

# Syrian Newcomer Students Share Their Experiences in Canadian Schools



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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of Syrian refugee students in Canadian schools. Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) was used as a framework. Data collection involved one-on-one interview with students. Data from the interviews was analyzed using an open-coding technique to identify themes and patterns. Although the students had positive resettlement experiences, some of them experienced difficulties with their learning. Based on the findings, we propose recommendations for educators and schools welcoming Syrian refugee students.

*Keywords:* Syrian refugee students, school experience, resettlement

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## **Introduction**

Armed conflicts and natural disasters have forced, and continue to force, thousands of people to flee their homes every year in search of safety and protection. In recent years, such tragic events have created several refugee crises worldwide. There are currently 100 million displaced people worldwide who have been forced to flee their homes including 27.1 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] Canada, 2022). An example of such crises is that of the recent Syrian refugee crisis caused by the ongoing war in Syria that started in 2011. As reported by Amnesty International (2019) and UNHCR Canada (n.d.), this armed conflict has had devastating effects on the Syrian people and has left millions of Syrians displaced either internally or internationally.

Canada, a country with a long-standing tradition of humanitarian relief on the global stage, has been working with the United Nations (UN) to sponsor thousands of Syrian refugee families to resettle in Canada. Particularly during the period 2015 to 2018, Canada experienced an influx of thousands of Syrian refugee families as 56,260 Syrian refugees were admitted into the country (Government of Canada, 2018). Ontario, one of Canada's largest and most populous provinces, has been at the forefront of this Canadian response by welcoming thousands of Syrian refugee families (Ontario Citizenship and Immigration, 2018), and admitted 24,715 Syrian refugees during 2015–2018 (Government of Canada, 2018).

The literature on the refugee experience is consistent in describing the many pre-migration challenges refugee children face related to their health, trauma, well-being, and education (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Vongkhamphra et al., 2011). In addition to such pre-migration challenges, once resettled in Canada, Syrian newcomer children begin a challenging post-migration process that involves integration into Canadian society, often learning a new language, and adapting to a new school system.

In this article, we shed light on some of the school experiences and challenges of Syrian newcomer students to Canada and propose strategies and recommendations for schools and educators to consider. The interview data we present is drawn from a mixed-methods research study we conducted during 2019–2020 to investigate the educational experiences of Syrian refugee students in elementary public schools in a city in the southwest region of Ontario. This particular city witnessed an influx of hundreds of Syrian refugee families, especially during 2015–2018, where a total of 1,525 Syrian refugees resettled in this city (Government of Canada, 2018).

We embarked on this research study after learning from educators that some Syrian newcomer students are experiencing challenges with their learning and with adapting to a formal education system in Canada. We were also alert to the fact that there is very limited research on

the experiences of Syrian newcomer students in Canada due to their recent arrival. We hoped that this study would empower the students by giving them an opportunity to advocate for themselves and voice their views and perspectives regarding their education.

We used the following overarching research question to guide the study: What are the educational experiences and challenges of Syrian newcomer students in elementary English public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada?

## Literature Review

### *Resettlement Challenges*

Young children are especially impacted by the refugee experience due to violence, trauma, lack of basic life necessities, and interruptions to their education (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Vongkhamphra et al., 2011). For example, due to the war in Syria, many Syrian children and families suffer from a lack of basic human needs such as food, water, shelter, healthcare, hygiene services, and education (Save the Children, 2019). In addition to these pre-migration difficulties, refugee families face further challenges with settlement and integration in their host country (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Nofal, 2017; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). There are additional challenges with learning a new language, adapting to a new society, and “overcoming disrupted or minimal prior education, disruption to family networks, insecure housing, poverty, negative stereotypes and discrimination” (Block et al., 2014, p. 1338). Skidmore (2016) also highlights that the newcomers experience “social, emotional, economic, and educational challenges” (p. 7).

