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# Breaking Silence: The Voices of Syrian Refugee Children in the Canadian Classroom

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## Abstract

The researchers in the study explored the lived experiences of Syrian refugee students in the Canadian classroom. The participant sample included four students who entered their first year in a South-western Ontario public school as of the 2015-2016 calendar year. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Analysis of results indicated the District's growing need for understanding refugee students using a holistic approach, utilizing and building peer relationships for language acquisition, and recognizing the effects of the structure of the learning environment on student experiences.

**Keywords:** English language learners, teacher-student connections, peer acceptance, learning environment, student experience, elementary education

## Introduction

Spring of 2011 marked the start of the crisis in Syria, leaving millions displaced in neighboring countries. However, as the numbers of refugees increased, support began to spread across Europe and North America. Since November of 2015, Canada has welcomed more than 29 thousand Syrian refugees. This growing population has resulted in an influx of Syrian refugee students within the elementary school system, many of whom have entered their first year within the system with limited language, schooling and the baggage of war and their previous experiences. Together, these experiences create challenges for refugee students in their adaptation to Canadian culture and expectations of a formal schooling system. Some of these challenges include, but are not limited to: acquiring the English language, curriculum, and socio-cultural norms (Ayoub, 2014; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

## Literature Review

Refugees are identified as individuals who are affected by war and violence and are forced to seek refuge and protection from a host country. Taking on refugee status protects individuals from returning to their war-torn home (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). According to Kirova (2010), the resettlement process is abrupt, causing significant physical and emotional stressors. The process begins with placement in a refugee camp, where poor nutrition, shelter, limited medical assistance, and the absence of education are faced (McBrien, 2011). Pre-migration experiences are just as traumatic as those experienced in the home country, as refugees continue to survive the difficulties

of violence, family separation, loss of loved ones, and psychological challenges (Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

More specifically, children of war experience major drawbacks in terms of education, mental health, and socialization (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). Refugee children's inexperience with school is not uncommon (McBrien, 2011). Their limited experience with school is due to the realities of continued conflict, physical and emotional stressors, lack of proper nutrition, and natural disasters (Wilkinson, 2002). Familial financial constraints equally impede on refugee children's education, as some children are forced to enter into the labour market at young ages (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). Refugee camps, which do provide education, often lack proper facilities, resulting in closure due to weather conditions and shortage of resources (Mareng, 2010). Such factors create gaps in the child's schooling experience and language development.

Interrupted schooling creates important constraints for the children once they have migrated to the host country. These students have very few academic skills that they can generalize or transfer over to the new learning context to assist them in academic growth and development. In regards to language acquisition, children who have experienced gaps in their schooling, or who have attended disadvantaged schools, often take up to 10 years to form English academic proficiency, which is almost double the amount of time it would take for a child who had received formal schooling with no interruptions (Garcia, 2000; Hakuta et al., 2000). The prolonged time frame of refugee children's English language development corresponds to their limited literacy development and knowledge of academic concepts in their first language (Garcia, 2000).

Additionally, the post-traumatic events of pre-migration also affect refugee children's integration into mainstream Canadian school and culture. Pine and Drachman (2005) found the loss of the family home, leaving family behind, and the displacement of loved ones as overwhelming constraints faced after migration. Refugees experience such feelings of loss as they enter a western culture, and can lead to aggressive behaviors, depression, and psychological instability (Coelho, 2004). These factors create difficulties for refugee students in establishing healthy peer relationships and can lead to greater feelings of isolation and negative self-worth (Loerke, 2009). Subsequently, interrupted schooling is also linked to the way refugee students behave in a classroom setting. Interrupted schooling affects students' understanding of *appropriate* behaviour in a classroom and hinders their ability to communicate, socialize, and develop healthy relationships with peers and adults (e.g., educators, administrators, etc.), resulting in greater feelings of isolation and negative self-worth (Loerke, 2009).

Social challenges are equally met by academic struggles, particularly by those who have limited-to-no schooling experiences (Short & Boyson, 2004). These challenges heighten as schools provide resources that do not sufficiently address the learning needs of refugees in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and mainstream classrooms (Martinez, 2011; Wang et al., 2008). Such difficulties are a result of the subject matter being presented in ways that are culturally or personally irrelevant to the student (Tellez & Manthey, 2015; Wang et al., 2008).

