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Transforming Schools and Strengthening Leadership to Support the Educational and Psychosocial Needs of War-Affected Children Living in Canada

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This article describes a qualitative research study that examined the educational experiences of refugee students who have immigrated to Canada. Many children from war-affected countries have been denied basic human entitlements, and their immigration to Canada represents hope for their futures. Evidence suggests that these students are further marginalized by an educational system that does not recognize their unique psychosocial needs and does not provide culturally sensitive support. Purposeful steps should be taken by school leaders to address the needs of newcomers and to facilitate pedagogical practices that make schools more equitable and socially just.

Throughout history, children have been affected by war; however, the nature of war has dramatically changed. In today’s conflicts, children assume the roles of casualties of war, soldiers of war, and survivors of war. The size and scope of the refugee movement has been a defining feature of the last 100 years, yet the field of education has paid little attention to the issues of refugee children (Myers, 2001). Access to education is a human right, and educational leaders have the legal obligation and the moral responsibility to ensure that youth who have been victims of violence receive an appropriate education. The first step involves a greater understanding of today’s conflict, how it affects children, and how these children are being served by our educational system upon immigrating to Canada.

Numerous studies have investigated immigrants from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Studies out of the United Kingdom (Rutter, 2003, 2006; Rutter & Jones, 1998) have been instrumental in describing successful initiatives with refugee children in educational settings. Similarly, Hamilton and Moore (2004) from New Zealand provided both a theoretical base and suggestions for best practices for refugee education.

This article focuses on a Canadian perspective of refugee education that is grounded in a qualitative research study designed to examine the educational and psychosocial needs of refugee students who have immigrated to Canada. As the literature supports, refugees are not a homogeneous group (Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Bracken & Petty, 1998; McBrien, 2005; Rutter, 2006); as such, their experiences will vary depending on the systems, their experiences, and the countries in
which they have lived. Following a brief overview on the changing nature of war and the impact that war has on children, the following questions guide the discussion in this article: (a) What are the experiences of war-affected children who immigrate to Canada? (b) What are the challenges that confront war-affected children who attend high school in Canada? (c) What systems, structures, or programs assist with the process of adjustment for the war-affected child? The role of the school leader, also referred to as principal or administrator, is integral to addressing the educational needs of children and in creating an organization that is equitable and accessible for all students. Specific recommendations to assist school leaders in more effectively meeting the needs of refugee students are provided.

BACKGROUND: THE IMPACT OF WAR ON CHILDREN

In August 1996, the Secretary General of the United Nations released a report entitled The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, written by Graca Machel. In this ground-breaking report, it was revealed that in any given year, over 300,000 children are exploited in armed conflicts as child soldiers and sex slaves. In the past 10 years, as a result of armed conflicts, about 2 million children have been killed, more than 6 million have been disabled, 1 million have been left orphaned, and about 12 million have been left homeless. It is estimated that there are presently 20 million children who have been uprooted from their homes because of war. Many of these children are internally displaced within their country, or they are refugees seeking asylum in another country (Machel, 2001). It has been more than 10 years since Graca Machel’s report, and children continue to be killed, maimed, trafficked, and raped with little concern from the international community (Machel, 2009). More than 10 million children have been psychologically scarred by the trauma of abduction, detention, sexual assault, and the brutal murder of family members (Government of Canada, 2001).

Despite some progress toward goals as outlined by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2011), the world is a long way from addressing the needs of children living in conflict-affected countries. Boothby and Knudsen (2000) from the Children in Crisis department of Save the Children in Washington, DC reported that, in many countries, war is a way of life, and entire generations of children have grown up surrounded by war.

Children and adolescents, who have been exposed to war and are now attending schools in Canada, represent a particularly vulnerable group of students. Their experiences have been diverse, and many have suffered from severe personal trauma, violence, and loss. It is argued that the current system is not meeting the unique social and psychological needs of these students, and they are not provided with an appropriate education. When students’ needs are not being met by the system, they often leave it, either reluctantly or voluntarily (MacKay & Tavares, 2005). This often results in the exacerbation of social issues and the further marginalization of the individual. It is expected that the number of students coming to Canada from war-affected countries will significantly increase over the next decade, and this will likely compound many of the current issues we already see in schools and in the community (Statistics Canada, 2007, para. 4). School leaders and educators must learn about the issues related to war-affected children so that they are able to examine and challenge how they might best meet the needs of these students.
Early conceptualizations of the stages related to the movement of refugees is evident in the work by Kunz (1981) and Stein (1981). In more recent work, the three phases of migration, delineated by Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, and Frater-Mathieson (2004), acknowledged the disruptions in an individual’s life, as well as the other developmental and ecological stages that occur with migration. Anderson et al. stated:

The development of the refugee child is influenced by the ever-changing ecologies that surround and interact with the child, for the refugee child, the potential for major changes in the ecologies can occur due to pre-migration, trans-migration and post-migration factors. (p. 8)

For the purpose of discovering both the factors that hinder and facilitate the students’ transition to Canadian schools, the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration stages were examined. The Manitoba context was chosen as a midsized Canadian province where immigration has surged in the last 10 years. From 2000-2009, Manitoba received over 97,000 immigrants. “In 2010, 84 per cent came from under the economic class (13,277), 8.8 per cent as family class (1,390) and 6.5 per cent as refugees (460 government-assisted and 514 privately sponsored.)” (Manitoba Education, 2012, p. 6). During 2006–2007, the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba received nearly 17% of the Private Sponsorship of Refugee Landings in the country (Denton, 2009). Manitoba experienced a substantial increase in the number of immigrants because of the provincial nominee program (PNP) that was designed to increase immigration to provinces that would not generally attract people. “The PNP is now Canada’s second largest economic immigration program, with admissions having grown from about 8,000 immigrants in 2005 to expected admissions of 42,000 people this year” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012, p. 1, para 11).

To investigate the various systems interacting with and influencing the development of the student, as well as the points of disruption to the student, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1999) provided an appropriate schematic model. Bronfenbrenner (1999) conceptualized the ecological environment “as a set of nested systems ranging from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’” (p. 11). At the centre of the model are the individual and the specific characteristics that influence and shape the course of his or her development. Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) referred to the five systems as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. These systems were examined in relation to the refugee youths and their process of adjustment to Canadian society (see Figure 1):

Microsystem: The microsystem represents the closest and most inner circle of relationships that the individual has with people, objects, or symbols in his or her immediate environment.

Mesosystem: The mesosystem refers to the linkages or connections among the various microsystems or contexts. Examples might include the linkages between the school experiences and the family or the family and the peer group.

Exosystem: The exosystem represents the events that occur in more distant systems that indirectly affect the experiences in the immediate context. The exosystem might be comprised of friends of the family, community members, social agencies, or neighbours.

Macrosystem: The macrosystem represents the ideologies or attitudes reflected in the culture in which the other systems exist. This system includes the values, customs, and laws of the society.

Chronosystem: The chronosystem refers to the changes in an environment that occur over the time that the individual lives. These developmental changes are triggered by life events or experiences.
The Bioecological Model provided a framework that supported the investigation of the individual within his or her ecosystem. The model supported the investigation of the individual and the examination of the factors that influenced his or her life as the individual moved from one country to another. Because the pre-migration experiences that children and youth have had prior to coming to Canada are so unique, and in many cases traumatic, understanding the individual from
this perspective was paramount to the research. Combining this framework with the three phases of a refugee’s migration to a host country (Anderson et al., 2004) provides a comprehensive illustration of the unique experiences of these students, as well as insight into their psychosocial and educational needs.

The concept of segmented assimilation was first introduced by Portes and Zhou (1993), and then further expanded as a result of the data that was collected by the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study conducted during the 1990s with more than 5,200 youth from several different nationalities as they were followed through their high school years. Portes and Zhou identified three possible patterns of adaptation—namely, straight-line theory, upward mobility and ethnic solidarity, and downward spiral. The latter pattern is associated with cultural dissonance and conflict, often resulting in the immigrant youth associating with “oppositional subcultures of marginalized peers” (Gibson, 2001, p. 21). This pattern is referred to by Portes and Zhou as the downward spiral. The basic structure purported by Portes and Zhou was used as a starting point for the analysis of the factors that contribute to the three patterns of adaptation into Canadian school systems. Combined, these three theories formed the overarching meta-framework for this study.

**METHOD**

This study was a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, document analyses, and focus group interviews. Using a purposive sampling technique, 51 participants took part in this study. High school students were interviewed, and their various ecological systems examined in an attempt to identify common trends and themes found in their various experiences. The student participants for this study were 13 high school students who attended Walter Duncan School, an inner city school in Manitoba (see Table 1 for demographic information). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 individuals from the school/home environment, including teachers, administrators, counsellors, specialists (e.g., school psychologists), and student council leaders.

