

## Yazidi Refugee Students: A Lost Generation Finding Their Way

Carla Sadler

### Abstract

*This paper examines issues that Yazidi refugee students face upon arrival to Canada, and interventions that schools can implement to support these students. Due to traumatic experiences, Yazidi students suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Therefore, school staff need training to recognize the symptoms of PTSD, and schools must provide targeted counselling services and connections to community-based services. Yazidi students are often illiterate or have gaps in education, so schools need to incorporate inclusive practices to increase engagement, and provide instruction that focuses on emergent literacy and functional language. Teachers require specific training that addresses the academic needs of Yazidi students.*

The Yazidi refugee population is a relatively new, but growing, group of refugees. Winnipeg currently has the largest population of Yazidi refugees in Canada (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Most Yazidis come from northern Iraq, and are escaping religious persecution and genocide at the hands of Daesh<sup>1</sup> (Standing Committee, 2018). Beginning in August 2014, 40,000 Yazidis tried to escape to the Sinjar Mountains. Thousands of women and children were kidnapped, raped, and sold in slave markets (Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2017). Yazidi families who escaped and arrived in Canada are living with extreme trauma (Standing Committee, 2018). Their children are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resulting in mental health issues and emotional dysregulation (Khamis, 2019). Schools can be key in identifying the symptoms of PTSD and ensuring that students and their families have access to essential mental health services (Baak et al., 2019). Most Yazidi students have significant gaps in education or no formal education at all, and are therefore illiterate (Wilkinson et al., 2019). To close these gaps, schools must adopt a holistic approach that incorporates language and literacy, and initiatives that embrace diversity and inclusion (McNeely et al., 2017). This poses challenges for teachers who are not trained to support students with such intensive academic and emotional needs (Raponi, 2016). Teachers require professional development related to PTSD and, especially for middle and senior years teachers, early literacy learning and intervention strategies (Jowett, 2019).

### Mental Health Supports

Yazidi children, young girls in particular, have had horrendous experiences that make them susceptible to mental health issues (Standing Committee, 2018). When children suffer from trauma, they frequently exhibit symptoms of PTSD such as mental health issues, recurring memories about the traumatic event, and severe anxiety (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). In turn, this can lead to prolonged states of emotional dysregulation (Mancini, 2019). For refugee children, PTSD and emotional dysregulation often go hand in hand (Khamis, 2019). They may have a dissociative response, mentally removing themselves from the present situation. Essentially, the students will shut off their emotions and become “numb” to the world around them (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). As a result, Yazidi students struggle with behaviour problems and hostility,

---

<sup>1</sup> “also called ‘Islamic State,’ ‘IS,’ ‘ISIS’ or ‘ISIL’” (Standing Committee, 2018, p. 7)

which can lead to a lack of connection with their classmates and their school community. I have witnessed Yazidi students whose anxiety is so debilitating that they withdraw to the point of not leaving their homes. If the mental health needs of Yazidi students are not properly diagnosed and treated, students will disengage. This can lead to a lack of academic success, and in the later grades students are more susceptible to quitting school (Mancini, 2019). For Yazidi students to thrive, it is imperative for schools to recognize and to deal with the effects of trauma that these students face.

Identifying the signs of PTSD and providing mental health supports are essential to the education of Yazidi students. Learning cannot take place until these needs are first met (Baak et al., 2019). Aside from home, students spend the majority of their time in school, which makes it an ideal place to begin counselling interventions (Raponi, 2016). In many schools, counselling services are limited (Hos, 2016). For example, I work in a school that has two counsellors for approximately 700 students, despite having a high number of refugee students in addition to other students with counselling needs. Schools that have a high number of students suffering from trauma need to be provided with extra counselling support. Staff need to be trained to recognize the symptoms of PTSD, so that they can proactively refer students to the necessary services. There needs to be an organized system that leads from recognition to referral, to support, to follow up, with communication and documentation at each stage (Baak et al., 2019). Schools should also offer support for students' family members who are not in the educational system.

