-Debnath & Kutty, 2006), access to language learning and education (Burnaby, 2010; Sarma-Debnath & Castano, 2008), and youth peer racism (Baker, 2013; Baker, Price, & Walsh, 2016). There is a paucity of data on refugee youth in-school dynamics and their academic and social challenges. The study was therefore designed and conducted to address (a) challenges encountered by high school refugee youth in their academic life and (b) interactions and negotiations of identities in their social lives in St. John's, Newfoundland.

## Method

The study adopted a basic qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, which allowed for a focus on the process of events, actions, and interactions that occur over time in the participants' lives (Creswell, 2008). After obtaining ethics approval from the researcher's home institution and the school board, and informed consent from the school principal and the teachers, we collected data from multiple sources in two stages over a period of 15 months.

In the first stage, the first author gathered demographic information on all ESL students (with names removed) and the ESL teacher-student ratio in the city with the assistance of school board personnel. The researcher also obtained guideline materials for supporting newcomer students from the ESL specialist in the Department of Education. Next, the researcher visited the study high school and spoke with the ESL teachers, who provided more specific information about the students in their classes (again, after their names were removed). From these initial data (student numbers, distribution in schools, ethnicity, age, gender, length of residence in Canada, previous educational experience, first language literacy level, English proficiency), the researcher was able to gain an overall picture of which schools the newcomer students attended and who taught them, and to predict some of the challenges that the students and teachers might have in the schools.

In the second stage, the researcher approached the support teachers/staff (three ESL and LEARN teachers, and a settlement worker stationed in the school to work with newcomer youth) and offered an information session to ESL students at the study high school that hosted the ESL and LEARN programs. Informed consent forms were distributed to all students so that they had an opportunity to discuss their participation with their parents. Students who returned the parent-child cosigned consent forms in the following two weeks were given a take-home qualitative survey with 12 open-ended questions and 18 multiple choice questions in plain English, covering topics such as their countries of origin, native languages, years of schooling, English competencies, interactions at home and school, family support on school work, academic performances and challenges, support teachers and programs, extracurricular activities, and feelings about school life in Canada and home country cultures. Fifteen students responded to the questionnaire, but only eight of them came forward for a face-to-face interview. The researcher disqualified two of them because they did not have a refugee background. The six interviewees—two female and four male—were from Nepal, Bhutan, Liberia, Kenya, and Iraq, and aged between 17 and 19. In terms of their religious beliefs, three were Muslim, one Christian, one Hindu, and one nonreligious. (See Table 1 for more information.) Three of the students were interviewed a second time one month later due to a change in their circumstances (e.g., one student found his long-lost father) or the need to clarify previously obtained information. Interview questions centred around refugee youths' school life—their interests, challenges, and expectations; their understanding of the school policies; their friend circles and after-school activities; their connections with family members; their views of cultural heritage and religious beliefs; the support they received; and the reception of these youth from local students and teachers. The 60-minute interviews were conducted in a safe environment without peer/teacher/colleague pressure. The language of interview was English, and only one student needed the help of a translator.

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Table 1
Refugee Students' Profile

| Code Name | ESL Placement | Language Profile | Identity Sticker |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student 1 | Beginner | Learned Swahili, Arabic, and English in the camp | Born to Ethiopian father and Somalian mother in Kenya; lived in a Kenyan refugee camp for 15 years |
| Student 2 | Inter-mediate | Mother tongue is Arabic; learned English in the camp | Born in Iraq, escaped to Libya at 8 with parents; later lived in a Syrian refugee camp for 8 years |
| Student 3 | Inter-mediate | Learned Nepali and English in the camp | Born to Bhutanese parents in a Nepalese refugee camp, and lived there for 18 years |
| Student 4 | Advanced | Learned English, Arabic, and Somali in the camp | Lived with Ugandan grandmother in a Kenyan refugee camp for 18 years; never met father and separated from mother who lived in Sudan |
| Student 5 | Advanced | Native language is Kissi; learned English in the camp school | Born in Liberia; separated from father and siblings due to war and lived in a Sierra Leone refugee camp with mother for 8 years |
| Student 6 | Advanced | Learned Nepali and English in the camp school | Born in a Nepalese refugee camp, to Nepalese-Bhutanese parents who were persecuted for Nepalese heritage by Bhutanese authorities; lived in camp for 16 years |