At times, immigrant or refugee families could experience tension between children and their parents due to exposure to a new society, culture, and way of life in the host country (Nilsson et al., 2012). Newcomer children often shift towards the dominant culture in their host country. Oikonomidou (2007) emphasized that “the worldviews and cultural ways of being for individuals are often threatened when they come into contact with the dominant culture in their host country” (p. 15). The cultural norms and expectations of the children’s home (heritage culture) may differ from those of the school (dominant culture), and thus create tension between the children and their parents (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016).

### *Learning Experiences*

For many refugee students, adapting to a new education system in their host country and achieving success with their learning is a major challenge (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Li & Grineva, 2017; Nofal, 2017; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The students’ pre-migration experiences with school interruptions, and in many cases, missing years of education, significantly contributes to these learning difficulties. Typically, schools in refugee camps are

unconventional, overcrowded, and short of resources while teachers may be underqualified and in some cases these schools cost money that refugee parents are unable to afford (Courtney, 2015; Mareng, 2010). Beltekin (2016) pointed out that refugee children with special education needs or a disability and living in a refugee camp or conflict zones are impacted mostly since they are almost entirely out of school. For refugee children in certain countries, “gender might also have been a factor limiting the opportunity to attend school” (Miles & Bailey–McKenna, 2016, p. 111).

For these reasons, many refugee students arrive in their host country having either limited or no prior formal educational experiences resulting in low subject-specific knowledge as well as low literacy and numeracy skills even in their first language (L1) (Courtney, 2015; McBrien, 2011; Miles & Bailey–McKenna, 2016; Weekes et al., 2011). For the newcomer students to experience success with their learning in the host country they need extensive support to develop literacy skills in the new language (L2) (Oikonomidou, 2007). In addition to suffering from educational disadvantages (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), refugee students also face challenges with “adapting to the expectations and culture of formal education” in their host country since they have limited prior formal school experiences (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010, p. 152). Li and Grineva (2017) found that refugee youths at a high school in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, faced many difficulties with their learning due to “limited proficiency in English and interrupted formal education” (p. 59).

### ***Post-Traumatic Stress***

The impact of war and forced displacement on many young children is immense and puts them at a high risk of exposure to traumatic events such as violence, abuse, separation from family, loss of family members, instability in their lives, and multiple losses including their home and belongings (Beltekin, 2016; Block et al., 2014; De Haene et al., 2007). As evidenced by the Syrian crisis, exposure to such traumatic events will inevitably have a psychological impact and lead to chronic stress and emotional challenges with many refugee children (Save the Children, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). After resettlement, many refugee students continue to be challenged with post-traumatic stress caused by pre-migration exposure to traumatic events.

Additionally, experiences with bullying and isolation at school in the host country may also impact the well-being of refugee students. The newcomer students are “vulnerable to bullying due to a myriad of reasons, including nationality, race, religion, and different cultural norms” (Mthethwa–Sommers & Kisiara, 2015, p. 1). Baker (2013) found that persistent racialized name-calling by peers created undue stress and impacted the mental well-being of refugee students in Canada who recognized that “racism was having a negative effect on their lives and was creating an environment where they did not feel welcome” (p. 82). Bullying and discrimination “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

We used a children's human rights participatory framework articulated in Article 12 (1) of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) to guide this study. We also relied on Lundy's (2007) model for conceptualizing Article 12 to ensure full implementation of the Article. Article 12 of the CRC affirms children's human right to freely express their opinions and for those opinions to be taken seriously in all matters that impact their lives. As noted in Article 12 (1) of the CRC:

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)

We chose Article 12 of the CRC to frame our study for two reasons. First, children's human right to participate in matters that affect them (as articulated in Article 12) necessitates the opportunity for newcomer students to voice their opinions to researchers and educators regarding their education and for those opinions to be considered. This was imperative since there is limited research on the experiences of refugee students in their host country using the children's own views and perspectives (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010; Prior & Niesz, 2013; Ratković et al., 2017; Smyth, 2013). Second, we hoped this participatory framework would empower Syrian newcomer students in Canada by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions, to learn about their education rights, and as emphasized by Lake (2015), to develop self-advocacy and collaboration skills.