To examine the role of the exosystem, two focus group discussions were conducted with participants from distant systems that could potentially indirectly influence the individual, such as counsellors from reception centres, members of faith organizations, school division executive members, youth justices, family service workers, social workers, government consultants, and immigrant service workers.

This study employed a continuous process of sorting the data using suitable codes and organizing the material into common themes and trends. Although the process of analysis included expanding, discounting, or altering the stated theories, the overarching goal was to learn about the experiences of war-affected children and to understand how educators and administrators could best support the needs of these students.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Pre-Migration, Trans-Migration, and Post-Migration Experiences**

There was evidence to support that students’ pre-migration experiences included loss, starvation, abuse, persecution, danger, displacement, and exposure to violence. Eight of the 13 students
indicated that one or both of their parents had been killed, and 3 students were not sure if their parents or siblings were alive. Although students did discuss pre-migration experiences that were positive, such as, going to school, playing with friends, and being with family, most of the discussions centered around the disruptions to their lives because of the conflict within their world.

All 13 students had witnessed high-intensity violence where a family member, friend, or a community member had been brutally murdered. One student indicated that he witnessed rebels chopping the arms off of children and adults as a means to intimidate the observers, to debilitate the victims, and to put a burden on the community. One of the female participants indicated that girls were not safe, and she lived in fear that she would be sexually assaulted. Rebels killed, and attempted to eradicate, the older generation as a strategy to manipulate the children and to enlist more followers. Four boys from Sudan witnessed the starvation and subsequent death of countless children as they traveled, unaccompanied, from Sudan to Ethiopia and later to Kenya. Bango talks about the rebels attacking his village. He recalls both the brutality of the violence and the indiscriminantly abduction of youth to serve as child soldiers:

My house got burnt. Rebels, they don’t pick anyone—they kill everyone. They kill kids. All years, middle age, old age. They don’t pick, no. They chop kid’s hands, eight-month old babies they chop their hands down. We do see kids like them, they chop hands down. Heartless people . . . they don’t even know what they’re fighting for. I don’t understand. When they cut you, they will grab a few young youths. They do things beyond your thinking.

Although the pre-migration experiences were unique to each participant, characteristics related to living within war zones were consistent with much of the literature (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Rutter, 2006).

Trans-migration might have included living in a refugee camp for years waiting to be relocated, or it could mean a relatively short period of a few weeks that included leaving home and relocating to Canada. The majority of the students encountered years of displacement from camp

### TABLE 1
Student Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Current Grade in School</th>
<th>Currently Living With . .</th>
<th>Date of Arrival to Canada</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Level of Education Prior to Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Afem</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>12/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Akot</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>01/06/2005</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Anna</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>09/01/2005</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Aran</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mom and dad</td>
<td>15/04/2005</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Bango</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>01/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Banya</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mom and siblings</td>
<td>01/10/2004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Some middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Helen</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dad and siblings</td>
<td>19/10/2004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: Imran</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>04/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: James</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>12/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Levi</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mom and siblings</td>
<td>01/10/2004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Some middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Mahad</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mom and siblings</td>
<td>04/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: Sokut</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>12/11/2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Some elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: Ugot</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Mom and dad</td>
<td>09/01/2006</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Formatted as day/month/year.
to camp coupled with broken promises for relocation. Some of the participants indicated that had lived in various refugee camps for approximately 10 years. Trans-migration experiences included leaving home, losing belongings, and being separated from family. Life in the refugee camps was reported as “difficult,” “unpleasant,” “violent,” and “unsafe.” James recounts what life was like in the refugee camp:

Sometimes there is other people that attacked the refugee camp, and they kill you in the night. People are scared for their security. There is insecurity in the camp. There are many people living in the refugee camp, and also what is sometimes called people fighting between other nations, other refugees with other refugees in the camp.

Camps were overcrowded, food was rationed, and neighbours could not be trusted. The students indicated that they waited and hoped that they would be chosen by the United Nations for relocation.

Findings related to the post-migration phase revealed two distinct phases: initial excitement, followed by challenges and adjustments. The phases are characterized in the literature as a process of segmented assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001) as adaptation (Anderson et al., 2004; Richman, 1998; Sam, Vedder, Ward, & Horenczyk, 2006) and as acculturation (Berry, 2001).