Meanwhile, the researcher had conversations with the ESL teachers and observed one of each of the literacy, intermediate, and advanced level classes (composed of international, immigrant, and refugee students) in a two-week period. In the next two-week period, the LEARN teacher and settlement worker in the school were consulted regarding daily routines of the refugee youth, their challenges in life, academic work, and social connections. The noon-hour and after-school interactions at the settlement worker's office and three LEARN classes were observed. The observations were focused on peer dynamics and student-teacher interactions.

The LEARN teacher and the settlement worker who worked predomi-nantly with refugee students were interviewed, the former twice for one hour each and the latter once for one hour. At this point, the researcher realized the necessity of speaking with some subject teachers who had newcomer students in their classes. Three teachers were approached; the one who taught English agreed to a one-hour interview in her office after school. Due to the one-and-only status of the ESL and LEARN programs in this city, code names (Student 1, Teacher 2, etc.) were assigned to protect the participants' identi-ties. The settlement worker in the school was labelled as "teacher," also for confidentiality reasons.

Data analysis was conducted following data collection throughout the study. Preliminary exploratory analysis, which began immediately after the

data were organized and transcribed, enabled the researcher to obtain a general sense of the material collected and the emerging themes. Each subsequent analysis resulted in further clarification and regrouping of thematic units. Constant comparison analysis, also referred to as "coding" (Creswell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000), was used to identify "underlying themes presented through the data" (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 565). The data were divided into meaningful segments, and each chunk of it was labeled with a code or word phrase. Lean coding, the assignment of only a few codes the first time a researcher goes through a manuscript (Creswell, 2008), was used. Codes were grouped by similarity, and themes were developed.

## Findings

As this was an exploratory study, analysis of earlier data impacted the later data collection and analysis. Findings are presented in the order in which the data were collected. Data from the first stage—namely, conversations, documents, and questionnaires—provided surface-level background information. Data from the second phase interviews and observations led to in-depth probing of specific issues; those directly related to academic work and social interaction are presented below. Participant quotations are all from the interviews.

### Policies, Programs, and Contradictions

Information and resources obtained from the earlier conversations with personnel in the Department of Education and the school board, as well as the ESL teachers, provided a global view of the guidelines for schools and teachers working with newcomer students. Open access documents that were published on the Department's ESL teaching page, prepared by the ESL specialist of the department and some ESL teachers in 2010, included information for classroom teachers of ESL students, a handbook for administrators, tips for peer- and self-help for ESL and English Literacy Development (ELD) students, recommendations for best practices for ESL students, a PowerPoint presentation on whole school inclusion of immigrant students, and most importantly, a "Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) Curriculum Guide" for literacy, math, and other subjects. The first two of these are distributed to all schools with immigrant students at the beginning of the school year.

The LEARN program is a provincial academic program for students with educational gaps. The courses are similar to regular courses in content, but the texts are written in less challenging language. LEARN has two levels. LEARN-1 consists of two courses: Language Arts: Basic Literacy, and Mathematics. LEARN-2 consists of four high school academic enabling courses:

Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science. At the time of the study, only one teacher was hired to teach all the LEARN courses to more than 10 students of varying degrees of gaps. It was brought up in some conversations that classroom teachers need to be involved in making content accessible for newcomer students, who should progress to be placed in regular classes. Schools need specialists in both ESL and special education to work with newcomer children with language and special needs.