Developing an understanding of the school's social expectations is pivotal for the learning and classroom engagement of refugee students (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). Stable and culturally inclusive environments encourage refugees to share their views and experiences with school personnel (Mosselson, 2006), which provides opportunities for mutual understanding; Educators

learn about each student's prior school experiences (e.g., rules, social/behavioral expectations, discipline, etc.), or lack thereof, in order to better bridge the gap between prior and current expectations. Once the discrepancy between expectations is identified, understood, and addressed, students can continue to build their identity as a student and as a member of the new school community of which they are a part (Arnot & Pinson, 2005). Oikonomidou (2007) further argued resettlement success and school performance is improved when the student learns the language of the host country. Additional factors, which influence refugees' success in school, include transitional plans, peer mentoring, and classroom discussion through visuals and multi-model technology (Cassidy & Gow, 2006; Pass & Mantero, 2009).

In summary, the literature review offers insight into the pre and post challenges refugee students experience as they settle into North American schools. While there is an abundance of literature surrounding the experiences of immigrants in new learning contexts, there is limited literature exploring the context of Syrian students in the Ontario elementary school system, as it is an emerging reality that requires consideration. Furthermore, there is limited literature that explores the unique perspective of refugee students in Ontario schools. Oikonomidou (2007) advises educators to listen to students' voices and experiences in order to better assist refugee students in the transition and adaptation process. The voice of refugee students will bring awareness to a growing population with a unique combination of needs and challenges, many of which have never been addressed before on such grand a scale by the Ontario education system. By exploring the experience of Syrian students, the researchers hoped to better understand the successes and challenges of Syrian refugee students in the Ontario classroom. In doing so, educators, administrators, and policymakers may better support the social, emotional, and academic needs of Syrian refugee students as they experience and adapt to school in Ontario.

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

The participants of this study were four Syrian refugee English Language Learner (ELL) students who entered an English speaking, south-western Ontario public school as of 2015. The school site was selected based on its high ELL and refugee demographics. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007), ELL students are defined as individuals whose native tongue is a language other than English. Once identified as an ELL, they are then divided into two programs: English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD). The participants in this study were ELD ELLs; these students have limited experience in developing language and literacy skills in their native language and have experienced gaps in their education.

All ELL students from grades five to eight within the school, who entered Canada with refugee status from 2014 and onward were invited to participate in the study. From the 24 qualifying students, four agreed to participate. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the students, pseudonyms have been used. Siblings, Ali and Hala, arrived in Canada from Aleppo in the 2014-2015 school year. At the time of the study, Ali was in grade eight, and his sister, Hala, in grade seven. Ali attended school in Syria up to grade five and Hala until grade four. Aamad and Souheila both arrived from Syria at different points in the 2014-2015 school year. Aamad and Souheila were in grade five during the study. Aamad remembered attending school for a short amount of time when he was younger, while Souheila did not attend school before arriving in Canada. All

participants' native language is Arabic, and together, they attended an English language learning class in addition to their mainstream class.

### ***Empirical Model***

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the experience of Syrian refugee students in the Ontario classroom. Phenomenology is an eidetic method that uses a philosophical approach to understand and examine the human experience from the perspective of those who experienced the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, as used in this study, phenomenology is commonly applied to qualitative semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are neither classified as open or closed-ended questions; instead, they are guiding questions that navigate the researcher and participant through central themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The phenomenological interviews were designed to provoke a detailed description of the participant's account through questions that engage their physical and emotional feelings towards the experience of becoming a member of the Canadian classroom. (Smith et al., 2009).

Additionally, the lead researcher of the study had experience working with the first wave of Syrian refugee students in the local school board through which the study was conducted, and included anecdotal observations while conducting the interviews. The experiences of the lead researcher as an educator and witness to the influx of Syrian refugee students inspired the exploration of students' experiences as they enter, navigate, and adapt to a new country, culture, and way of life. Taking into consideration the personal connection, as well as the phenomenological approach to conducting the study, the following research question emerged: What has affected refugee students' experience of being in the Ontario classroom?

### ***Data Collection***

The study was explored using a general research question and supported by open-ended semi-structured interview questions. Interview questions were developed based on the researcher's experience working with ELL students as an elementary educator. They were designed to provide a holistic snapshot of the students' learning experiences, allowing the researcher to flexibly discuss the topics with students, adjusting questions based on participant responses. To provoke a detailed response and provide insight on the growing phenomenon, questions were asked regarding: background information, language, socialization, and experience in the classroom. See Appendix for some sample questions.

