

## **Syrian Newcomer Students' Feelings and Attitudes Regarding Their Education in Canada**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to share and discuss our research findings on the experiences of Syrian refugee students in elementary public schools in a southwestern region of Ontario, Canada. We used Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a frame to guide this study. Data collection involved an anonymous questionnaire completed by the students. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The majority of the students missed several years of school or experienced interruptions to their education prior to resettlement in Canada. The students reported positive resettlement and socio-cultural experiences in Canada so far; however, some of them faced difficulties with their learning. Based on the findings, we propose some strategies and make recommendations for educators and the school to support Syrian newcomer students with their learning and integration into the school community.

*Keywords:* Syrian refugee students, resettlement, school experiences in Canada



## **Syrian Newcomer Students' Feelings and Attitudes Regarding Their Education in Canada**

Millions of people worldwide have been, and continue, to be forced to flee their homes due to wars, armed conflicts, or natural disasters. There are currently 100 million displaced people in the world and among them 27.1 million refugees who are living in dire conditions while seeking safety and protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] Canada, 2022). An example of such armed conflicts is the ongoing war in Syria that started in 2011 and has led to millions of Syrian refugees internally and externally displaced from their homes (Amnesty International, 2022).

In previous years, Canada has, and continues to, respond to global crises by providing relief and sponsoring thousands of refugees every year to resettle in Canada; by doing so, Canada maintains a humanitarian tradition on the global stage. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Canada has sponsored, and continues to sponsor, thousands of Syrian refugee families to resettle in Canada. During 2015 to 2022, Canada admitted 44,630 Syrian refugees to resettle in Canada; out of this total number, 19,620 Syrian refugees resettled in the province of Ontario (Government of Canada, 2022).

Once in Canada, Syrian newcomer children begin a challenging process of integration into Canadian society and adaptation to a new school system. This paper is based on a mixed methods research study we conducted in 2019–2020 to investigate the educational experiences of Syrian refugee students in elementary English public schools (Grades 4–8) in a city in the southwest region of Ontario that welcomed 1,525 Syrian refugees from 2015 to 2018 (Government of Canada, 2018). We embarked on this study for two main reasons: First, we learned from educators that some of the Syrian newcomer students are experiencing challenges with their learning and adapting to the school system in Canada, and second, there is very limited research on the experiences of Syrian newcomer students in Canada due to their recent arrival.

The purpose of the study we conducted was to investigate the experiences of the students using their own perspectives, stories, and views about their education in Canada, and to shed light on their challenges and needs. As emphasized by Guerrero and Tinkler (2010) and Smyth (2013), to have a good understanding on how an education system is meeting the needs of newcomer students, it is imperative to hear from the students themselves about their school experiences; this is of particular importance since the views of refugee children and those of minority groups are rarely heard with regards to their education.

Since the students have experienced some premigration and postmigration challenges, we hoped that this study would empower them by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions and advocate for themselves. We also aimed at shedding light on their resilience and areas of strengths so that educators are aware of these positive skills that are essential to the students' educational success. We believe this is imperative since refugee students' resilience and coping strategies, as stressed by Ogilvie and Fuller (2016), is not always considered with their education. As accentuated by Weekes et al. (2011), refugee children are resilient, and despite the many challenges they have to overcome, they have the capacity to thrive with their learning.

We used the following overarching research question as we explored the students' school experiences and gained insightful information using their own perspectives: What are the educational experiences and challenges of Syrian newcomer students in elementary English public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada? More specifically, we focused on the students'

premigration school experiences, resettlement experience, and their school experiences in Canada related to learning, social integration, extra-curricular activities, and staff support. This was a mixed-methods study that used an anonymous questionnaire with students and interviews with students and parents for data collection. This article focuses on the quantitative data from the questionnaire completed by the students that elucidated their strengths, challenges, and needs. We also propose strategies and recommendations for consideration by educators and schools welcoming Syrian newcomer students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Premigration Refugee Experiences**

The literature outlines the significant impacts of the refugee experience particularly on young children due to the lack of basic human needs, exposure to traumatic events, and disruptions to education (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Barber & Ramsay, 2020; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Vongkhamphra et al., 2011; Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Refugees, or those who are displaced from their homes internally or externally, struggle with lack of basic life necessities. As reported by Save the Children (2022), due to the war and displacement, many Syrian children and their families are lacking basic life necessities such as food, water, healthcare, hygiene services, and education. Many Syrian children have been impacted by this humanitarian crisis and are suffering from malnutrition (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2019, Syrian Crisis section, para. 5).