The initial questionnaire collected from the students revealed some contradictory information calling for further probing. Here are some examples. Most of the newcomer youth reported that their parents were unable to speak English well, but many of them were employed as part-time newspaper inserters. All their parents viewed education as very important but were not helping their children with school work. Most youth identified math as their favourite and also their most difficult course. Some felt challenged in specific courses, despite the fact that they considered their grade placement too low. Most regarded their local classmates as friendly but did not have much contact with them. They were all proud of their own cultural heritage, which was largely unfamiliar to their local classmates. They unanimously viewed their ESL and LEARN teachers most helpful in learning English and all subject matters. They completed their schoolwork mostly during the after-school homework program supervised by the LEARN teacher. The researcher began the interviews and observations with special attention to these contradictions and the ways the teachers worked with the youth.

## Academic Work and School Culture

A wide range of issues were noted by the participating students and teachers. While teachers talked more about what they observed and how they supported the newcomer students, students focused more on their academic adjustment and social interaction, with financial worries, emotional distress, and identity conflicts mixed in the conversations. In terms of academic adjustment, language difficulties and course content were not the only concerns. The students were very confused by the education system, the school culture, and the way in which students and teachers interacted within and beyond the classroom.

## Language Difficulties and Educational Gaps

Despite the facilitation of the ESL and LEARN programs, newcomer students encountered many difficulties trying to keep up with their native-born peers in academic achievement. Limited proficiency in English and interrupted formal education strongly affected their ability to negotiate and manage the development of their academic competence at school. The participants indicated that lack of vocabulary was their greatest concern with regard to language.

*Student 2:* The thing is, I didn't imagine one time I will take all my subjects in English. So, this is big challenge for me to study all of that in English … I don't get some vocabulary.

*Student 4:* Not all the words I know in English, I am still learning English more.

*Student 6:* Biology is difficult. I know the terms also, but when I write the answer, it difficult to express Nepali to English, I understand [the content].

Findings from the questionnaires and interviews also demonstrated that local linguistic nuances such as accent and fast speech rate posed great challenges for newcomer youth. They had difficulty understanding when their teachers spoke at "normal" conversational speed. In addition to limited proficiency in English, most of the newcomer students lagged behind their native-born peers in different subjects due to interrupted formal education and uneven knowledge levels across subjects. While they might be proficient in some subjects, their skills in others were elementary. One of the participants was a case in point.

*Teacher 2:* He is an example of the student whose schedule has to be tailor-made for him, 'cause his English is phenomenal … and he is a very bright individual, but his math level that he has been educated to is not sufficient for Grade 10 entry.

We observed a dilemma faced by the support teachers and newcomer students. Placing students with weak numeracy or language skills in a class based on their age would inevitably make them vulnerable to academic failure. However, the participants stated that their placement in a lower level greatly affected the emotional dimension of their adjustment to academic life, in spite of the fact that the simultaneous LEARN courses helped them fill their educational gaps. Some students were driven to graduate early for immediate employment or for future employment following college education. When they had to study the same content that they had studied before in their native language, they felt it was "a waste" of their time.

## The Credit System and School Subjects

The high school program in Newfoundland and Labrador "is structured on a course credit basis culminating in the acquisition of a senior high graduation diploma in three years or more" (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2014, Section 2). Students are required to complete a minimum of 36 credits' worth of mandatory and elective courses. Many newcomer students were unfamiliar with the concept of "credit" and its association with a high school diploma. They had received explanations on how the credit system worked and advice on which courses to take and when, but they re-

mained confused even after two or more semesters. In spite of her teacher's attempts to help, one student complained that

> from the beginning here I didn't make my schedule because I didn't know anything, so I didn't get science, so now I need to stay for one more extra year to finish all of that … I was crying too much for that because I just feel I am spending my years for nothing.