### ***Procedures***

Research approval was granted by the Research Ethics Board, the local school board, as well as the school administrator. Students and their parents were invited to join the lead researcher after school for an information session regarding the study, where a translator was present to ensure clear lines of communication and understanding between the parents, the students, and the lead researcher. The purpose, procedures, ethical considerations, and dissemination purposes were discussed. Parents of the students who were interested in partaking in the study were given a consent form, which was translated and explained to them in further detail by the lead researcher, with the aid of the translator. For those who agreed to participate, ongoing assent was obtained prior to the start time of the scheduled interview.

Potential risks were also considered prior to the start of interviews. Participants were made aware they did not have to answer the questions if they experienced feelings of discomfort and rescheduling was available if needed. Additionally, students were informed there would be no penalization for withdrawal. To address the potential emotional risks or physical distress, support from trained school administration would be attained to ensure the emotional safety and well-being of the child, however, no signs of distress were observed or voiced throughout the study.

Moreover, to manage and minimize any risk related to misinterpretation, an interpreter was hired from the city's Multicultural Council. The role of the interpreter was to provide translation services and transcribe audio recordings. The city's Multicultural Council requires working and volunteering interpreters to ensure confidentiality. Moreover, the interpreter was also required to understand and sign a confidentiality/non-disclosure agreement form associated with this study.

In October 2016, the translator and lead researcher entered the participants' school. Data were collected during the students' nutrition break in a private room located in the school library. All procedures and questions were explained to the students individually and in the participant's preferred language (Arabic). Through a 40-minute semi-structured, one-on-one interview, the lead researcher began to unfold the layers behind each student's experience.

The essence of the students' experiences were analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis. In addition, the researchers abided by the phenomenological rule of horizontalization, where each experience was recognized and valued at equal weight. The transcripts were first coded individually and then together for common themes. Lastly, the data gathered from the interviews were interpreted to produce final conclusions and recommendations.

## **Findings**

Upon analysis of the data gathered from the translated interview responses, the following themes emerged: need for teacher-student connection, peer acceptance and friendship, and the effects of the learning environment on student experience.

### ***Need for Teacher-Student Connection***

To develop a lens and understanding of the students' experience with the phenomenon, each participant was asked to share their previous experiences in education. Several common threads were observed during the participants' responses, which included their immediate response to compare and contrast experiences, the importance of maintaining and preserving their first language and their desire to communicate with educators.

When discussing their school experiences in Syria, the participants shared memories and pointed out the differences they observed since living in Canada. Ali explained,

There is a difference. There, [the teachers] have a big temper, here they are relaxed. There, if you do anything in the class, they make you leave the class . . . There were some Misses who were very nice, but there were some Misses who had a big temper with us.

Hala also mentioned there were differences between schools in Syria and Canada. She went on to explain that, “The school there, the Misses yell a lot at the kids. Here, is the opposite; I like the Misses a lot.”

Additionally, Amaad discussed academics and his relationship with teachers, “I think I learn at school here, and I learned at school there. They are different though because there I would learn math and science, and so many things, and play soccer with my teacher.”

Aamad’s discussion on his limited exposure to math and science in school is not uncommon. As an ESL teacher, the lead researcher witnessed the struggles homeroom teachers encountered when trying to modify math and science lessons to meet the academic strengths and needs of English Language Learners. The homeroom teachers’ struggles are even more challenging when students possess limited prior knowledge to the subject or content area (Windle & Miller, 2012).

Unlike the other students in the study, Souheila did not attend school prior to arriving in Canada, but she continued to share her early experiences with the English language,

The son of my uncle, he did go to school, he would finish with the books and give them to me, and I would study these books from my home. I would study the *A* and the *B* in English. When I first came to here, I had them memorized because I knew them from when I was little.

Souheila’s level of independence and initiative is evident throughout her interview. Gaining awareness of her character traits through the learning of her experiences is an example of how educators can begin to understand their students and support their language acquisition (Arthur, 2003).