Another major challenge for refugees, especially young children, is the risk of exposure to traumatic events (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Walker & Zuberi, 2020) such as experiencing or witnessing violence, or the loss of family members and their home. As described by Miles and Bailey-McKenna (2016), "Trauma can be understood as an experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, and can include acute (discrete) or chronic (over and over again) events. Refugee students may have experienced one or both types of trauma" (p. 118). Beltekin (2016) pointed out that even though most people who flee war violence survive, they lose their personal belongings including their homes and lose their connection with family and friends. In the example of the war in Syria, children have been impacted most severely by the violence, risk of injury, trauma, lack of access to basic life necessities, displacement, loss of friends and family, and separation from family and relatives (Hamilton et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2018; UNICEF, 2019). Syrian children who experienced these psychologically impacting, traumatic events suffer from injuries, chronic stress, and instabilities in their lives (Save the Children, 2022).

The refugee experience also has adverse effects on children's education by causing interruptions or missed years of schooling (Barber, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Displaced people who flee their homes for safety and make it to a refugee camp "are typically offered little or no educational opportunities" (Melton, 2013, p. 3) and children who are disabled or have special education needs are mostly affected by having limited school opportunities (Beltekin, 2016). Some of the factors that contribute to refugee children receiving little to no formal education include large class sizes, lack of resources, underqualified educators, parents' inability to cover school fees, and in certain countries gender may be a factor in limiting school opportunities (Courtney, 2015; Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). Hos (2016) learned in her study of Syrian refugee children's education in a school in Turkey that the students "are receiving basic education under difficult conditions" (pg. 59). Nofal (2017) also witnessed, during her visits to Syrian refugee camps, the limited resources for education: "Schools are unable to accommodate

the number of students,” and “schools do not offer the specific educational curriculum that meets the needs of students who have experienced war, trauma and displacement” (p. 6). Resulting from these educational challenges, refugee children often suffer from weak literacy and numeracy skills (Courtney, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002), and it is possible that “many resettled refugee students may arrive to their host country having no past experiences with schooling at all” (McBrien, 2011, p. 76).

### **Postmigration Experiences**

In addition to the premigration difficulties, refugee families and children face further challenges after resettlement in a host country with integration, adaptation to a new way of life, introduction to a new language, and education (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Nofal, 2017; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Wilbur, 2016). After resettlement, refugee children are challenged to overcome “disrupted or minimal prior education, disruption to family networks, insecure housing, poverty, negative stereotypes and discrimination” (Block et al., 2014, p. 1338).

Some refugee children, as indicated in the literature, experience post-traumatic stress in the host country resulting from premigration experiences with violence, trauma, and losses. Forced migration, as described by De Haene et al. (2007), is a “pervasive and adverse long-term experience” that involves losses and transitions that cause mental health challenges for refugees (p. 233). The mental health and psychological needs experienced by refugee students is “one of the most challenging categories related to the education of children and youth with refugee backgrounds” (Schutte et al., 2022).

In some cases, one of the causes for stress for refugees in their host country is dealing with racism and discrimination (Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Baker (2013) highlighted in his study on the effects of racialized name-calling on refugee students in Canada that “persistent racism can significantly impact the social and mental well-being and development of youth ... and can seriously impact their [refugee youth] integration into Canadian society” (p. 82). Additionally, some educators working with newcomer students may not have the proper training or knowledge to deal with the children’s emotional challenges or stress (Barber & Ramsay, 2020). For example, Li and Grineva (2016) found in their study that teachers in Canada relied on the learning that resulted from their everyday work with newcomer students as well as consulting with one another because none of them had training on working with refugee students.

Resulting from premigration education interruptions or missed years of schooling, refugee students face educational disadvantages (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012) and challenges in their host country with “adapting to the expectations and culture of formal education” (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010, p. 152). Li and Grineva (2016) learned from refugee youth at a high school in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, that they “encountered many difficulties trying to keep up with their native-born peers in academic achievement” and their “limited proficiency in English and interrupted formal education strongly affected their ability to negotiate and manage the development of their academic competence at school” (p. 59). Nofal (2017) identified “low language proficiency and a lack of proper information and knowledge regarding the education system” as some of the factors that affected the education performance of Syrian refugee students in Ottawa, Canada (p. 56). An additional challenge with learning is that although many refugee parents/caregivers have high hopes that their children will be successful in school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a), they are “unable to provide educational assistance to their children as they possess limited or no English,

and parental illiteracy in the mother tongue is common” (Ferfolja, 2009, p. 398). Bitew and Ferguson (2010) learned in their study that the majority of Ethiopian-Australian students in secondary school did not receive educational support from their parents who had limited educational experiences and that most parents had no contact with their children’s school.