Mismatch also exists in terms of the degree of importance attributed to different school subjects. The newcomer students placed great value on world geography and world history because those subjects were viewed as important in their home countries. Regardless of the newcomer students' gaps in formal education, they felt they had a better picture of world history and geography than their local peers. They were surprised that domestic geography received greater emphasis in their school than world geography. One participant responded to this situation: "They [local students] know maybe a lot of Canada, but they don't know about somewhere else. I don't think this is good." The difference in range of knowledge placed the newcomer students in a deficit status and rated what they knew as less valuable than what the local students knew.

The participants also mentioned that some of the school subjects posed problems for them because either they had never studied those subjects before or the courses were in conflict with their religious beliefs. One student expressed both issues, saying that fine arts had been absent from the school program in his refugee camp and, most disturbingly, that the religious education he had received at an early age dictated that any drawings of sentient beings or humans were prohibited. As a result, not only was he behind in completing the arts assignments involving drawings of people and objects, but he was also uncomfortable attending the class.

> It's against my religion … it's among the bad things to do, I mean, drawing things … I tried tell them [the teachers] but [they] said it's compulsory, you need to take that one to get your credit.

The official provincial government websites note that two credits toward the high school certificate are assigned to Fine Arts (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2015, 2016). Although the teachers were simply helping the student meet the graduation requirements, the student's complaint seemed to be directed at the teachers, due to either miscommunication or misunderstanding of the credit system.

## School Regulations on Discipline

The students interviewed in the study came from educational environments with severe systems of discipline, often involving corporal punishment:

> *Student 4:* There's different policies we had, like, in Africa, in Sierra Leone mostly, most African countries do that. Like, if you are late for

school, you get punishment. But here, the only punishment some-body give you—detention!

Although the student participants themselves did not have any issues with conduct, according to the teachers and settlement workers, the degree of liberty some newcomers enjoyed resulted in behaviour problems.

*Teacher 1:* I think that, in a lot of the situations, it's because of past schools that they went to. The rules were so strict and the punishments were so severe that when they come here and they don't see that there's severe punishment, they don't think the rules are serious … They just sort of get, like, detention or if they get a suspension, it means they don't have to go to school, right? So they don't see that as much of a punishment and I don't think they really fully understand sort of what the consequences will be later if they don't do well, if they have poor attendance when it comes to getting into university.

For these newcomer students, the school policies regarding discipline seemed overly lenient, and students were not disciplined for underage drug use.

*Student 3:* In our country, you are not supposed to smoke in the school, or you are not supposed to smoke weed somewhere and then come to your school. But here it still seems like students who smoke out weed and stuff and then … going to school.

Since they had little contact with local students, newcomer youth could not tell if a certain behaviour was an individual issue or group culture.

## Teacher-Student Interaction

In addition to differences in educational systems, newcomer students have to adapt to new models of teacher-student relationships and student autonomy. According to the participants, teachers in their previous schools were stricter than those in Canada, where high school students are expected to work independently and the teacher plays a facilitator role. They interpreted such liberty in the relationship as lack of attention on the part of teachers and, as a result, the students felt their hard work was "not appreciated."

Student autonomy implies high level of initiative, which posed another challenge for newcomer students who were generally not used to volunteering answers. This was especially true in the case of students from Africa. They noted that back home they were not expected to answer a question unless they were asked by the teacher. Therefore, volunteering answers was viewed as disrespectful to the teacher and a desire to show off. One student said that he was quiet in class because he was "just fearing, maybe I'll be causing problem."

The participants' adjustment involved not only becoming comfortable with the in-class culture but also recognizing the out-of-class teacher-student

relationship. One participant called his teacher on the weekend, hoping to receive some help with his homework. The teacher gave his phone number to the newcomer students in his class for emergency contact, out of good will. The student, judging from his school experiences in his home country, believed that the student-teacher relationship was not limited to in-school interactions. The phone call turned out to be an embarrassing situation for the adolescent, as the teacher did not want to be disturbed during his day off. The student said, "I put the phone down and I... felt really bad."