Based on the findings in this study, the theory of segmented assimilation purported by Portes and Zhou (1993) did not necessarily encapsulate what was discovered in the data. The theory of segmented assimilation suggests that there are three paths to assimilation. During the particular point in time that this study was conducted, the students’ post-migration experiences most closely resembled an oscillating pattern of adjustment. This fluctuating model incorporates progressive movement of the individual who encounters challenges and obstacles, as well as successes and accomplishments, throughout all phases of migration.

Challenges for Newcomer Students

Challenges and problems related to education were revealed in four broad categories: (a) Students had difficulty with the academics because of previous disrupted schooling and lower academic literacy levels, (b) students had a financial burden and had to work full time and, therefore, could not focus on their schooling, (c) the school was not always a welcoming environment, and (d) the students were not supported because of systemic, organizational, and policy issues.

Perceived racism and discrimination were most frequently discussed by the students and the members of the microsystem as a major challenge, both in the educational setting and in the various ecological systems. This study inadvertently included an examination of how the adults also contributed to racism and discrimination in all of the ecological systems. Sandra, a teacher at the school, discussed how pervasive the problem is:

I’ve had students that have told me that they lived in a racist country before and now they have come to Canada, and they thought that Canada was going to be this total ideal place and then they realized that this place is just as bad to them. They thought that they would feel safe on the street and they wouldn’t be persecuted for the color of their skin. And now they know that they’re profiled by the police, they’re profiled by the administration, by teachers and by other students who just see them as
a nasty black man or a gang member. So they feel that the promised land that they worked so hard to
get into is not what they wanted it to be.

Sandra’s words not only illustrate how widespread the discrimination is from an ecological
perspective, but also the disappointment that she thinks the students feel about being in Canada.

Ingrid, a divisional consultant, believes that racism is “highly existing” in many schools in the
school division. She is concerned because once she sees progress in one school, she recognizes
another problem in another school. She also indicated that she has received phone calls at her
divisional office from parents who said that they do not want their child sitting beside a Black
student. When I asked Laurie, the school counsellor, if there was any racism or discrimination in
the school, she responded by saying, “From the adults?” This statement was accompanied by a
little laugh followed by this quote:

It’s shameful, it’s true. It’s there. And it comes from a lack of understanding and ignorance and we
don’t address it. In our school, we have created all of these different pockets. We’ve created it and we
are living with it. It’s our own problem. A lot of the resistance comes from the adults. . . . I just don’t
think we do enough education with the adults. How can we educate the kids if we can’t even educate
ourselves?

One of the findings related to discrimination was the lack of integration of the newcomer
students with the Canadian students. Many of the participants concurred that placing the refugee
student immediately into a regular age-appropriate high school classroom would not meet the
students’ educational needs and would likely result in their quick exit from the system. That
said, it is absolutely imperative that the importance of schooling in the lives of all children is
recognized. Education is equally a process of gaining academic skills and social skills. To lessen
the conflict that results from racially and culturally divisive lines, it is necessary to address social
skills and teach children to get along and understand each other. Although placing students into a
specialized program for intensive language skills may be what some professionals think is most
appropriate, doing so has repercussions on the school culture. A student discussed the separate
program in the following dialogue:

Well, you know we have a different program for people who come from another country. I don’t think
they should do that. I don’t think they should put them in a separate group. I think they should put
them in a classroom with regular students and have like a teacher there, that understands them to
show them whatever. I think that’s so we can get a better understanding of them. So that we know
who they are and stuff. Then he gets to know them because you have all different kinds of school
programs here.

Do you have refugee students in your classrooms?
No.
Where are they?
They have like to have their own program so that the teachers can help them understand better,
because they don’t speak English that good.

The benefits of specialized programming cannot be denied; however, problems are created in the
system if this approach is adopted. Programs should not be culturally specific and only programs
that get students together will overcome the fears and insecurities they have about people who
are culturally different. A comprehensive and sustainable program addressing all levels of the
ecological systems is needed to address racism and discrimination.
Educational Challenges

Education emerged as the most prominent system in the lives of the student participants. Education represented a new start to life, where possibilities would be opened up and where dreams could be fulfilled. Sokut indicated that after he finished his education he would go back to Sudan to help people live peacefully. The importance of getting an education was clearly articulated in the following quote from Sokut:

> Although there are difficulties, it cannot stop me from going to school. Although I don’t have anything to eat today, I cannot stop going to school. I have to drink some water, and then go to school. I have to get my education. Unless I died, nothing will get in my way. I go to school even though I have no money. Now I live with a cousin who helps me get money for food.

