

# Supporting Refugee Students in Schools

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## Abstract

*Education is believed to play an essential role in creating a sense of belonging amongst adolescents from refugee backgrounds. This narrative inquiry study set out to better understand the influence one Canadian school community played in the sense of belonging amongst female students from refugee backgrounds. Findings indicate that a sense of belonging is best fostered by positive teacher-student and peer relationships, the opportunity for youth to get involved in positive ways within their school community, and through the availability and accessibility of support services. Sense of belonging was inhibited by language and cultural barriers, as well as limited availability of support services. The female experience was further challenged by gender-based responsibilities which limited opportunities to participate in the wider school community*

## 1. Introduction

Children and adolescents under the age of 18 years old make up over half of all individuals from refugee backgrounds worldwide [9]. These children and adolescents have endured untold hardships, and the risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, trafficking, or military recruitment, does not end upon resettlement [13]. Host countries have a responsibility to consider the unique cognitive, social, and emotional needs of developing children and adolescents being resettled in their communities, and one way to do so is through education [28].

Education acts as a stabilizing force in the lives of children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds by protecting them from recruitment into armed groups, sexual exploitation, and child marriage; by creating community resilience; by empowering them with the skills and knowledge necessary to live meaningful lives; and by enlightening them to learn about themselves and the world they live in [13]. Education plays an essential role in creating a sense of belonging and preserving hope amongst adolescents from refugee backgrounds [20]. To feel a sense of belonging in school (SOBIS) is to feel connected to a particular group, to feel accepted by peers, supported by teachers and to feel supported by the school community [21]. Students' sense of belonging is determined by their level of attachment to their school, their compliance with school rules and expectations, their involvement in

academics and extracurricular activities, and their belief in the values of their school [21]. A strong sense of belonging is related to positive academic, behavioural and psychological outcomes, including improved self-efficacy, motivation and reduced social-emotional distress [21].

This research set out to investigate the impact that one school community had on adolescents from refugee backgrounds' sense of belonging. It examined three fundamental questions. First, the study analyzed what it meant for female adolescent students from refugee backgrounds to experience a sense of belonging in their school (SOBIS). Second, it explored the impact of teacher and peer relationships on students' sense of belonging; and third it sought to answer how the services available at one Canadian secondary school influenced students' sense of belonging.

## 2. Literature Review

Canada has been a sanctuary for refugees from as far back as the American Revolutionary War in 1776 and continues to welcome thousands of refugees every year [21]. The refugee experience of hardship, difficulty, and sometimes trauma, may continue upon reaching host countries where adolescent students in schools continue to be confronted with extreme poverty, discrimination, racism, community-based (and sometimes domestic) violence, as well as mental health challenges [21]. Yet, despite these enormous setbacks, adolescents from refugee backgrounds display a strong desire to fit in, be academically successful, and contribute positively to their new countries [21].

Unfortunately, much of the existing literature available on the topic of refugee settlement combines refugees into a homogenous group having experienced violence, war, natural disaster or persecution in the same way, and the popular discourse on refugees acts to stigmatize them into a group of victims of trauma and in need of saving [28]. Prior studies also fail to address their school experiences, particularly at the secondary level (ages 13-18 years old) and in the Canadian context. It is important to recognize the vast differences within the refugee experience, which significantly impacts their settlement into Canadian life. There is a large

disparity amongst adolescents from refugee backgrounds in their ability to adjust to a new culture and society [19]. Those who were born and grew up in refugee camps have significantly more trouble adjusting to structured, formalized education, than those whose education was interrupted by the outbreak of war [19]. Subsequently, the ability of a student from a refugee background to find a sense of belonging within their new school is influenced by a multitude of factors, including how easily these students are able to integrate into their new school community, whether they feel accepted by their teachers and peers, and how well the wider school community is able to support them and their families.

Students from refugee backgrounds are often confronted with language barriers that delay and sometimes inhibit them from forming strong social relationships with teachers and peers. Poverty contributes to social isolation, peer rejection and higher school drop-out rates. Mental health challenges can also interfere with cognitive and psychosocial functioning, thereby interfering with higher academic performances [14]. While there are various organizations, such as community groups, religious institutions and sports teams that can provide students with a sense of belonging, schools are situated in a unique position as they have the most access to students [14]. Subsequently, schools are the most influential service systems for adolescents from refugee backgrounds. A strong sense of belonging in school can strengthen internal protective factors, by encouraging intrinsic motivation, fostering optimism about individual abilities, promoting positive attitudes towards school, and strengthening resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges [12,14,21].