## Social Network and Adjustment

The newcomer students' social adjustment in a new learning environment was accompanied by a number of difficulties. Most of them had few or no friends among local peers, felt more comfortable among other newcomer youth than with their native-born Canadian classmates, and rarely or never participated in extracurricular activities.

## Peer Interaction

Newcomer students' social success at school depends on a variety of factors, one of which is the attitude and interest of local classmates to newcomer students' cultures. The participants generally maintained good relationships with local classmates who offered help in school and daily life. However, very few of them referred to their Canadian peers as friends. The participants stated that some local classmates were interested in learning about their culture and religion, while others adopted an attitude of "I don't care." The newcomer youth realized that socializing with peers was what they lacked at school. One student said, "Classmates, maybe we should talk more." However, they still felt more comfortable interacting with other newcomer students due to their similar cultural background, status in Canada (refugee or permanent resident), and English language proficiency. All of them indicated that their best friends were either other newcomer students or adolescents in their home countries. One student said, "I don't think I have any Canadian friends."

A few factors account for participants' lack of friends from the dominant culture. First, their limited English language proficiency and unfamiliarity with the local students' accent decreased their chances of gaining social success. One participant was not comfortable talking to other Canadian students because "Sometimes they speak fast. They know the perfect English and they write big, big word, you know?" Second, negotiating between different cultures and religious beliefs also posed a great challenge in developing peer social capital. Newcomers had trouble understanding their local peers' behaviours and were uncertain if and how they could negotiate a comfortable space of mutual respect.

Social success at school depends on not only effective peer support within the academic domain, but also relationships developed outside of the class-

room. Engagement in extracurricular activities helps maintain friendships within and beyond school communities. Unfortunately, the students in our study rarely or never participated in the extracurricular life of the school. In addition to the language issues and cultural differences, they lacked information about student clubs, societies, and sports teams. Even with knowledge of extracurricular activities, newcomers were uncertain if they would be received well by the local students.

## Body Language, Dress Code, and Gender Identity

Another cultural disparity that negatively affected the participants' social adjustment related to body language. In particular, some Muslim newcomer students reported that they found physical contact with female classmates, especially hugging, embarrassing, as those forms of greeting and parting were "not allowed" in the environment in which they grew up. However, it should be emphasized that in trying to deal with the adjustment issues, the newcomer students generally remained tolerant and respectful of other cultures and religions. The following responses from the interviews are illustrative:

> *Student 1:* You don't know my culture, you don't know [hand] shaking is bad, but if you shake me, and you don't know, it's OK.

> *Student 4:* I don't have any … religious attitude. I just feel people all the same, all the same human beings.

> *Student 2:* Being different, it's not like me and you are bad. We are humans, even if we have different stuff, but we need to respect each other.

With such awareness and understanding, however, all of the interviewees recalled the "shock" or "scare" they experienced on their first days of school when they were introduced to their classmates. The friendly gestures of handshaking and hugging were almost an abrupt invasion of their personal space, culture, and religion.

Another disturbing aspect of school culture involved dress code. Many newcomer students of Muslim background felt embarrassed seeing Canadian peers' clothes that exposed their bodies.

> *Student 1:* Well, it's not that I don't like. It's disturbing, you know … And when they wear this one [referring to a top], it's translucent, you can see …

> *Student 2:* I find the people coming with short skirt and stuff like that, I was like: "What's wrong with that girl?"

Interestingly, the participants emphasized that it was not only their religious beliefs that guided them to dress more conservatively in the academic envi-

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ronment, but also their conception of school as being very serious, meaningful, and important.

> *Student 2:* I mean in our country the school is so big thing. You can't put make-up in the school; you can't put nail polish; you are supposed to cut your nails.… I don't mind if they wear shorts out from the school, but for school it's supposed to be different.

In addition to dress code-related disparities, the newcomer students encountered differences in attitude to sexual orientation. The adolescents reported that the tolerant attitude to sexual minorities in high school caused them discomfort and confusion, as they mostly came from cultures where homosexual relationships were subject to stigma and societal rejection. The occasional discussions at school about these matters did not seem to help much, as they heard different, if not opposite, views at home.