To ensure a full implementation of Article 12 of the CRC, we relied on Lundy's (2007) model which comprises 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 the four elements of the model to guide us in the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting stages of this study. Starting with "space," this study was conducted in a Syrian community Saturday school program—a space where students felt comfortable—and gave the children an opportunity to share their opinions and perspectives on their education. With respect to "voice," this study was inclusive and enabled all the students who wanted to participate to express their opinions and views freely using their choice of English and/or

Arabic. Regarding “audience,” we reiterated to the students during the research process that we value their opinions, and we were active listeners trying to understand their experiences from their own perspectives. Lastly, in relation to “influence,” we used the children’s views regarding their educational needs to propose recommendations and we shared the final report with senior administration and educators in schools.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### ***Research Design***

We employed a mixed methods research design to conduct this study. We used a convergent parallel mixed methods design approach by collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data separately, comparing the results from both datasets, and then merging the data together for interpretation and understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2012; Gay et al., 2011). We collected data using an anonymous student questionnaire (quantitative component) and one-on-one interviews with students and parents (qualitative component). The focus of this paper is on the qualitative component findings from the student interviews.

### ***Research Setting***

This research was conducted at a Syrian community Saturday school program offered to Syrian newcomer children in the city where this study took place. This enabled the students to participate in this research in a “space” they were comfortable and familiar with—the first of four key elements in Lundy’s (2007) model for conceptualizing Article 12 of the CRC. This Saturday school program runs out of a local school for five hours every Saturday and welcomes all Syrian newcomer children at the elementary school level (Kindergarten to Grade 8 or 4–13 years old). The program offers the students Arabic, French, religion, craft, and gym classes, as well as two nutrition breaks during the school day. The classes are taught by the program president and community volunteers with previous teaching experience.

### ***Selecting Participants***

The selection criteria for participation in this study was based on the students’ cultural background, time in Canada, location, age, grade level, and language. With the help of the Saturday school president (a key informant in this study), we identified 45 students in the program who fit the selection criteria. All the identified students were invited to complete the one-on-one interview. Seven students expressed interest and were invited to participate in the interview. We used purposive or judgmental sampling to recruit an additional three students for the interview. Qualitative researchers often use purposive or judgmental sampling to purposely select individuals to study because of certain characteristics or traits they have that meet the selection criteria, or because of contributions they can make to understanding the research

problem (Gay et al., 2011; Nardi, 2006). Therefore, 10 students participated in the one-on-one interview.

### ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were used to give the students' an opportunity to share their views and "voice" regarding their educational experiences in Canada—the second of four key elements in Lundy's (2007) model for conceptualizing Article 12. An interview aims at exploring and understanding the participants' experiences using their own opinions and views (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 1998, 2012; Luker, 2008; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). The semi-structured approach to the one-on-one interview allowed for some flexibility to add or remove questions during the interview based on the information provided by each participant (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). To guide the interview, we developed an interview protocol with open-ended questions by relying on Article 12 of the CRC to keep the focus on the students' own experiences. The first author in this article is fluent in Arabic and English and was the main researcher who conducted the interviews with the students and transcribed the answers. When asking the questions, the interviewer provided Arabic and English translations as needed by the students so they could fully understand what they were being asked.

Five female students and five male students were interviewed during the Saturday school program. Each interview took approximately 35 minutes to complete. The age of the students ranged from 10–13 years old. On average, the students had been in Canada for 2.5 years, with 4 months shortest time and 4 years longest time. The students had the choice to complete the interview in English and/or Arabic. Eight of the interviews were completed using a mix of English and Arabic language as preferred by the participants; one interview was completed in Arabic, and one interview in English. The answers that were provided in Arabic were translated to English by the interviewer (first author). Active listening to the perspectives and views of each student was very important during the interview to make sure the students had "audience"—the third of four key elements in Lundy's (2007) model for full implementation of Article 12. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data, after each interview, the method of member checking was used to review the data with the students for accuracy and to ensure they were comfortable with their answers.