Many Yazidi families encounter obstacles while accessing mental health supports that they desperately need. Aside from the obvious language barriers, there is often a cultural stigma surrounding mental health (Standing Committee, 2018). In Winnipeg, Ryerson School hosts a "Newcomer Community Hub" specifically for Yazidi and Syrian refugees. This is a collaboration between Pembina Trails School Division and various newcomer organizations (Gaidola, 2019). Families can access mental health services and gain an understanding of the importance of counselling. It is my experience that if a family unit thrives, the student will achieve greater success. Once the effects of PTSD are addressed and being managed, Yazidi youth must next face the challenge of adapting to the Canadian school system.

### **Academic Programming**

Students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) are students who have had "limited access to education" or poor-quality schooling (Drake, 2017, p. 338). Manitoba Education considers immigrant SIFE to be three years or more below grade level or students who have never attended school (Jowett, 2019). Schools are frequently closed during times of war or there is no schooling available for refugee students while they are en route to safety, so education is often inaccessible (Bang, 2017). Most Yazidi SIFE who arrive to Canada are illiterate in their own language, Kurmanji, since it is not taught in Iraqi schools. Some have very limited literacy in Arabic, but because this was the language of their slave owners, most refuse to speak it (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Learning another language is challenging. Being illiterate and learning a new language is even more challenging. Yazidi SIFE also do not have the content knowledge or critical thinking skills mandated by the provincial curricula or typical of the grade level that they are entering. They must begin by learning basic "student skills" (Bang, 2017, p. 56). Many competences learned in the primary grades are first learned by older Yazidi students when they enter Canadian classrooms. To remedy these issues, schools must provide targeted literacy programs and content area interventions.

To ensure academic success, it is essential that Yazidi SIFE have comprehensive language and literacy programs. This is especially true for middle years and senior years students. On average, it takes ten years for SIFE to learn academic English, so time is of the essence (McNeely et al., 2017). Practical language skills necessary for everyday functioning should be a priority for Yazidi students. This will increase student engagement as the language

learning spreads into curricular areas (Ross & Ziemke, 2016). It is common for middle schools and high schools to have SIFE begin with a separate program that focuses on functional language and specific language related to academic content. This facilitates a smoother transition to regular classes. Instruction should be flexible and adapted to meet the needs of each SIFE (Jowett, 2019). Language and literacy need to be incorporated across all subject areas, not just in English language arts. Content area teachers must ensure that the chosen texts match the literacy and language levels of SIFE (Ross & Ziemke, 2016). Teachers can use common reading comprehension strategies such as retelling, summarizing, and asking questions. Comprehension strategies should be paired with word study that includes phonological awareness, word sorting activities, and word walls. This will support students who feel more comfortable with the content, but lack the language and vocabulary (Jowett, 2019). Above all else, teachers need to ensure they access students' prior knowledge. Although they do not have traditional education or knowledge of western educational values, Yazidi SIFE come to Canada with a multitude of valuable experiences. When possible, teachers should try to relate content to Yazidi experiences and culture (Hanover Research, 2014). This will help students engage academically. It will also help them to feel accepted as members of the classroom and school communities.

### **Social-Emotional Wellness**

Incorporating inclusive practices and creating a sense of belonging are essential for Yazidi students. Social connections are critical ways to keep SIFE engaged and to reduce the risk of them dropping out of school (Jowett, 2019). Whole school and classroom level community building is imperative. Schools need to create a climate where diversity is valued and seen as an asset, and inclusion is embedded in the school culture (Hanover Research, 2014). Every student should feel like their culture and background is valuable, and every staff member has the responsibility to ensure that this happens. In the classroom, teachers play a key role in helping Yazidi students adjust socially and emotionally (Hos, 2016). Teachers must purposefully implement activities that create a strong sense of classroom community. A good place to start is learning about each student's personal interests and finding ways to incorporate them into the classroom and into lesson planning. This will increase student engagement, attendance, and overall success (Schnellert et al., 2020). Making collaborative classroom agreements is a way for students to feel like they have a voice. Sharing circles are a way for students to get to know each other, value each other's diversity, and foster empathy. When strong connections and relationships are developed, at-risk students, such as Yazidi SIFE, become more engaged and are more likely to stay in school (Schnellert et al., 2020). To ensure that Yazidi students achieve optimal success, teachers first need specific training related to working with SIFE.