In discussing their past experiences, the students shared common feelings about maintaining and using their native language at school. Aamad explains, “I like using Arabic at school because me and my friends understand each other when we talk in Arabic.” Souheila shared a similar experience,

When I first came to here, I forgot the Arabic, all of it. So then I thought, what will I speak? What will I speak? Then I said, I will speak English. My dad knows a friend and this friend has a son. The son is a young person. This young person told me, ‘in a far away tomorrow you will forget the Arabic.’ We told him, ‘we will forget you before we forget the Arabic’.

The students’ attitude towards maintaining and preserving their native language is common among ELL students. It was evident they took great pride in sharing the gains they made in both their native and English language. Many of the lead researcher’s students, who had limited to no literacy skills in Arabic, are now attending Arabic school on the weekends. Consequently, students who engage in extra-curricular activities, whether in English or their mother tongue, have more confidence in the classroom (Yohani, 2013).

An additional component of holistic education is approaching student learning through the development of healthy teacher-student relationships (Hare, 2006). This relationship requires educators to acknowledge students’ experiences (Boud et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the students in the study experienced a disconnect between themselves and their teachers. Ali explained, “I want my tongue to learn the English a little so that I can know . . . they [teachers] could better

themselves by knowing that we do not understand them. I think that they think we understand them all the time, and we do not. I do not know how they can make this better” Amaad shared,

If I had a teacher that understood Arabic and English that would help me learn English. It would help me learn English because then if I don't know a word, I can ask them and they will know what I am trying to say.

Amaad's challenge of communicating with his educators was equally met by emotional distress, as he went on to explain,

I feel sad when I can't speak with my teachers. I try my best and do the best that I can to understand. Sometimes my friend in class will help me try my best with English and sometimes I will help my friend try their best with English. We help each other find the words in English. But sometimes it is hard.

Hala confessed similar feelings, “It is very embarrassing when I do not know the word. So, I have to call on somebody to help me.” Souheila also shared the feeling of confusion and embarrassment, “I am confused and overwhelmed. All I want for her [teacher] is to understand me. Also, it is embarrassing a little.”

### ***Peer Acceptance and Friendship***

Peer acceptance is a pivotal part of a student's journey, as it influences attitudes toward school, work ethic, and cultural learning experience (Osterman, 2000). In their discussion of peer relationships, the students expressed feelings of isolation and differentiation between themselves and their English-speaking peers. The students accredited this difference to language, as Ali went on to explain,

They think I am talking about them or something. And if they talk about me, I will not know that they are talking about me. They talk to me in English and I do not understand. I talk to them in Arabic; they do not understand. If I would learn English, this would help me to understand them because I could talk to them.

Hala shared a similar experience, “they look at us, and they think we are saying something about them. So, we speak, and we try to not look at them. But I do not know what they feel.” These feelings mirror what the lead researcher witnessed in her professional experience as an ELL teacher; often seeing students feeling rejected, left out and separate from their English-speaking peers. Such feelings are noted to be a daily challenge faced in the classroom and on the playground, as well as a barrier for engaging in English social interactions (Deckers & Zinga, 2012).

Consequently, all the students in the study explained their friendship circles consisted of other Arabic-speaking students, mostly those in their ESL class and the challenges they faced initiating and sustaining English-speaking friendships, Ali explains, “I think it is hard because I do not know what I can tell them. Sometimes I play basketball to get to know people.” Amaad shared a similar perspective,

It is sometimes easy to make friends when the friends speak Arabic. It is difficult to make friends with English speakers because I only speak a little bit of English. I used to have no English friends before, because I knew no English. Now that I know a little bit of English I can have a little bit of friends, but it is still hard to play with people at recess because I can't understand them and they can't understand me.



Souhaila's perspective also aligned with the others',

If you know English, you can go to and play with anyone [*sic*]. But here I can only have Arabic friends and friends who talk this way and that. And, I have to learn before I can have friends. There are no friends who understand us or know how to play with us. Eh, if I could talk English, I would play with so many others.

Despite the challenges in peer relationships, some students expressed solutions to creating friendships, which extended beyond learning the language, Ali stated, "The Misses could tell him to come and help me. This way, we can be together, and we can become friends. This is the number one way I have made friends before." In contrast, Amaad's statement relates to his preferred instructional style, "I think if my teacher knew Arabic and English and came out to recess and could tell me what my friends were saying." Regardless, all students stressed the importance of holding friendships, particularly among their Arabic speaking friends, who, for them, provide security. Hala explained, "When my friends are with me, I am happy because we can play, but when I am alone I am not very happy; I am upset. If one of my friends is gone, it feels like something is missing."