Another challenge for some refugee students in their host country has to do with inclusion and social aspects of school. Li and Grineva (2016) found in their study that refugee students in Canada encountered difficulties with social adjustment, had low participation in extracurricular activities, and lacked friendships with Canadian-born or local students; some of the factors that account for these social challenges include the newcomer students’ “limited English language proficiency ... negotiating between different cultures and religious beliefs ... and trouble understanding their local peers’ behaviours” (p. 63). Guo et al.’s (2019) findings—from their study that explored Syrian refugee students’ integration in schools in one of Canada’s western cities—show that the students had many difficulties with social integration, and they raised concerns over “feelings of isolation, separation and not belonging in Canada” (p. 94). Such experiences with social isolation “place refugee students’ self-esteem, social competence, and academic achievements at risk, hindering the student’s social, economic, and political integration in the receiving society” (Ratković et al., 2017, p. 3).

### **Conceptual Framework**

To guide this study, we used a children’s human rights participatory framework articulated in Article 12 (1) of the United Nations’ (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 12 (1) of the CRC (1990) states:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [UN OHCHR], 2018, Convention on the Rights of the Child section, Article 12)

In other words, children have a human right to freely express their opinions on matters that impact them and for those views to be considered when decisions regarding their lives are made (Perry-Hazan, 2015). Furthermore, Article 12 affirms that consulting with children is a requirement for professionals working with them, including educators (Dunn et al., 2014). Therefore, Syrian newcomer students to Canada have participatory rights, and their opinions on their school experiences, curriculum, and education programs should be heard and taken seriously. By recognizing the students’ participation rights articulated in Article 12, it is legally and morally essential to ask them about their school experiences (Huus et al., 2015; Lundy, 2007; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 2009).

To ensure full implementation of Article 12 of the CRC, we relied on Lundy’s (2007) model for conceptualizing Article 12 as a framework to guide this study. Lundy’s model has four key elements:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

We used these four elements of the model to design the study, conduct the research, and to make recommendations. The elements of space and voice deal with the first component of Article 12—the right to express a view. Starting with space, we conducted this research in a Syrian community Saturday school program that the students attended. The students and their families felt comfortable in this space which encouraged participation and engagement with the study. With respect to voice, there is a need for educators and researchers to give newcomer students to Canada an opportunity to voice their opinions on their education. This study provided the students with an opportunity to express their opinions and views freely regarding their educational experiences in Canada. They had the choice to participate in English or Arabic, whichever language they felt more comfortable with to ensure meaningful participation. All the children who expressed interest in participating in this study were able to participate on their own or with parent support if needed.

The elements of audience and influence deal with the second component of Article 12—the right to have views given due weight. Regarding audience, we explained to the students that their views are very important, and that we were keen on listening to their opinions to understand their experiences from their own perspectives. We also hoped that by giving the students an opportunity to be heard, it would allow them to advocate for their needs, develop self-advocacy skills as emphasized by Lake (2015), and to learn about their rights in education. Lastly, in terms of influence, we approached this study with the mindset and belief that the students' input should have influence on their education in Canada. Based on their input and what we learned from this study, we made recommendations to improve the students' educational experiences. We made sure to share the final report including our recommendations with senior administration and educators working with the students.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Research Design**

To gain a full understanding of the students' experiences, we employed a mixed methods research design using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze data (Creswell, 2012; Gay et al., 2011). A mixed methods research design is used to “build on the synergy and strength that exists between quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand a phenomenon more fully than is possible using either quantitative or qualitative methods alone” (Gay et al., 2011, p. 481). For the quantitative component of this study, the focus of this article, we collected data using an anonymous student questionnaire.

The questionnaire yielded numeric data that we analyzed statistically. Although the data from “survey research cannot answer what is causing a certain problem, it can, however, identify traits that are seen in people” (Kiess & Green, 2010, p. 20). Questionnaire data also offers valuable information for describing the attitudes, frequency, and magnitude of certain trends with participants (Creswell, 2012; Nardi, 2006). Therefore, the data from the student questionnaire provided a broad picture of the children's school experiences.

### **Research Setting**

This study was conducted in a Syrian community Saturday school program offered to Syrian newcomer children, a space the students felt comfortable in—one of the four key elements in Lundy's (2007) model for conceptualising Article 12. The Saturday school program is a fairly new program in the city where this research took place. It started mainly after the influx of Syrian refugees to Canada, and this city, between 2015 and 2018. The program takes place at one of the

local schools, runs for 5 hours every Saturday, and is supported by a school board, school president, community volunteers, and Syrian community.