The numerous systemic and personal challenges that the students incurred contributed to feelings of disappointment and uncertainty that appeared to motivate the students to work harder to stay in school. While there was ample evidence to support the fact that many students drop out of school or are pushed out of school, it became far more meaningful and useful to focus on what kept these students in school. The findings suggest that the students had low expectations for what they would get from an educational system. Most were happy to be safe from violence and war and to be living in a free and democratic country. Participants indicated that they believed students were willing to put up with the treatment they received from staff and students because they were just so happy to be safe. The following quote from a school principal best illustrates this concept:

> They are euphoric at first a bit, but then they start getting into the science and the math and the languages and the curriculum, and it is so difficult. You are so far behind that it becomes such a struggle and your family is counting on you to be the breadwinner. You are the person who is going to make a living in this country. And the only thing you do is toss pizza and there is nothing wrong with tossing pizza, but that wasn’t your dream. Your dream was to be the doctor. And it’s coming to grips with that... They mind it, but they don’t see it as a problem. No one is shooting them.

Some of the teachers openly discussed their dissatisfaction with how other teachers and the administrators treat the refugee students. Examples were provided by various participants to substantiate their claims that some teachers do not want refugee students in their classes. For example, a teacher in the focus group stated: “And that’s the issue that teachers are, instead of compassion and empathy it is, why are they even here? Why do they bother coming to this country if they don’t know how to behave?” Some of the participants explained that teachers assume that refugee children are like every other immigrant and they should not be given preferential treatment. One of the more difficult comments to hear and one that has resonated with me throughout this study was a comment from one of the teachers at Walter Duncan School. At the end of our interview, he emotionally and with a defeatist tone stated: “And the only thing we have going for us is that they don’t know that they’re being treated like crap, because they’re not physically under threat as much as they were. But they will figure it out.” On the more positive side of this comment, it was clearly coming from a teacher who struggled with some of the attitudes and behaviours that he witnessed; that in itself shows that there are people who are concerned for the children in the school.
Parental Assistance

One of the teachers pointed out that if the children do not know the English language, then it is likely that the parents do not either. Many references were made as to the importance of the school connecting with the parents or caregivers and the need for parents to be more responsible for their child’s schooling. One of the parents suggested the following:

Those parents, they have to monitor from time to time and check the kids and check what they did today. And most of the times, I don’t think, especially immigrant parents, they don’t even look into their kids’ work, because they think education is the responsibility of the school.

It was suggested that more work was needed to improve the communication between the school and the home. This communication is particularly difficult when the parents do not speak the language and the school uses the student as a translator. This creates an unequal power structure that complicates the roles between the child and the parents.

Bill is the Sudanese community liaison representative, and he suggested that more resources need to be provided to the parents on the weekends because many of them work during the day. He suggested that if the school had programs on the weekends that were designed for parents—for example, on the topic of discipline—it would be easier for parents to attend. Bill also indicated that there are some parents who are working two jobs, and it is not feasible for them to miss work time.

Critical theorists (Brown, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008) suggest that liberation of a marginalized population begins with facilitating the process whereby the oppressed see how they have been oppressed, repressed, or marginalized. The findings suggest that the adults in the microsystem are well aware of the barriers and the challenges that these students face; however, the students have no common frame of reference on which to judge how much better things could be. Using an ecological framework, this study revealed that to create a productive learning environment and to address the challenges that students incur, all ecological systems must be involved in a collaborative multi-systemic approach to education.

Economic Challenges

The lack of economic resources available to refugee students resulted in numerous challenges that directly affected their adjustment to Canada. Poverty restricted the refugees’ movement within the city and confined them to government subsidized housing within the inner city. This community was perceived by the participants as having a higher incidence of criminal activity, gang activity, and violence. While some literature discusses the economic challenges that complicate the refugees’ adjustment (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), this study revealed that criminal activity, gang activity, and non-completion rates of schooling were a corollary to economic challenges. While the students in this study were presently enrolled in school, they indicated that their peers had dropped out of school for the “easy money” offered by criminal activity or for the necessity to work to support family.