### ***Data Analysis***

We analyzed the data from the interviews using a qualitative content analysis approach. This process involves the researcher collecting data (i.e., transcriptions), preparing and organizing the data, reading through the data to obtain a general sense, coding the data by assigning a code label to text segments, using the codes to develop themes, and representing the findings through narratives (Creswell, 2012). We started by preparing and organizing the transcribed

data from the interviews, then we read through the data to explore further and gain some general ideas. We then used an open coding technique to review the data from each student and mark different segments of the text with codes. As stated by Gay et al. (2011), “one of the most frequent data analysis activities undertaken by qualitative researchers is coding, the process of categorically marking or referencing units of text (e.g., words, sentences) with codes and labels as a way to indicate patterns and meaning” (p. 469). We then grouped similar codes together that led to identifying patterns and main themes. This process helped in reducing the large amount to data to a set of themes.

When analyzing the data, we relied on the second, third, and fourth elements of Lundy’s (2007) model for Article 12 (voice, audience, and influence). We ensured the students’ “voices” were included in the study by focusing our analysis on their own perspectives. We relied on our learning from listening to the students (“audience”) and presented their views in the study. We were also keen for this study to have potential “influence” on the students’ educational experiences, and therefore, we presented the challenges they shared in our final report and made recommendations for further support.

## **Findings**

The findings from the student interviews are presented here in five themes. The quotations will be in their original form without grammar correction in order to keep the dialogues intact. To protect the privacy of participants, pseudonyms instead of their real names, are used.

### ***Educational Challenges Prior to Resettlement***

Most of the students experienced educational setbacks, missed school years, and in some cases the students attended school for the first time when they resettled in Canada. Those who attended school prior to resettlement experienced difficulties with treatment and reported that they did not benefit from attending school. Below are some examples shared by the students with respect to their prior school experiences:

Samer: I did not go to school in Syria. I missed Grade 2, 3, 4. I went to school in Lebanon. School in Lebanon I did not learn a lot. I had challenges ... the teacher hit me I did not like that.

Hayat: I went to school just in Jordan, a little. I missed Grades 2, 3, and 4. ... There, the teacher they hit and if you understand or not, they don’t care.

### ***Resettlement Experience in Canada***

The students reported that their families are having successful resettlement experiences in Canada. All the students said that people in this city where they resettled are friendly and welcoming to them and their families. Wasim described his family’s experience when they first

arrived in Canada and were at the hotel. He stated that “when we first came people came to welcome us at the hotel, they asked us if we need any help.” Hala also mentioned that “everyone is helping us in Canada.” All the students said that they help their parents with translations if they receive a letter in the mail or if they attend a doctor’s or other appointment. All the students discussed the importance of keeping their Syrian culture but also learning about Canadian culture. Wasim described this by saying “I want to keep Syrian culture because it is nice. Everything was nice there if it comes back, it will be nice. I like to learn English language and about Canada, it is nice, beautiful.” Recognizing that Canada is now her new home, Hayat expressed the importance of learning about Canadian culture by stating that “it is very important to keep Syrian culture. Canadian culture is very important also because, like, I will be here my whole life.”

### ***Learning Experiences***

#### *Learning in ESL Class*

Most of the students were in the ESL program (half of school day) and attended regular homeroom class (half of school day), except for a couple of students who were demitted from the ESL to regular homeroom class. All the students expressed interest in learning in ESL class because they benefit a great deal and described their experiences as being successful. Mourad liked the fact that ESL class had lower number of students, which meant the teachers could provide more individualized support to students; he noted that “in ESL, we don’t have a lot of students and we can learn.” Mohamad felt the ESL class was a good starting point to learn about new aspects of school in Canada and how to speak English; he mentioned “when you come and you don’t know anything, in ESL they help you learn new things and how to speak and learn.” Most students said that ESL teachers ask for their opinions about their learning. For example, Hayat explained her monthly meetings with her ESL teacher: “like every month she [teacher] do meeting with me, and I sit with her like one hour and we just talk about our learning. And I tell her what I think and what I need.” This instance suggests that seeking feedback from ESL students is an integral part of the learning process.