### ***The Effects of the Learning Environment and Student Experience***

The structure of the learning environment impacts both teacher delivery and student receptiveness. More specifically, researchers have indicated that classroom design affects the English language development of ELLs (Gunn et al., 2000; Ross & Begeny, 2011). All students in the interviews discussed the difficulties they faced with learning the English language, Amaad explained, "I think of how I can learn, but the problem is I do not know how I will learn English." Hala also noted, "The learning of English is a little hard, but very nice." She goes onto explain her reasoning for the challenges she faces,

Do you want the truth? First, before we took a break [referring to summer], there was a teacher named Ms. C. I learned from her a lot. She used to give us always dictation work, like at, bat, cat. I learned a lot from her. Now, we do not learn a lot. This is because we are all put upstairs, and everyone is yelling. So, we do not learn anything ever here. This is because the grade 4s, 6s, 7s, and 8s are all together. But, before the school was better, I would learn a lot.

Similarly, Souheila mentioned the distractions she experienced from her peers, "The class does not let me learn anything. They keep on talking. They were not raised good with good manners." Ali adds, "With all of the noise when the people talk in class and the Misses tells them to be quiet. I will have something to ask, and I cannot ask it."

Aside from the environment, the students also brought light to the challenges they faced with instruction in their ESL class. Ali explained,

So, the Misses speaks quickly, and we do not understand. Then we ask her, "what did you say?" and she starts a different topic. So, I have a paper and I have questions with the paper, but then she starts a different topic, and all of my questions go without anything. This is why we are not learning.

Ali's response was shared among all the participants, but in addition to their challenges with instruction, the students offered solutions, Hala stated, "I wish she would give us things to memorize, like dictation. Something to memorize, like Miss. C would give us. This helped me better." Souheila shared similar feelings, "We should be able to get a paper of what she is saying.

I want to take this home and translate. Then I can memorize it.” Moreover, to resolve the noise level Souheila recommends the use of a rewards system,

If the Miss wants to keep the children all of them well-behaved. Do you know what she needs to do? Like the other Miss. She needs to bring a paper like this, put it on the board, and everyone writes their name. And, the one who answers, the one who is quiet, the well behaved one Miss then puts a sticker. Once they fill the paper, all of it, eh, she gives a prize. Eh, and if she sees them talking she peels all the stickers. Then they stop talking, ever, ever, ever.

During this time, the lead researcher observed a sincere sense of anxiousness and confidence as Souheila spoke about possible suggestions to implement into the classrooms. Her entire demeanor changed: the volume of her voice increased, she sat up confidently and spoke with passion. As she shared multiple strategies to enhance her learning experience and environment, it became evident that she had been thinking of possible approaches for some time.

Amaad later discussed his feelings in this mainstream class and explained the dynamic changes between his homeroom and ESL class, “I feel different in my homeroom class because I play in my homeroom class and I work hard in my ESL class.” Souheila shared different feelings about her homeroom class,

In this class [homeroom class] I am very happy. In this class, the kids listen more. And, they learn more. Even though they are smaller and there are more kids in the class. They are smaller because I am with grades four and grades five. They are small, but their minds are big. They like to listen to the Miss and learn and I learn English.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspective of Syrian refugee students, with a focus on understanding what has affected their experience of being in the Ontario classroom. Through analysis and researcher interpretation, the following themes emerged: need for teacher-student connection, peer acceptance and friendship, and the effects of the learning environment on student experience. The themes give way to the researchers’ major findings, which emphasize the importance of understanding students using a holistic approach, building peer relationships as motivation for language acquisition, and considering the impact of the structure of the learning environment on student experience.

### ***Understanding Students Using a Holistic Approach***

The ultimate purpose of the holistic approach to education is to transform the way individuals look at themselves, others, and their relationship with the world from a fragmented to an integrated perspective (Hare, 2006). While there is no one definition of holistic education, there are a number of complex and recurrent elements: the assumption that everything is connected; development of relationships; a shared sense of community; a genuine sense of caring; management of personal development and growth of the whole person; development of personal goals; and the impact of the environment on student experiences (Hare, 2006).