The Saturday school program is available for children at an elementary school level (Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 or 4–13 years old) and welcomes all interested Syrian newcomer children. The students who attend the program are mainly students who are enrolled in the English public board of education (during the weekdays) that this study focused on. Students in the Saturday program have Arabic, French, religion, crafts, and gym classes as well as two nutrition breaks during the school day. The classes are taught by community volunteers who have previous teaching experience.

### **Selecting Participants**

For participant recruitment, the selection criteria for students was based on cultural background, duration of time in Canada, location, age, grade level, gender, and language. Participants had to be Syrian newcomer students to Canada since the war started in Syria in 2011 and had to be in Grades 4–8 (9–13 years old) attending elementary English public schools in the city where this study took place. The students also needed to be comfortable enough to complete the anonymous questionnaire alone or with parent support if needed in their choice of English or Arabic.

With the help of the Saturday school program president, a member of the Syrian community and key informant in this study, we identified all the students in the program who fit the selection criteria and we invited them to participate in completing the questionnaire. The school president and parent volunteers in the Saturday school also distributed questionnaire packages to other Syrian newcomer families in the city to reach the desired number of questionnaires for this study (75 students). Letters of information about the research, consent forms, and the questionnaire were provided in English and Arabic. We were also available every Saturday during the school program to answer any questions or concerns the students or parents had. The students or their parents then dropped off the questionnaire anonymously in a sealed box in the main office of the Saturday program.

### **Data Collection**

We used an anonymous questionnaire that we developed for the quantitative component of this study to collect numerical data from the students about their school experiences (Gay et al., 2011). This gave the students a voice regarding their educational experiences so far in Canada—another element in Lundy’s (2007) model for conceptualizing Article 12. Data collection took approximately 4 months. Out of 160 questionnaires handed out (inside and outside the Saturday school program), 75 were completed and returned, generating a 47% response rate.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect numeric data about the students’ feelings, attitudes, and perceptions regarding their education. To develop the questionnaire, we relied on Article 12 of the CRC as a guide to keep the focus on the students’ own experiences. We organized the questionnaire using the following themes: family background; school experiences before coming to Canada; settlement experiences in Canada; and school experiences in Canada related to learning, socio-cultural, extra-curricular activities, and staff support. The questions were mainly closed-ended (e.g., Likert scales, rating scales, etc.) and students chose from standardized answers. We worded the questions carefully considering the children’s ages and language skills. The

students had the option to complete the questionnaire in English or Arabic and with parent support if needed.

### Data Analysis

For data analysis of the anonymous student questionnaire, we relied on the voice, audience, and influence elements of Lundy's (2007) model for Article 12. We used the element of voice by focusing our analysis on the students' own views, the element of audience by ensuring those views were heard and presented, and the element of influence by presenting any of the students' challenges that could lead to recommendations.

Once we organized the data from the questionnaires, we used descriptive and inferential statistics techniques to analyze the numeric data. We used descriptive analysis to present summaries and descriptions of the students' experiences with various aspects of their education. We also used inferential analysis, using two-sample t-test for proportions assuming unequal variances, for comparisons of means between groups of students to determine any variances or significant differences in the data on different topics.

### Findings

#### Demographics

A total of 75 students completed the anonymous questionnaire, with 56% female students and 44% male, and an age range from 9–13 years old. The responding students had been in Canada from 2 to 4 years. Although all the students were born in Syria, almost all of them had fled Syria to neighbouring countries due to the war. The vast majority of the students lived in Jordan or Lebanon, and followed by Turkey. Almost half of the students (53%) reported that they lived in a refugee camp for an average of 4 years before resettlement in Canada, while 47% reported that they did not live in a refugee camp. Arabic was selected by the students as the language most often spoken at home (82%), followed by English (17%), and one student reported Kurdish as being spoken at home.

#### School Experiences Before Resettlement in Canada

**Table 1**

*Interrupted Education Before Resettlement in Canada*

	Yes	No	Total
Students	41	25	66
Percent (%)	62%	38%	100%

Out of 74 respondents, 66 students (89%) reported that they went to school before resettlement in Canada, while eight students (11%) did not go to school. Of the 66 students who went to school, 62% reported that their education was interrupted as shown in Table 1. On average, those students missed 3 years of school before resettlement in Canada, and the highest concentration of grades missed were between Grades 2 and Grade 5. Most students who went to school before resettlement in Canada reported that they had difficulties and did not benefit from learning in school, or they just benefited a little, as shown in Table 2 below.