### **Teacher Training**

Teachers are often untrained and unprepared to meet the unique needs of Yazidi students. Many teachers have expressed feeling ill equipped to teach instructional level literacy and English language acquisition (Jowett, 2020). This is especially true for middle years and senior years teachers, whose backgrounds focus more heavily on content area teaching (Drake, 2017). A lack of appropriate resources, such as low-level high interest reading materials, is also a significant issue (Raponi, 2016). Most teachers do not have specific training related to working with students who have suffered extreme trauma, nor have they had professional development related to the history or experiences of the Yazidi population (Wilkinson et al., 2019). As a result, there is sometimes confusion and miscommunication between Yazidi students, families, and educators. Teachers are often left feeling frustrated by their lack of efficacy in supporting these students. Administrators have the duty to ensure that they are providing teachers with appropriate professional development so that they are properly equipped to teach Yazidi

students.

Currently, teachers do not require any specific training to work with SIFE (McNeely et al., 2017). However, they overwhelmingly express wanting training related to supporting the mental health needs of Yazidi students and early literacy and language intervention strategies. Teachers want to help these students achieve the same level of success as their peers (Raponi, 2016). Whole school professional development in relation to cultural competency is essential. All school staff working with Yazidi SIFE should be aware of their backgrounds and their experiences (Hanover Research, 2014). This will help inform teaching topics and create an understanding of why Yazidi students may require extra attention. Teachers must have training from experts to recognize the symptoms and effects of PTSD and to understand that these symptoms are not simply behaviour issues (Baak et al., 2019). Yazidi students need support as quickly as possible, and teachers are often the first people to witness these behaviours. Teachers need to know when to contact counsellors, school psychologists, or school social workers (Jowett, 2019). Finally, although not typically seen as part of middle or high school teachers' jobs, it is essential that all content area teachers of Yazidi students receive training in emergent literacy strategies and language development (Ross & Ziemke, 2016). Teachers must be able to competently adapt and differentiate for each student, including SIFE.

### Conclusion

Yazidi SIFE face many challenges in the Canadian school system. Although Yazidi students indicate that they appreciate being part of a school community, the effects of their trauma and mental health needs create many barriers in learning and in overall school performance (Standing Committee, 2018). Interventions must be timely and should involve all stakeholders, including family members (Raponi, 2016). The significant amounts of interrupted or no formal schooling have led to extremely high rates of illiteracy in the Yazidi mother tongue of Kurmanji, which makes learning English and learning the Canadian curricula difficult (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Schools must provide a holistic education that meets the academic and social-emotional needs of Yazidi students. Educators do not have the professional training required to reduce the academic disparities and to mitigate the effects of trauma that Yazidi students face (Raponi, 2016). Administrators must build capacity in their staff by providing relevant professional development and training that addresses the needs of Yazidi SIFE. Yazidi children are among the most resilient children that I have encountered as an educator. Despite their past traumas, they have a determination and a drive to succeed. Teachers have the opportunity to be life-changing mentors for these special students on their journey to success.