In the interviews, the students shared many memories, new experiences, and thoughts and perspectives, which have and are continually contributing to their overall experience as students in Canada. Students spoke about experiences in their home countries, the differences they noticed

in the instructional approaches and overall atmosphere teachers created in their classrooms, differences in the connectedness they felt to their friends in Syria versus their peers in Canada, difficulty building friendships, and difficulty with teacher approaches to instruction. Difficulty communicating, understanding, and being understood by peers and teachers has added a level of emotional distress to the students.

Language acquisition becomes a primary focus for refugee students. However, the holistic view of education suggests support, encouragement, experience, and understanding of all factors that contribute to the human experience are needed in order to develop the whole child: academically, personally, socially, and emotionally (Çakmak, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kosnik & Beck, 2000). In order to close the gap among ELL students, their teachers, peers and the rest of the school community, students must feel their experiences are acknowledged and valued as a connected component of their identity in the classroom, as both their prior and current experiences, and feelings towards both, have the power to impact all future learning (Boud et al., 2013).

### ***Building Peer Relationships as Motivation for Language Acquisition***

After the basic human physiological and safety needs, there is a need for love and belonging through social relationships (Maslow, 1970). During school-age years, there is a strong emphasis on this through the general need of children and adolescents to belong in the school community, and especially in their peer groups. Many of the participants in the study discussed the void they felt in their social relationships. Most of them left good friends in Syria and found it challenging to make new friends in Canada because of the language barrier. While many were able to make friends in their ESL/ELD classes because of a shared language and experiential commonalities, they experienced difficulty making friends with their English-speaking peers, which created feelings of isolation and division between the perceived *groups*. Sometimes these difficulties even resulted in conflicts between non-native and native English speakers because of miscommunication and assumptions related to culture, experience, and social norms.

The degree to which students feel accepted by their peers (teachers and school community) is associated with a positive orientation toward school and classwork and is indicative of the amount of interest and enjoyment students have in school. It also is reflected in their commitment to their work, higher expectations of success and lower levels of anxiety (Osterman, 2000). While students did feel isolated from many of their peers, this served as a great motivation for them to work hard and learn the language so that they would be able to interact, communicate, and form meaningful relationships. Participants noticed that as they became more proficient and English, they made more friends and were able to socialize throughout the day and at recess. They had better experiences at school and felt more accepted by their peers.

### ***Impact of the Structure of the Learning Environment on Student Experience***

Each participant in the study shared their perspective and possible considerations towards their ESL/ELD classroom environment and the delivery of instruction. The students' view of their learning environment reflected their desire for a smaller group size with students within their grade division. The participants' views are reflective of earlier research, which has indicated that larger class sizes have an effect on the relationships and level of intellectual challenge experienced among students (Hoxby, 2000).

Specifically, small class sizes are most effective for at-risk students, such as refugees and English language learners, as it allows for higher amounts of focused and specialized instruction reflective of the academic needs of the group of learners (Gunn et al., 2000; Vaughn et al., 2006). When compared to large group instruction, small group settings have shown to increase ELL students' reading, fluency, and comprehension level (Ross & Begeny, 2011).

Alongside the dynamics of the classroom, the participants also raised concerns regarding the delivery of instruction. The perceived disconnect between instruction and students' learning needs is reflective of the challenges experienced by ELLs in previous studies: limited scaffolding and engagement, teacher-directed instruction and discussion, difficulty understanding instruction and content, and lack of personally relevant tasks and resources (Cummins et al., 2012; Windle & Miller, 2012). Participants who shared their experiences and concerns regarding instructional strategies, as well as their request for classroom management, suggested the need for greater teacher awareness towards instructional approaches and students' learning styles and needs (Kovinthan, 2016). This echoes findings in the literature, which assert teachers have a part in how the academic and social components of schooling are experienced by students (Cummins et al., 2012; MacNevin, 2012).

### ***Practical Implications***

The students' voices, as well as the conclusions from the study, suggest the need for teachers, schools, and administrators to develop a holistic approach to education. Holistic education maintains that understanding and supporting the whole child, and their experiences, enhances the student's overall well-being (Hare, 2006). The need to adopt a holistic approach stems from the participants' shared experience of engaging in work and content material that does not align to their prior experiences and interests. Cummins et al. (2012) highlight the weight of the matter, by encouraging educators to create a frame of reference that builds upon and utilizes students' background knowledge. While building a holistic view of the children, teachers are also reminded to consider aligning their approach to instruction, application, and assessment to the learning styles and abilities of their students.