#### *Learning in Regular Homeroom Class*

All the student interviewees valued the time in a regular homeroom class for half of the school day. They pointed out that in regular homeroom class they could work with both Canadian-born students and newcomer students, as well as have the experience of learning with different teachers. Fatima expressed why she thinks regular homeroom class is important, “homeroom class is important, there are other students and teachers who help you, ESL it is same teacher.” Hayat recalled her experience with the change of ESL learning model, “I remember when I first came [to Canada] it was all day in ESL, but now three periods in ESL and three periods in homeroom and that help me a lot. Because I have more friends and I speak more English.”

Some of the students highlighted some challenges they are having with learning in regular homeroom class. Samer stated that “in homeroom class, it’s kind of hard with science and geography. They give us a big book and sometimes you don’t get what they are doing.” One possible explanation to this could be that some newcomer students are not receiving enough modifications to the expectations and learning goals in regular homeroom class. Fatima emphasized the importance of teacher support in regular homeroom class for newcomer students to be successful; she shared her experience with this by saying “the teacher in homeroom class she is so nice she always help me. If I don’t understand a thing, she just call me to her table, she says if you need help just come.” Hayat stressed the importance of not only teacher support, but also peer support for newcomer students to experience success in homeroom class; she explained that “homeroom class can be hard sometimes if you don’t have anyone to help you, but in my class, everyone help everyone, and the teacher helps us too.” Hayat points to possible challenges with learning in regular homeroom class when newcomer students do not receive support. When they lack teacher and peer support, Syrian newcomer students may struggle with understanding the task at hand, with English language, and with engaging in the learning activity. This will have a negative impact on the students’ learning and success at school.

Students were evenly divided on the frequency with which regular homeroom teachers sought feedback from them to help them learn. Five students said that teachers who work with them in homeroom class ask for their opinions about their learning, and five students reported that teachers do not often seek their feedback. This finding suggests that educators and administrators working with Syrian newcomer students may not be aware of the learning struggles the newcomer students are experiencing. This leads to more challenges with learning, an increase in learning gaps, and frustrations by the students due to the lack of support.

### *Literacy and Numeracy Skills*

When discussing their progress with learning English, all the students felt that their oral communication is coming along well, although some of them expressed that their reading and writing needs more improvement. This suggests that the students understand that this is an area of struggle and growth for them. Reading and writing skills in English are essential for the students to experience success with their learning in other subject areas. To help newcomer students understand the English language, Hayat suggested for school staff to use small words with their communication; she explained that “sometimes they [school staff] use hard words that I don’t understand, I wish if they use more small words for those people who are coming new to Canada who don’t know English.”

When discussing their Arabic language skills, all the students said they can speak Arabic; however, most of them said they cannot read or write in Arabic. Based on this finding, it would

be accurate to conclude that most of the students in this study have weak literacy skills in Arabic, their first language. Therefore, it will take them longer time to develop literacy skills in English and they will need extensive support to acquire the new language.

All the students said they enjoy learning math in their school in Canada, but most of them expressed some areas of difficulty in math. Wasim finds it difficult when learning with big numbers, "I like math. I am learning math. When it is big numbers, it is hard for me." One explanation to the students' challenges with math learning is having weak numeracy skills because of missing many years of education prior to resettlement in Canada. Another reason is likely due to the math expectations not being modified enough by educators to generate learning goals for the students that are challenging yet achievable. Some of the students shared examples that demonstrate resilience and determination to do well with learning math:

Mohamad: I like math. Because when I was in Jordan, I was not good, but here [in Canada] I said to myself I have to be good in math, so I am trying my best all the time.

Hayat: My math is good especially the last 2 years in Grades 7 and 8. I was not that good but now I help everyone in my math. Sometimes I help the ESL teacher explain the math to the other students.