## Personal Hygiene

Differences in subtle social conventions and life habits, an underresearched area that "may lead to marginalization, a denial of access and disablement for those whose behaviour is seen as deviant, unintelligible, or undesirable" (Jaspers, 2010, p. 192), may jeopardize the development of friendships. For example, personal hygiene customs in a newcomer student's country of origin may be notably different from the ones in Canada.

> *Teacher 2:* In North America we have cleanliness fetish almost. Everybody showers every morning, that's the expected standard, and puts on deodorant.… When students come from other countries, especially equatorial countries, they don't seem to notice the smell of human odour; but Canadian students, they can smell a student far, ten feet around.

This disparity may turn social and emotional adjustment into a painful experience, especially for adolescents going through a difficult transition period. The narrative of one of the participants was especially illustrative from this perspective. During the interviews he gave an impression of being a sociable person, highly motivated to succeed academically, go on to higher education, pursue a career, and integrate into Canadian society. He did not seem to resist either the dominant academic culture or the local way of life. However, he had been repeatedly reported to the school by his classmates and teachers as having personal hygiene issues. The school counsellors, teachers, and settlement workers who were usually familiar with such "problems" seemed to have worked on the issue and explained the situation to the student. One teacher said:

> Some students, when they come, we have to talk about, you know, "You have to shower every day. You have to wear deodorant every

day. When you work out, you have to use deodorant." Some of these things are not the most comfortable topics, but, usually, if you are just honest and come right away with that stuff, it's pretty easy. In [the student's name]'s case, he was same sort of thing. We could notice the human odour, the smell, but also his clothes weren't as clean as it should've been. So, when we told him the expectation for washing and the odour, he did exactly as we told him, but his clothes were still smelly. Even after he had corrected the problem, some students and teachers were still finding there to be an issue, the smell. We had to take him down again and say, "You have to clean your clothes," but eventually we've got the issues sorted out.

The teacher even took the student shopping for personal hygiene products. Although the teachers and counsellors considered that they "handled that well" and "he feels OK about it now," the student said that he was embarrassed, if not humiliated. He did not want to either seek friendships or invest in any existing relationship. He preferred to stay unnoticed when in a crowd of his classmates. He sat at the back corner of the class and never volunteered to speak. He avoided drawing any attention and thus reminding people of his prior hygiene issues. At some point, the participant was thinking of dropping out, as his embarrassment turned into resentment. He even considered the teacher's approach an act of bullying, in spite of the teacher's extended effort to help. One important factor, of which the teachers were not aware and the student did not disclose, was that he did not own another set of clothes at the time. He had to do laundry manually every night to meet the school hygiene requirements. At the time of our interview, he was proud to own three pairs of socks and was planning to buy a second pair of sneakers at a thrift store.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study are in line with those of the current literature. Educational and cultural gaps affect immigrant students' academic work and relationships with local peers (Yeh & Inose, 2002; Yeh et al., 2008). Newcomer youth may have a strong desire to maintain their own cultural values and may be hesitant to integrate into a new culture. Acculturative stress may have a strong negative impact on immigrant adolescents' social adjustment (Asher, 2008; Berthold, 2000; De Gourville, 2002; Hersi, 2005; Yeh, 2003). Neither their self-consciousness regarding communication difficulties nor their local peers' lack of understanding ameliorate the situation. Moreover, "perceived discrimination" (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006, p. 322) may have confined them to their own group. As a result, newcomer students often refrain from interactions with their local-born classmates and associate more closely with other newcomers sharing similar cultural and religious backgrounds and prior life experiences.