Students also voiced their concerns regarding cross-cultural peer groups, and the limitations that language poses on their relationships with English-speaking peers. To navigate these concerns, the researchers of the study suggest adopting a school-wide approach that works towards bridging the language and cultural gap among students and teachers by highlighting shared experiences through visually-based activities. As an example in class, students can participate in a game of cross the line; however, rather than asking students to cross the line based on an oral example, teachers can offer a visual representation of the feeling or experience. As a school-community, administrators and teachers can build respected and valued relationships through broadcasting student video blogs with translation in order to share their identities, special moments, and new learning. Moreover, a student language program could be put in place, where ELLs are paired with native-speaking classmates to engage in various language and cultural exchanging activities. Researchers, who employed a pairing system to language learning, found this approach alleviated ELLs' stress when speaking out in class and eased their transition back into the mainstream classroom (Cho & Reich, 2008; Every et al., 2014).

Lastly, although class size was a matter of discussion, it is a topic that is difficult to mitigate, therefore, the researchers suggest providing ESL and ELD program teachers with professional development focused on classroom management. In the case of this study, Arabic was the primary language of the ELD students, which appeared to have affected the classroom learning dynamics. To assist teachers in addressing first-language concerns and fostering an environment that is conducive to learning the target language, professional development is recommended.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

There were several limitations to the study. The first being a small sample size of four students in a single elementary school in Ontario. These students represent a small subset of the population in a unique learning context. As a result, they may not be entirely representative of the Syrian refugee student population, because there is a wide range of experiences existing in this population of students. The singular context is also very limiting as the structure of ESL/ELD programs varies from school to school, and from school board to school board, resulting in both context and structure to affect the experiences and perspectives of students.

A final limitation is the ever-changing education system. From the time of the initial data collection to the final draft of this article, the ESL/ELD program model in the school board through which the study was conducted changed multiple times, and continues to evolve, which could significantly change the experiences and perspectives of students. The continuous change in programming is problematic for many reasons. While this could indicate school boards have yet to find a model that *works*, it can be argued a single model has not been in place long enough to evaluate, making it difficult to assess the areas of strength and challenge existing in the program models in order to consistently and effectively address the needs of students.

Exploring what has affected Syrian refugee students as they adapt to the Ontario classroom provided insight into their experiences in and with their environment. Through analysis of the students' responses, the researchers discovered the need for understanding refugee students using a holistic approach, the importance of peer relationships in enhancing language acquisition, and the impact of the structure of the learning environment on students' experiences.

Taking the findings into consideration, the researchers encourage educators to implement culturally relevant material that expands upon the students' experience and existing knowledge. Recognizing and acknowledging the student's interests, needs and learning styles may assist teachers in enhancing the ELL students' level of engagement, peer-to-peer relationships, and feelings of confidence and belonging in their learning space. The developments of peer-to-peer relationships are also encouraged through tasks, activities, and extra-curricular school teams/clubs that support authentic and meaningful interactions between ELLs and native speakers. Lastly, with the understanding there are diverse learning gaps between new and existing ELLs, the researchers suggest the Ministry consider reducing ESL class sizes to smaller groups consisting of students with similar academic needs and similar age in order to better meet the needs of students emotionally, socially, and academically. We believe finding effective ways to address these recommendations would be an important first step in creating conditions for all refugee students, regardless of previous school experiences, to be, and believe they can be, successful, and in turn, positively affect the experiences of refugee students in Ontario classrooms.

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## Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

### Background Information

1. What did you think a Canadian school would be like before you started here?
2. Describe what you thought about school after you started.
3. Describe a typical day at school. What would make this day better?

### ***Language***

1. Describe how you feel about learning English?
2. Describe some of your experiences with learning and using English at school.)
3. How do you feel when you can't communicate with your teachers?
4. What do you think would help your teachers to understand you better?

### ***Socialization***

1. What are some of your favorite things to do at school?
2. Do you think it is hard or easy to make friends at school? Why?
3. What do you do during nutrition break? Who do you spend your nutrition break with?

### ***Experience in the Classroom***

1. What is it like to work with other students in your class?
2. Describe how you feel in your homeroom class? Do you feel the same or different when you are in the ESL class?
3. How do you feel when you are getting ready to go to school in the morning?