**Table 2***Benefiting From Learning in School Before Canada*

	Not at All	Little	Fairly Benefited	Much	A Great Deal	Total
Students	24	22	7	5	4	62
Percent (%)	39%	36%	11%	8%	6%	100%

Note.  $N=66$ . Missing data = 4 (6.1%).

**Resettlement Experiences in Canada**

Slightly over three quarters of the respondents (80%), reported that people in the city where they resettled are “very” or “extremely” friendly towards their family as shown in Table 3 below. This is a positive experience for the children and their families especially due to the traumatic experiences they have been through before resettlement. Feeling welcomed and treated with friendliness by others in Canada supports the students with social integration in Canada.

**Table 3***Friendly Approach Towards Your Family in Canada*

	Not at All	A Little	Fairly Friendly	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	0	4	11	24	34	73
Percent (%)	0%	5%	15%	33%	47%	100%

Note.  $N=75$ . Missing data = 2 (2.7%).

In terms of providing support to their parents with aspects related to resettlement (translating, appointments, reading letters, etc.), nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported that they “often” or “very often” provide support to their parents, while 32% indicated “sometimes.” This is probably because the students’ parents do not possess English skills yet, and since the children are learning English at a faster rate than the parents, they are providing any support they can to their parents with translations.

The students placed significant importance on maintaining their Syrian culture; out of 74 respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, 89% of the students reported that Syrian culture is “important” or “very important” to them. At the same time, the students placed significant importance on learning about Canadian culture; out of 75 respondents, 81% of the students indicated that learning about Canadian culture is “important” or “very important.” This demonstrates that the students want to integrate into Canadian society and learn about Canadian culture, while also maintaining their Syrian heritage and culture.

**Learning Experiences**

We asked the students about their learning experiences in their respective elementary public schools in Canada.

### ***ESL and Regular Homeroom Classroom***

Regarding the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, where the students spend half of their school day, the majority of the respondents (87%) reported that the program is either “helpful” or “very helpful.” Also, out of 71 respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, slightly over three quarters of the students (79%) reported that they are/were “very” or “extremely” interested in the learning in the ESL program. The students’ interest in learning in the ESL program shows they are engaged in the learning, and this may explain why they believe the program is helpful.

In relation to learning in the regular homeroom class (non-ESL class), three quarters of the respondents (75%) reported that it is “important” or “very important” for newcomer students to Canada to learn in this class. However, out of 72 respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, 32% of the students reported that learning in regular homeroom class is “very” or “extremely” difficult, 33% “fairly difficult”, and 35% indicated that learning is a “little” or “not at all” difficult. The students felt the learning in regular homeroom class was more difficult than ESL class. One explanation for this difficulty is that the students are in their early stages of English language development, in addition to having limited school experiences before resettlement in Canada, which created a gap in their learning. This reinforces the importance for teachers in regular homeroom class to differentiate instruction for the students and to teach to their levels.

In both ESL and regular homeroom class, student feedback on their learning is an area of growth and could be used more by educators. 17% of the respondents indicated that teachers in ESL “rarely” or “not at all” ask for their feedback to help them learn, while 18% indicated that teachers in regular homeroom class “rarely” or “not at all” ask for their feedback. These findings suggest the need for teachers to set up more conferencing or meeting times with students to ask for their feedback on their learning. With more conferencing with students, teachers will be able to learn more about their learning needs and levels, which will help in differentiating instruction for meeting individual student needs. This is especially important in the regular homeroom class since 32% of the respondents reported that learning in regular homeroom class in Canada is “very” or “extremely” difficult.

### ***Learning English and Math***

Regarding difficulty learning English in Canada, as seen in Table 4 below (all students), 18% of the respondents reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult, 48% “fairly difficult”, and 34% indicated it has been a “little” or “not at all” difficult. A comparison of the means between students with prior school experience and students with interrupted or no prior school experience showed that the scores varied for the two groups (students with prior school experience:  $M = .47$ ,  $SD = .16$ ; students with interrupted or no prior school experience:  $M = .59$ ,  $SD = .19$ ). At an alpha of .05, the analysis indicated a statistically significant difference among the groups,  $t(57) = -2.88$ ,  $p = .0056$ , effect size = .69  $SD$ . Students with interrupted or no prior school experience before resettlement in Canada are experiencing greater challenges in learning English than students who had school experience prior to resettlement. Only 4% of the students (out of 25 respondents) with prior school experience reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult to learn English in Canada, in comparison to 25% of the students (out of 48 respondents) with interrupted or no prior school experience who reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult to learn English (see Table 4).