### References

- Baak, M., Miller, E., Ziersch, A., Due, C., Masocha, S., & Ziaian, T. (2019). The role of schools in identifying and referring refugee background young people who are experiencing mental health issues. *Journal of School Health, 90*(3), 172-181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12862>
- Bang, H. (2016). Iraqi refugee high school students' academic adjustment. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 11*(1), 45-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2016.1202232>
- Drake, K. (2017). Competing purposes of education: The case of underschooled immigrant students. *Journal of Educational Change, 18*(3), 337-363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9302-3>
- Gaidola, J. (2019, January 26). Centre at Ryerson School to give refugees resources, "emotional support" in south Winnipeg. CTV News. <https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/centre-at-ryerson-school-to-give-refugees-resources-emotional-support-in-south-winnipeg-1.4270417>
- Hanover Research. (2014, August). *Strategies for building cultural competency*. <https://www.gssaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Strategies-for-Building-Cultural->

- Competency-1.pdf
- Hos, R. (2016). The lives, aspirations, and needs of refugee and immigrant students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) in a secondary newcomer program. *Urban Education*, 55(7), 1021-1042. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916666932>
- Jowett, N. (with Silvius, R., Abdikheir, A., DePape, N). (2020, February). *Supported transitions: Effective educational approaches for older refugee youth with interrupted schooling*. <https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/79586/effective-educational-approaches-for-older-refugee-youth-with-interrupted-schooling.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Khamis, V. (2019). Posttraumatic stress disorder and emotion dysregulation among Syrian refugee children and adolescents resettled in Lebanon and Jordan. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 89, 29-39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.12.013>
- Kizilhan, J. I., & Noll-Hussong, M. (2017). Individual, collective, and transgenerational traumatization in the Yazidi. *BMC Medicine*, 15(1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-017-0965-7>
- Mancini, M. A. (2019). A pilot study evaluating a school-based, trauma-focused intervention for immigrant and refugee youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 37(3), 287-300. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00641-8>
- McNeely, C. A., Morland, L., Doty, S. B., Meschke, L. L., Awad, S., Husain, A., & Nashwan, A. (2017). How schools can promote healthy development for newly arrived immigrant and refugee adolescents: Research priorities. *Journal of School Health*, 87(2), 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12477>
- Perry, B. D., & Szalavitz, M. (2017). *The boy who was raised as a dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook: What traumatized children can teach us about loss, love, and healing*. Basic Books.
- Raponi, J. (2016). Students with interrupted formal education: Teacher perspectives [Master's thesis, The College at Brockport: State University of New York]. Brockport Digital Commons. [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/ehd\\_theses/638](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/ehd_theses/638)
- Ross, D. B., & Ziemke, L. (2016). Promising literacy practices for students with interrupted formal education in achieving competence with academic language across disciplines. *The Florida Reading Journal*, 51(3), 1-10.
- Schnellert, L., King, J., Manuel, T., Searcy, N., Moase, J., & Moore, S. (2020). Through a different lens: Increasing success for "at-risk" learners through situated, collaborative inquiry. *American Educational Research Association Annual Conference Repository*, 1-44. [https://www.academia.edu/43320583/Through\\_a\\_Different\\_Lens\\_Increasing\\_success\\_for\\_at\\_risk\\_learners\\_through\\_situated\\_collaborative\\_inquiry](https://www.academia.edu/43320583/Through_a_Different_Lens_Increasing_success_for_at_risk_learners_through_situated_collaborative_inquiry)
- Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. (2018, March). *Road to recovery: Resettlement issues of Yazidi women and children in Canada*. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/CoMmittee/421/CIMM/Reports/RP9715738/ciMmrp18/ciMmrp18-e.pdf>
- Wilkinson, L., Bhattacharyya, P., Riziki, A., & Abdul-Karim, A.-B. (2019). *Yazidi resettlement in Canada-Final report 2018*. <https://mansomanitoba.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/YAZIDI-FINAL-FEB14.pdf>

### **About the Author**

*Carla Sadler is working toward completing her Master of Education in educational administration. She currently teaches ninth grade English language arts and social studies. Carla has two daughters, who keep her busy with various extra-curricular activities. In her spare time, Carla enjoys reading, cooking, and playing in a bowling league.*