However, students in our study also pointed to several issues that warrant further discussion: school curriculum requirements, teacher preparedness, and peer interaction. The NL high school curricula are in line with Anglo-American cultural traditions and social values, with some degree of provincial variation and local focus. The curricula reflect the interests of the majority white Christian population. The Muslim participants in our study reported discomfort in taking Fine Arts, a subject that required activities prohibited in their religion and therefore threatened their religious identity. The NL public educational system positions itself as religiously sensitive: Religious Studies is a compulsory component of school curricula, with the objective to instill tolerance and respect for various religious beliefs (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2015). Specialized curriculum designed to meet the language, cultural, and social needs of the immigrant students (see, for example, Higgs, 2005) and to take into account the distinct features of newcomer students' identity would be valuable. Alternative course requirements for religiously and culturally divergent students would also be an option.

Discomfort with curriculum requirements is not the only issue that hinders high school newcomer students' adaptation to a new school life. To integrate successfully into a new system, it is critical for newcomers to understand how the system works. Our data, however, showed a lack of such understanding. In particular, the concept of the credit system, a vital element of Canadian high school education, was not common knowledge for many of the newcomer youth. As a result, they felt as though they were "shooting in the dark." It may take newcomers much longer than expected to fully understand the concept of the credit system. Sometimes they gain this understanding too late: important deadlines are missed, necessary courses are not chosen, and their academic performance and their adjustment to the new learning environment are thus prone to failure.

Teachers' knowledge of and efforts to understand their students' cultures, past experiences, and present situations can make a significant difference. Take the warm-welcome-scare mentioned by newcomer youth the first time they were introduced to a roomful of strangers. If teachers could inform the class of the newcomers' preferred way of welcome, which involves no physical contact, the initial contact could be more comfortable. Unfortunately, some high school teachers' knowledge about newcomer students' cultures is rather limited. Moreover, findings of the study indicate that teachers may be unaware of the level of stress caused by adjusting to a new environment and may have a false idea of newcomer students' emotional state. The personal hygiene issue was handled by teachers in a simplistic way—showing the "correct" hygiene routine to the student—based on their unexamined assumptions and biases. This reality speaks to a deficiency in teachers' pre- and in-service education. None of the teachers in our study had received training on how to work with newcomer children and youth. They were learning on the job, consulting one another as situations arose.

The personal hygiene issue was not in the original design of the study, but it turned out to be a concern for the teachers, newcomer students, and local students. It tells us that working with newcomer youth can be more complicated than we expect. It also indicates that situations may not be what they appear. It takes time for a refugee child to build up a new wardrobe in a new country. It also takes time for young people who grew up in a refugee camp to understand life routines (e.g., daily showers and fresh clothes) in Canada. Clothes that we take for granted—shoes, socks, sweaters, coats, and so on— can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for people from equatorial regions. In addition, poverty can play a major role in what appears to be a behavioural problem. To make a young man handwash his only set of clothes and air dry them daily is not an acceptable solution to this "problem." We need to ask what else the school, educators, and government can do for such youth in addition to placing them in a school. We need to ask if educators working directly with newcomer children are equipped with the proper knowledge, skills, and approaches. We need to ask if educators have taken the dignity and identity of newcomer youth into consideration when negotiating issues with them, albeit with kind intentions to help.

Socializing with peers is a vital aspect of identity formation for adolescents in their transition to adulthood. These participants, however, were not very successful in connecting with their local classmates, whose absence and indifference should not be ignored. While subtle racism might be at play, most local students did not seem to have sufficient knowledge and opportunities to interact with these culturally divergent newcomers.

At the same time, newcomer students had difficulties negotiating their cultural and religious identities. They were challenged in finding a "mediated space" (Li, 2015) in which they could live with conventions and concepts (such as dress codes and sexual orientations) not conforming to their home cultures and religions without losing their roots. This situation points to the need for educators to find more effective ways to mediate the differences in a multicultural student population, particularly in a smaller centre with largely monocultural educational staff. Schools and school boards may consider initiatives to promote cultural awareness and intercultural communication. In addition to open discussions on diversity and equity at school and in society, more in-depth research is called for to examine the social, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions of these issues.

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