Aran discussed the lure to criminal activity:
They just join a gang and they don’t have any support for the government helping them. . . . And the way we see it on TV in Sudan they think being in a gang is a cool thing. They’re carrying guns and when we see them in movies, it affects a lot of people there. So when they come here, they think it’s that easy. If you’re in a gang you get a lot of money and they think they can just tell them they don’t want to be in the gang anymore, but it’s not that easy. It’s not.

There was a correlation between academic difficulty and having to work. Teachers indicated that having to work and go to school was a contraindication to the students’ academic success. Paul noted a pattern in one of the students he teaches:

I know he works up to eight hours a day doing maintenance and security. He starts at 4 and finishes at 12 and by the time he gets home, it might be one or two, and he has four, five, six hours of sleep and then he gets up and goes to school. And he does this five or six days a week.

Students indicated that they were required to work a full-time job to be able to provide their basic needs. Bango stated:

I look at it, like life is kind of harder here compared to back home. You know, because back home, no one will depend on me. No one will look up to me, and at night, no one is expecting anything from me. But now that I am here going to school, I’m going to live on the small things that I am earning from work. I have to pay bills, and then from that I send some back home. Just for giving them to survive, I send money to my mom. I have to work.

Portes and Rumbat (2001) found that social capital was important for all immigrants, but particularly important for those who “had relatively poor parents with modest educational credentials” (p. 108). They found that the community networks compensated for the lack of economic resources. There was evidence in this study that supported Portes and Rumbaut’s assertions. Students in this study assisted each other by helping each other get jobs, providing food, shelter, or clothing when one of their friends was without, and getting donations from the community or the school staff to help themselves or others.

Psychosocial Challenges

There is a currently debate surrounding trauma discourse and the priority that should be afforded to the investigation of psychological trauma in the refugee population (Boothby et al., 2006; Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Bracken & Petty, 1998; Rutter, 2006; Summerfield, 1999). Unfortunately, this debate has overshadowed the legitimate concern for the need to address the psychosocial needs of war-affected children. The purpose of this research was not to victimize refugee children; rather, it was to draw attention to some of the presenting psychosocial issues that have been observed and brought forward by some of the students and the adult participants.

The following excerpt provides evidence about the extent to which Anna was struggling with mental health issues:

I told her, I’m listening to voices, and I try to hurt myself. One voice tells me to kill myself and the other voice says not to. And I can’t hear with both of them talking to me in both ears. And every time I go home by myself, living by myself, with nobody around me to talk to. I told her that every night, I listen to the voices and I can be so scared to go to bed. Sometimes I just leave the lights on all night. Or I leave the music or the TV on really loud all night and then I go to bed.
Aran noted the difficulty he has sleeping because of the painful memories that resurface:

I just think people are crazy because we are all the same blood, and you go and you kill your own sister and your own brother and that is strange. And I saw that thing when I was young. I was 10 years old, and it’s still coming back in my mind. Sometimes it comes in my dreaming. But I have to get up three or four times in the night.

Although there was evidence to suggest that many of these children forge ahead, despite these issues, there was also evidence to suggest that many of the students keep many of these issues inside, and they continue to suffer from headaches, nightmares, a lack of concentration, sadness, and other medically related symptoms. It is essential to acknowledge what the students have lived through and accept how these experiences currently affect their lives politically, spiritually, biologically, emotionally, and personally.

Environmental Challenges

The study revealed that students were isolated from the various systems of support in the community. A relationship between the lack of support for the students and a lack of interaction between the school and the various ecological systems was revealed. The result was that everyone felt alone. The community environments functioned independently, and the school functioned independently. The majority of the students relied on the school for support. However, most of the students were not aware of the support that the school could or would provide. Several recommendations were made for having a community mentor who would help the students and their families learn how to navigate the system and how to access services.

The findings clearly revealed conflict between the Aboriginal communities and the African communities. Tension between the two groups was fuelled with misunderstandings and ignorance, and it often resulted in conflict and violence. The findings revealed that there were clearly two disenfranchised groups, who were competing for territory and resources. This was exacerbated by the fact that both groups were living in close proximity to each other in an impoverished area of the city that was already struggling to address the needs of the community members. Evidence from this study demonstrates that the conflict and violence have continued to erupt in the community to the point that lives have been lost. While this study focused on only the perspective of the newcomers to Canada, several participants clearly indicated that they do not feel safe in the city, and live in fear that they will be mistaken for a gang member and arbitrarily attacked on the street.