All the students emphasized the importance of group work and the opportunity to learn with other students in both ESL and regular homeroom class because of the opportunities for communication with other students, gaining peer support, and simply the enjoyment of learning with their classmates.

### ***Socio-Cultural Experiences***

All the students said it was difficult to make friends when they first arrived at school in Canada because they were in a new environment and could not communicate in English. However, most students said it got easier and they were able to make friends by being nice to the other students, helping them, and playing together with them. This finding shows that the onus has been primarily on Syrian newcomer students to initiate friendships by themselves after they learn English, rather than having support from educators and other students in fostering inclusion into the school community. Some of the students also said that working in a group in class helped them make friends. Bassam explained how speaking English helps him make friends:

When I came, some kids they are doing something awesome, I want to be friends with them, but I couldn't say it because I don't speak English. Talking English helps me make friends at school now. I have a lot of friends at school, a lot of them speak Arabic, and a lot speak English. It is easier now to make friends who speak English because I know English.

Most students said that during breaks, they play and spend time with both newcomer students and Canadian-born or English-speaking students. Hayat shared her perspective on the importance for newcomer students and Canadian-born or English-speaking students to play together so they can get to know each other:

For me, newcomer students and Canadian-born friends we all get together, and we play. It is fun. That is important because the newcomers they will learn English more and Canadian-born students will learn how Arab think about them. A lot of people think Arab think about them in a bad way, but this way they can see that we think about them nicely and that we want to play with them.

All the students said that other students in the school treat newcomer students fairly. They said that other students are nice to them, talk to them, help them if they have a problem, play with them, and show them around the school when they first arrive. Mourad said that “other students show us [newcomer students] class, washroom, where to go, and what we have after music.” Hayat wants newcomer students to know that other students want to be nice to them and treat them well; she mentioned that “the newcomers sometimes for them they think no one like them and no one want to talk to them but in real life they treat them in a very good way.” Although the participants in this study reported feeling welcomed by other students in the school, Hayat’s quote suggests that perhaps other newcomer students have had experiences with exclusion and need educators’ and other students’ support to feel welcomed in the school community.

### ***Future Aspirations***

The students shared many examples that demonstrate resilience, grit, and determination. They are determined to do well in school and be successful members of Canadian society. They are caring, compassionate individuals who want to help others, especially those in need of support. The students all have future goals and aspirations, which for the most part revolve around helping others:

Lara: I want to be a doctor so I can help poor people. Or I want to be a teacher to teach students how to read and protect people.

Bassam: I want to be a doctor because the doctor brings money a lot, like 1 million dollars. If somebody is sick, and I am a doctor, I can have money and give him money to go to the hospital.

Samia: I want to be a police officer. Because I like police because if there is a problem they help.

Hayat: I like to be a diplomat. I like that.

Mohamad: I want to be a pilot or a soccer player.

Wasim: I want to be a mechanic. Since I was young, I like to fix everything, cars.

Fatima: I want to be a doctor because I like to help people to make them back to life. It is nice to be a doctor, to be helpful.

## **Discussion**

Despite the many resettlement challenges documented in the literature such as learning a new language, adapting to a new culture, overcoming educational gaps, and possible discrimination (Block et al., 2014; Skidmore, 2016), the students in this study described overall positive resettlement experiences so far in Canada. They feel that their family is welcome, supported, and treated with respect at school and the broader community. There were no indications of intolerance or any discrimination towards them. They also shared that educators and school staff utilize a caring and supportive approach and offer supports with translations. Having a consistent plan for translation support would be beneficial for schools with Syrian newcomer students to support their educational experiences. These findings indicate that schools are playing a significant role, as Nofal (2017) emphasized, in supporting the students with social connections and in bringing stability to their lives. These initial positive experiences are shaping the students' positive attitudes and views not only about school in Canada but also on Canadian society in general. For instance, in addition to maintaining their Syrian culture, the students expressed interest in learning more about Canadian culture and society which they viewed as their new home.