**Table 4***Difficulty Learning English in Canada*

<b>All Students</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	8	17	35	10	3	73
Percent (%)	11%	23%	48%	14%	4%	100%
<b>Students With Prior School Experience</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	4	9	11	1	0	25
Percent (%)	16%	36%	44%	4%	0%	100%
<b>Students With Interrupted or No Prior School Experience</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	4	8	24	9	3	48
Percent (%)	8%	17%	50%	19%	6%	100%

Note.  $N = 75$ . Missing data = 2 (2.7%).

With respect to difficulty in learning Math in Canada, 32% of the respondents reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult, 26% “fairly difficult”, and 42% indicated it has been a “little” or “not at all” difficult. A comparison of the means between students with prior school experience and students with interrupted or no prior school experience showed that the scores did not vary for the two groups (students with prior school experience:  $M = .57$ ,  $SD = .25$ ; students with interrupted or no prior school experience:  $M = .59$ ,  $SD = .27$ ). At an alpha of .05, the analysis indicated a statistically non-significant difference among the groups,  $t(52) = -0.38$ ,  $p = .7061$ , effect size = .09  $SD$ .

Since many of the students had interruptions to their education and limited school experiences before resettlement in Canada, they are likely to have gaps in literacy and numeracy skills even in their mother tongue Arabic, which leads to them needing more time to develop literacy and numeracy skills in English school system in Canada.

### **Socio-Cultural Experiences**

Table 5 below indicates that 22% of the respondents reported that it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult to make friends at school in Canada, 22% “fairly difficult”, and 56% indicated that it has been a “little” or “not at all” difficult. A comparison of the means between female and male students showed that the scores did not vary for the two groups (female students:  $M = .5$ ,  $SD = .25$ ; male students:  $M = .52$ ,  $SD = .23$ ). At an alpha of .05, the analysis indicated a

statistically non-significant difference among the groups,  $t(67) = -0.44, p = .6644$ , effect size = .1 *SD*. For female students (41 respondents), 22% reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult to make friends at school in Canada and 61% reported it has been a “little” or “not at all” difficult. This is in comparison to male students (31 respondents) where 23% reported it has been “very” or “extremely” difficult to make friends at school in Canada and 48% reported it has been a “little” or “not at all” difficult (see Table 5 also).

**Table 5***Difficulty Making Friends at School in Canada*

<b>All Students</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	15	25	16	10	6	72
Percent (%)	21%	35%	22%	14%	8%	100%
<b>Female Students</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	9	16	7	5	4	41
Percent (%)	22%	39%	17%	12%	10%	100%
<b>Male Students</b>						
	Not at All	Little	Fairly Difficult	Very	Extremely	Total
Students	6	9	9	5	2	31
Percent (%)	19%	29%	29%	16%	7%	100%

Note.  $N = 75$ . Missing data = 3 (4%).

Having limited English and being in a new environment in Canada could be contributing factors to some difficulty in making friends at school for Syrian newcomer students, especially in the initial stages of resettlement. The students will need teacher and school staff support to develop friendships at school.

Overall, less than 15% of the respondents reported that they “often” or “almost always” experience conflicts with other students, which may be due to premigration experiences, language barriers, being in a new school system and environment in Canada, and/or some Canadian-born or English-speaking students may bring some of their own issues to the interaction thus creating problems. Considering the students’ premigration and limited formal school experiences before resettlement, these promising findings show that the students are doing well in Canada with peer relationships and getting along with other students.

We also asked the students if they had the choice with their learning, whether they prefer to work with newcomer students to Canada or Canadian-born students for their group work or

team project. Out of 73 respondents, 66% preferred to work with Canadian-born or English-speaking students for their group work or team projects, in comparison to 34% of the students who preferred to work with newcomer students to Canada. The students also reported that they spent almost equal time at school playing with newcomer students to Canada and Canadian-born or English-speaking students.

These findings demonstrate that the students want to learn and play with Canadian-born or English-speaking students and not just newcomer students to Canada. They may feel this helps them with inclusion, integration, learning English, and adapting to their new environment. In addition to working with newcomer students to Canada in ESL class, these findings also highlight the importance for Syrian newcomer students to be integrated into regular homeroom class since they want to learn and play with Canadian-born or English-speaking students.