While some of the tension between the African students and the Aboriginal students was racially driven, much of it was also the result of an overall weakened ecological system that could not provide resources to its members. Laurie, a counsellor from Walter Duncan School, blamed the school system for not providing a young student and his family the support he needed. Her statement also illustrates the severity of the violence that is linked to gang activity:

I worked with a boy from Eritrea, who was killed, who was 14 years old, and he was killed for running drugs. He was shot in the stomach and died on the street. He was my student and he was a really great kid. He was charming but, he had no sense of belonging. We didn’t give it to him. . . . We’ve failed him. We failed him by not understanding his needs, by not providing support for him and his family.
Gang involvement was a means of protection from other marginalized groups. The findings in this study suggest that keeping students in school is paramount and, to do this, the collaborative efforts of the various ecological systems are crucial. Heather, from Youth Justice, stated the following:

I am hearing this story a lot from our gang members’ families. The school system is where somehow it all falls apart. At that front end is: I’m not blaming the school system; I am just saying that that is what the parents perceive is happening is that the school piece is falling apart.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) indicated that the most significant outcome for second-generation immigrants depended on whether they stayed in school. In revealing the deficiencies in the ecological model and the difficulties this posed to the students in this study, the findings further reinforce the necessity of strengthening the ecological systems, as well as improving the interactions that the school has with the various systems. In doing this, it is less likely that the school system or the individual will feel isolated.

Assisting Students With Post-Migration Adjustment

The systems, structures, or programs that foster adjustment for the newcomer students are those that provide intensive and flexible programming that can adjust to meet the unique needs of each student. It is imperative that newcomer students are integrated into the school community and connected to people in the system who will provide assistance if the student encounters post-migration challenges. Programming must be flexible enough to address a wide range of academic abilities and previous school experiences. Although language, literacy, and numeracy skills are paramount, so are socialization skills. Psychosocial support must also be provided in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner. Programs that foster positive interaction, such as, tutoring, mentoring, and leadership development, would be beneficial programs for newcomer students. Basic life skills and strategies for dealing with social and emotional issues, such as, anger, depression, stress, and anxiety, would also be useful. Findings revealed that because of the multidimensional nature of the various challenges affecting children and their families, systems must interact more with each other and resources must be developed and shared among the various groups and organizations.

The people who support children from war-affected countries are those who take the time to personally connect with the student and who exhibit perseverance, patience, and kindness. When these people are unsure of how to react or how to help, they are honest with students, and they seek help from others so that they are better able to respond. The findings revealed the presence of an additional system that was much smaller than the microsystem. The nanosystem is a close, interpersonal relationship or network that is integral to connecting the individual to the microsystem. The nanosystem is constructed by a significant person from the student’s innermost microsystem. It could be a parent, a teacher, a coach, or a best friend. The nanosystem is a network, a connection, and a close relationship.

Reverting to the earlier definition of the microsystem, we accept that a microsystem is the closest, most inner circle of relationships that an individual has with people, objects, or symbols in his or her immediate environment. It is the immediate environment in which the individual lives. How the nanosystem differs from the microsystem is the nature of the connection between the
people. Whereas the microsystem was observed to be more contextual, the nanosystem was more relational. Although the microsystem involves close relationships, the extent of this closeness is what differentiates the nanosystem from the microsystem. Everyone could be considered to exist within a microsystem, but only some connect to a nanosystem.

The people who best support the children from war-affected countries are individuals from the microsystem, who create a nanosystem that supports and cares for the individual, who fosters their development, and makes a marked difference in the outcomes of their lives. Students in this study offered several suggestions to teachers and administrators to better assist children who have been affected by war. For the most part, these suggestions all contributed to improving the human capacity of those in the school system.

Strengthening Leadership for School Transformation

The role of the school leader can greatly influence the overall culture of the school, and can also be the driving force behind school reform (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). The findings related to educational challenges suggested that there is a need for stronger leadership and for school leaders to take action against issues related to injustice. Participants from the microsystem most frequently discussed the need for the school to interact and work in partnership with other agencies and programs in the community. As both the literature and the findings in this study suggest, the role of the school leader is paramount to the process of guiding change and for creating a socially just system. The focus for the first set of recommendations directly targets what school leaders can do to improve the success of refugee students.