In terms of their learning experiences, the students favour the 50/50 ESL–regular homeroom class split model implemented by their schools because it provides options for learning with different teachers. The students also prefer this model because it provides opportunities for integration and socializing with newcomer students as well as English–speaking students. The students shared examples of resilience and determination with their learning and are keen on doing well with their education.

However, some of the students expressed difficulties with English reading, writing, Math, and other school subjects particularly in the homeroom class. These learning difficulties are likely due to missed education prior to resettlement in Canada resulting in weak literacy and numeracy skills even in the students' first language. It may also be due to the learning expectations not being modified enough by educators resulting in the students working on learning goals that are too difficult for them. These learning challenges align with other studies on refugee students' education in the host country. Owing to missed education and limited opportunities for numeracy and numeracy development (Beltekin, 2016; Courtney, 2015; McBrien, 2011), refugee students face educational disadvantages after resettlement in their

host country (Melton, 2014; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), as well as challenges with acclimating to formal education (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

Some of the students also pointed to possible challenges with learning when there is a lack of support from educators and/or peers. Without support, the students may struggle and become frustrated with their learning which will have a negative impact on their academic success. The students do seem to benefit from peer support and group work opportunities when they are facilitated by educators, an area that teachers could further implement to support the students' learning. The role of educators, administrators, and peers is critical in supporting newcomer students' development with their learning, achieving academic proficiency, and having positive school experiences (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2008a).

Our findings suggest that the students—in ESL and regular homeroom class—would benefit from opportunities to share feedback with their teachers about their learning through conferencing or one-on-one opportunities. Educators working with Syrian newcomer students may not be aware of the learning challenges they are having. This leads to more struggles with learning and a further increase in the learning gaps. To understand the students' learning needs, educators should create opportunities for one-on-one conferencing to discuss the students' strengths, areas of improvement, and next steps in their learning. This will enable educators to target and address individual learning needs.

It is imperative for educators working with Syrian newcomer students to recognize that the students can learn and be successful with their learning when given opportunities and proper supports (OME, 2008b). Although they will require more time to achieve success with their learning due to limited prior education, the newcomer students are more likely to participate in class and take a more positive approach to learning when they feel supported by educators and peers with their needs (OME, 2005).

The participants shared overall positive school experiences so far in Canada with social integration and inclusion, resulting in additional positive thoughts about school in Canada. The students had difficulties with developing friendships during the initial stages, however, most of them said they were eventually able to form friendships at school by being nice to other students, playing with them, and working together on group projects. Although the students are making positive social connections, this finding suggests that the onus has been on them to initiate friendships. Educators and other students should have a more responsible role in facilitating friendships and fostering inclusion of Syrian newcomer students into the school community.

The students shared that other students treat newcomer students fairly, play with them, and at times, show them around the school to become familiar with the school building. Having supportive peers is a significant support system for newcomer students (Smyth, 2013). Since

the literature points to challenges faced by refugee students in their host country with isolation and at times bullying due to their backgrounds (Loerke, 2009; Moriarty, 2015; Mthethwa–Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Smyth, 2013), the positive experiences shared by the students in our study demonstrate the significant role schools can play in creating a welcoming and supportive environment for newcomer students. Additionally, most of the students said that during breaks they play with newcomer students as well as Canadian–born or English–speaking students. By playing and working on school projects with English–speaking students, the students believe they can make more friends, learn English, and integrate more fully. We believe that the students’ own efforts towards establishing social connections, educators’ efforts in this regard, as well as other students’ supportive approach, are all key factors contributing to the students’ success with social integration.

Despite their pre–migration and post–migration challenges, we have learned from Syrian newcomer students in this study that they are resilient and determined to do well in school in Canada. They are caring, appreciative, and are working hard to become successful members of Canadian society. These findings validate the literature surrounding refugee students’ resiliency, coping strategies, and capacity to do well in school and society in their host country (Weekes et al., 2011), areas of potential often not considered by educators working with refugee students (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016).

We believe that the students’ opinions should have “influence”—the fourth of four key elements in Lundy’s (2007) model for full implementation of Article 12—and therefore, we propose several recommendations based on the study findings for consideration by educators and schools welcoming Syrian newcomer students.