### Extra-Curricular Activities

Levels of participation in extra-curricular activities at school often reveals valuable information about the extent of integration. 86% of the respondents reported that they participate in at least one extra-curricular activity at school in Canada (see Table 6 below).

**Table 6**

*Number of Extra-Curricular Activities at School*

	None	1	2	3	More Than 3	Total
Students	10	20	16	11	13	70
Percent (%)	14%	29%	23%	16%	18%	100%

*Note.*  $N=75$ . Missing data = 5 (6.7%).

Out of 71 respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, 59% reported that extra-curricular activities at school are “important” or “very important” for newcomer students to Canada, 24% “fairly important”, and 17% indicated that extra-curricular activities at school are “a little important” or “not important”.

The students are doing well in trying to participate in extra-curricular activities, and most of them participate in at least one. This is beneficial for the students’ inclusion and well-being as they adapt to a new culture and school system in Canada. School staff and teachers could support the students and encourage them for further participation in extra-curricular activities since it is a great way for the students to develop friendships, English language, and social skills.

### Staff Support

The study addressed students’ levels of comfort consulting staff about problems they may be having at school. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents reported that they are “very” or “extremely” comfortable talking to school staff about their problems, 21% “fairly comfortable”, and 21% indicated that they are a “little” or “not at all” comfortable. A comparison of the means between female and male students showed that the scores did not vary for the two groups. Out of 72 respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, 62% reported that they receive “much” or “a great deal” of support from school staff when they need help with a problem, 18% “some” support, and 20% indicated that they receive a “little” or “not at all” support.

Some of the students may not be comfortable asking teachers or school staff for support with their problems especially in the initial stages of resettlement due to language barriers and premigration challenges with school prior to resettlement. Building trust and using a caring approach with the students will increase their confidence level, trust, and likelihood of asking for support. Students may also not know who to ask for support during breaks and when they are playing outside on the field or playground, and therefore, showing them staff who can support and guide them during these unstructured times of the school day will help the students in getting the support they need.

### Discussion

The results from the student questionnaire shows that the students are having positive resettlement experiences, facing some challenges with their education, but also experiencing success in many areas. The majority of the students reported that they missed, on average, 3 years of education prior to resettlement in Canada. Those who attended school experienced many difficulties. These findings were not surprising to us because many of the Syrian newcomer families we have worked with in Canada expressed premigration difficulties with children's education. These findings also align with the existing literature that documents the many challenges faced by refugee children in receiving proper education. For example, Nofal (2017) described witnessing “the emotional disorder of children” and the “limited resources available for formal and non-formal education programs” (p. 1) in Syrian refugee camps in Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon. Beltekin (2016) also pointed out that children with special education needs or have a disability are almost totally left out of school in refugee camps. Due to these prior school interruptions, and missed years of education, major efforts are required from educators, parents, and Syrian newcomer children to bridge the learning gaps in Canada. The students are also more likely to have positive learning experiences “when they are supported by teachers and peers who are sensitive to their needs and bolster their self-confidence” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 19).

Although the literature points to many challenges experienced by refugee children in their host country, for example, adjusting to a new way of life, language, and education (Block et al., 2014; Skidmore, 2016), the students in this study reported overall positive experiences with resettlement in Canada. Despite some difficulties with adapting to a new culture, the students indicated that people and community agencies in Canada—including school—have been welcoming and supportive to their family. Owing to these experiences, the students seem to be comfortable with the resettlement process and optimistic about their future in Canada.

In terms of the education programs offered to them in Canada, the students reported that they are interested in the learning that takes place in the ESL program and that the program is helpful. At the same time, more than three-quarters of the students believe that being in regular homeroom class is also important for their education success. The students expressed that the learning in homeroom class is more difficult than ESL class, with possible explanations being the students' limited prior school experiences and larger class size in regular homeroom class (in comparison to lower number of students in ESL) making it more difficult for educators to meet their individual learning needs. Although the students will require more time to achieve academic proficiency, they can be successful with their learning when provided with intensive literacy and language support programs and with appropriate supports (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b).

The data also shows that seeking feedback from the children about their learning is an area that could be utilized further by educators in the ESL and regular homeroom class. These findings

suggest that more efforts are needed from ESL and homeroom teachers to meet or conference with the students individually to learn more about their educational needs. This is especially important in the regular homeroom classroom since some of the students expressed difficulties and could benefit from more differentiated instruction and individualized accommodations and modifications. Educators working with Syrian refugee students should work towards meeting regularly with the students to develop a rapport with them, to learn about their learning needs, and to build on their prior knowledge (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, 2008b). This data also suggests that PD and in-service training on best pedagogical approaches for newcomer students would be beneficial for educators.