School leaders have the ability to articulate a clear stand against war, violence, and the abuse of human rights. Moreover, they are uniquely positioned within the school and the community to address issues of inequity, power, and oppression. The lack of interaction between the various systems and the school was the most frequently occurring theme discussed by members of the microsystem. Schools are an integral part of the larger community, and as the findings revealed, the school is a fundamental system in the students’ lives. That said, the school leader should facilitate the activities and processes that link the various systems that influence the child. It is advised that school leaders collaborate with parents and community groups by (a) providing welcoming information (print, video, and computer-based) in multiple languages represented in the community, (b) providing translation services to help parents and students who are not proficient in English, and (c) encouraging parents to attend school functions by eliminating barriers (language, work schedules, and child care) that prohibit their involvement.

School leaders must also establish partnerships with refugee community groups and businesses to support the following: (a) mentoring and tutoring programs, (b) school-community liaison workers, and (c) increased opportunities for students to take part in sport and recreation activities. School leaders should also implement a school-based plan to encourage collaboration and to develop networks of support among the school staff in an effort to decrease feelings of isolation.

Before responding to the community’s needs and interests, the school leader must first actively engage in dialogue with community members to learn about the prevailing issues. To assess the needs of the community, the following four recommendations are advanced:
1. School leaders should document specific demographic data pertaining to marginalized students and their achievement in school.
2. Achievement data should be recorded throughout the year, and there should be greater accountability for the achievement of all students.
3. School leaders should also collect data on the number of students accessing mental health services within the school community.
4. School leaders should also engage in continuing conversations with the staff and students on issues related to social justice.

Evidence from this study suggested that it is essential for the school leader to set an example for the staff and the community by promoting equality, fairness, and respect. If the school leader does not exemplify these characteristics, the participants suggested that the overall tone and culture within the school will be adversely affected. When school leaders are committed to eradicating inequality and injustice, they will be able to recognize how the school system continues to marginalize and oppress certain groups of children. Moreover, they will be more apt to make changes to transform the system to better meet the needs of all students. Promoting justice requires reducing misunderstandings.

The findings in this study suggested that the school is the primary source of socialization, and when ethnically diverse students are not integrated, issues related to misunderstandings and misinterpretations between ethnic groups increase. Programs, such as sports or after-school drop-in clubs, increase integration and contribute to greater cultural understanding and acceptance. Supporting these structures and programs will benefit all students, particularly those who have been marginalized. School leaders should also provide opportunities for staff to learn about the political, social, and cultural issues that influence students and the school community. School leaders must facilitate learning for all staff in the area of best practices for teaching English language learners. Issues related to teachers’ attitudes and behaviours were one of the top 10 most frequently occurring themes in the interviews with the school staff. The attitudes and behaviours that were discussed by the participants included racism, discrimination, unfair treatment, exclusionary actions, and disrespectful comments. Most of the adult participants suggested that a lack of information about refugee students, combined with inadequate support for the staff, was what contributed to these counterproductive attitudes. That said, if these attitudes do exist and refugee students are treated in such a manner, then a comprehensive educational program is needed for all staff.

CONCLUSION

Using Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model (see Bronfenbrenner, 2001) as the theoretical framework for this study confirmed that a multi-ecological and coordinated program to support refugee children would likely ameliorate many of the challenges that they experience. Instead of working with children as isolated individuals, there needs to be more culturally appropriate and contextually inclusive approaches that focus on children who are part of a much larger ecological system. The investigation also revealed the centrality of a key member from the microsystem who created a much smaller and more intimate network of support for the student, which mediated many of their adjustment challenges. The emergence of a nanosystem was revealed when
closely examining how the various systems functioned, how they interacted with each other, and how they supported the student.

Canada has a responsibility to protect refugee children, and this includes the implementation of specific recommendations generated from this study to help rebuild and reconstruct their lives post-migration. There should be a genuine and sincere commitment from the Canadian government, provincial governments, the local school divisions, and school communities to ensure that children who have been affected by war will be protected and supported after they immigrate to Canada. With the commitment of individuals who are willing to address the plight of war-affected children with a sense of urgency and expediency, there is hope that these children will receive the basic entitlements and the appropriate educations they deserve.

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REFERENCES


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