First, it is important to provide students and parents with a school orientation prior to commencement to make sure they are familiar with schedules, procedures, physical layout of the school building, and available supports. If the school has procedures in place to help the students and their parents become familiar with the school system, they will have an easier transition to school in Canada (OME, 2002). This is imperative since the students and their parents may not be familiar with a formal Canadian school system, and for some, it may be their first time attending school.

Second, since the students experienced challenges with their education prior to resettlement (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Beltekin, 2016; Block et al., 2014; Courtney, 2015), educators should take the time to learn about refugee students’ prior school experiences to provide supports that are responsive to their needs. As emphasized by the OME (2005), educators should strive towards developing a rapport with newcomer students as an initial step, and then begin to learn about their background and educational experiences. This will give educators an opportunity to

learn about the students' unique knowledge, perspectives, and strengths that they could build on to help the students experience success in school.

Third, since Syrian newcomer students are likely to have had learning gaps due to previously interrupted education, teachers could utilize ongoing one-on-one meetings with the students to check on their progress. Without such meetings or check-ins, the students' learning challenges may go unnoticed, and they may continue to struggle to make academic gains. With frequent check-ins and individual conferencing with students, educators can identify their strengths, areas of improvement, and determine next steps in their learning.

Fourth, educators should set high—yet achievable—expectations for the newcomer students and believe in their capabilities. This is imperative since it was evident in our study that the students are dedicated, resilient, and have developed coping strategies to deal with their challenges. Refugee students with limited prior school experiences are capable of learning and can thrive when educators understand their background and set high expectations for them (OME, 2008b). The students rely on their understandings and knowledge they have acquired from various life situations, as well as their resiliency and determination to be successful with their learning (Weekes et al., 2011).

Fifth, and lastly, to provide educators with professional development or in-service training opportunities focused on working with refugee students. Professional development should be geared towards helping educators understand the pre-migration experiences of refugee students, how to best communicate and build a rapport with the students, and on best pedagogical approaches to support their learning. By participating in professional development, educators will have a better understanding on how to identify and address refugee students' learning challenges and will be better prepared to facilitate the students' integration into the school community.

We have identified two potential limitations to our study. The first limitation deals with the accuracy of interview data due to the possibility that some participants may have been reluctant to share certain aspects of their experiences related to sensitive topics (e.g., pre-migration school experiences, difficulties with school in Canada). Secondly, although our findings may resonate with newcomer students and educators in other Canadian educational settings, it is not possible to make broad generalizations beyond the scope of our study since the participants may have their own unique experiences.

For future research, the experiences of Syrian newcomer students at the secondary school level (14–18 years old or Grades 9–12) could be explored to hear their perspectives and to determine their learning progress. It would also be useful to compare the experiences of Syrian newcomer

students in this study with other newcomer students in Canada who come from different cultural backgrounds or countries of origin.

## Conclusion

Syrian newcomer students in this study shared overall positive resettlement experiences in Canada so far. They felt supported and cared for in their schools and broader community. They did their best to learn about Canadian culture and to integrate into Canadian society. The students favoured an integration model of education where they learn in ESL class with other newcomer students as well as in regular homeroom class with Canadian-born or English-speaking students. Some of the students experienced difficulties with their learning, likely due to interrupted education or missed years of schooling prior to resettlement in Canada. However, they were resilient, developed coping strategies to deal with difficulties, and were determined to do well in school in Canada. The students expressed positive socio-cultural experiences at school and are experiencing success with social integration; they feel welcomed, included, and supported by other students and staff. Such experiences are encouraging and are having a positive impact on the students' social and emotional well-being. Based on our research findings, we have proposed some recommendations and strategies for consideration by schools and educators working with Syrian newcomer students. Since many of the students missed years of formal education, schools should consider providing them with an orientation regarding school procedures prior to starting school, and it would be imperative for educators to learn about their pre-migration experiences and provide an education program that is responsive to their individual needs.

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