Regarding learning English, some of the students indicated it has been very difficult to learn English in school with evidence that students with little or no prior school experiences are having greater challenges. Some of the students also reported that it has been very difficult to learn math. These learning difficulties are likely a result of gaps in the students' literacy and numeracy skills, even in their first language, due to prior interruptions or missed years of education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, 2008b). These findings align with other research and discourse in the literature surrounding learning challenges for refugee students in their host country. Because of previous interruptions to their education, refugee students are likely to lack age-appropriate knowledge and literacy and numeracy skills putting them at an educational disadvantage in their host country and may also face challenges adapting to the expectations of formal schooling (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The school and educators play a critical role in supporting the development of Syrian newcomer students to Canada by providing intensive literacy and numeracy support programs and by building on the students' prior knowledge and areas of strengths (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b).

Concerning socio-cultural experiences, the literature discusses many challenges faced by newcomer students in their host country. For instance, newcomer children may struggle with social integration, isolation, and bullying due to having a different religion or cultural background, which puts them at risk of emotional and psychological distress (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Loerke, 2009; Moriarty, 2015; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Smyth, 2013). However, despite some of the students experiencing difficulty making friends initially, most of them reported overall positive experiences in school with developing friendships, being included, and treated with respect by other students and staff. These findings indicate that the students are finding success with social integration and inclusion. Some factors contributing to this success are likely to be the students' own efforts to establish social connections, the efforts of educators, and other students' supportive approach.

In relation to staff support, although nearly three-quarters of the students stated they are comfortable talking to school staff if they have a problem, some of the students are still developing this comfort level. As they develop their English and become more familiar with working through challenges with their teachers, the students seem to be on track to developing self-advocacy skills and a level of comfort to consult with educators when needed. Educators could support this process by guiding the students and facilitating a comfort zone based on trust that would encourage them to share their problems and challenges.

For full implementation of Article 12 of the CRC, the opinions of the students reported in this study must have influence – another of the four key elements in Lundy's (2007) model. Based on the results, we propose several recommendations for educators and schools to further support Syrian newcomer students: First, since the majority of the students missed years of education and

may not be familiar with the expectations of formal schooling, schools should provide Syrian newcomer families and children a school orientation to prepare them before they start school (e.g., procedures, schedules, expectations, school map, safety, supports, etc.). Second, educators are encouraged to continue with extensive literacy and numeracy support to bridge the learning gaps resulting from previous school interruptions. Third, it is important for educators to differentiate instruction for individual students based on their needs. This is especially important when Syrian newcomer students are in regular homeroom class since some of the students reported difficulties and could benefit from accommodations and/or modifications with their learning. Fourth, educators should utilize group work activities to facilitate peer support and opportunities for Syrian newcomer students to share their ideas and make social connections not only with other newcomer students but also with Canadian-born or English-speaking students. Fifth, and lastly, to provide educators with professional development and training opportunities to strengthen their understanding of the premigration and postmigration experiences of refugee students as well as best pedagogical strategies.

A limitation in our study is the difficulty of determining if the students expressed their true attitudes and opinions when completing the questionnaire. As stated by Gay et al. (2011), a potential problem with surveys is that some respondents may respond “true” or “agree” to questions feeling that is what the researcher desires or because of the “tendency of an individual to select responses that are believed to be the most socially acceptable, even if they are not necessarily characteristic of that individual” (p. 159). To assist in overcoming these potential problems, the questionnaire completed by the students was anonymous to encourage them to express their true attitudes.

Due to the recent influx of Syrian refugee families to Canada, there are many topics that could be explored regarding their education. While we focused our study on elementary school students (Grades 4–8 or 9–13 years old), future research could explore the experiences of Syrian newcomer students at the secondary school level (Grades 9–12 or 14–18 years old). Another potential research area is to compare the experiences of the students in this study that we conducted in a city in southwest Ontario, Canada, to the experiences of Syrian newcomer students in other Canadian cities and provinces.

### **Conclusion**

The majority of Syrian refugee students in this study missed, on average, 3 years of education before resettlement in Canada due to the war in Syria. The students indicated positive resettlement experiences and feel welcome and supported by people in their city, community agencies, and their schools. Some of the students reported it has been very difficult to learn English and math in Canada, likely due to gaps in their learning resulting from previous interruptions to their education. The students have been finding success with social integration at school and feel included and respected by other students and staff. The results from this study revealed some areas of growth with the children’s education in Canada which our proposed recommendations were based on.



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