Developing a sense of belonging in schools has shown to mitigate some effects of poverty and mental health challenges by promoting physical and psychological health and well-being, decreasing illicit drug use, decreasing levels of depression and, in some studies, even mitigating the impacts of post-traumatic stress [14,21]. If a strong sense of belonging and community can be fostered for students from refugee backgrounds, many of the aforementioned risks can be minimized, allowing these students a chance to achieve higher levels of life satisfaction [14,21].

### 3. Methodology

The research conducted is qualitative in nature and based in narrative inquiry. Narratives occur within specific sociocultural and historical-political climates, which influence the identity that participants choose to exert [11]. The sociocultural climate, or the beliefs, customs, practices and behaviours, in which the study participants operated changed frequently as they navigated their own

sociocultural environments, as influenced by their traditional family values, attitudes and religious beliefs, along with the new Western sociocultural climate in which they found themselves. During the time that the study was conducted, the historical-political climate was one of distrust and uncertainty towards people from refugee backgrounds. The world was experiencing unprecedented refugee migration rates, largely impacted by the Syrian war, which forced 4.8 million people to flee the country and internally displaced another 6 million people [28]. Biased media coverage largely contributed to spreading public distrust of refugees, by portraying them as violent and potential terrorist threats [26]. This had a particularly significant influence on spreading Islamophobia, or prejudice against refugees who practice the Islamic faith [26]. Four (of the seven) study participants identified as being Muslim. As a result, the participants were operating in a historical-political climate of uncertainty, distrust and often prejudice towards people of refugee backgrounds. The study aimed to examine the participants' sense of belonging through their own stories and with the understanding that identity is fluid and constantly changing. This study also used a strength-based approach that focused on the capacity, skills and potential of the participants in the school community. The study approached and analysis from the perspective that the participants are resourceful and resilient, have hope and optimism for the future, value their education and want to find a sense of belonging in their new school communities [27].

These students continue to face on-going challenges and barriers to achieving belonging in their new countries of resettlement, including language barriers, poverty, potential mental and physical health challenges and much more. This study aimed to acknowledge the resiliency that these students employ in the face of the persistent and daily systemic barriers that they face, while recognizing that the challenges they encountered through their refugee experience of forced migration, do not end upon arrival to their new country of resettlement, but rather persist in new, everyday challenges. Yet, despite these daily obstacles, these students continue to maintain a resilient, positive, hopeful and optimistic outlook for the future.

#### 3.1. Participants

Study participants were chosen through a selective or purposive sampling process, which narrows down the participants to a select group of people who fit a particular profile [8]. In consultation with the English Language Learner teachers, participants were selected who were female, from refugee backgrounds, have been in Canada two years

or less and who maintained a working knowledge of the English language.

Females were chosen as focal participants in this study because female adolescents from refugee backgrounds often have different experiences both during conflict and post-conflict than their male counterparts. During times of conflict, female and male children and adolescents who are directly involved in the conflict (often through deliberate strategic targeting), have many different experiences, ranging from sexual violence, to economic exploitation, to forced recruitment as combatants (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000). The study uses narrative inquiry to focus specifically on female adolescents and to give voice to their unique experiences.

### 3.2. Research Design

The study took place at a large inter-city Secondary school located in a sub-urban neighbourhood in a large metropolitan community in British Columbia, Canada. The student population intermixes with the reality of the high levels of poverty, criminal activity, and opioid usage in this neighbourhood daily. This study collected data from student participants and English language learner (ELL) teacher interviews, classroom and school community observations, and a field note journal.

Students were interviewed twice to allow them the opportunity to explain their stories in their own voices. ELL teachers were interviewed to better understand the influence of the classroom community on the student participants' experiences of belonging. Interviews 60-90 minutes, and conducted once prior to observations, and once post-observations. Interviews were semi-structured and were guided by a set of general questions related to the study's core sense of belonging questions [24]. Questions were worded from a positive perspective to minimize the potential of recalling traumatic experiences. For instance, questions asked, "When do you feel comfortable expressing your opinions in class?" and "If you need advice, who are some people you can talk to?" and "How do your friends support each other when you have problems inside/outside of school?"

Observations were conducted to better understand the influence of the school community on students' sense of belonging. Observations allowed the researcher to record first-hand accounts of participant experiences in their classrooms, in the wider school community (e.g. school performances and events), at relevant meetings, on the sports-field and at club gatherings. Observations also allowed the researcher to observe the students in a variety of school community settings. Field notes were recorded from these observations in a field note journal in which the researcher used description,

quotations, and comments to describe situations. These notes were then reflected upon and often participants were asked to elaborate on key observations during the second set of interviews. For instance, "I noticed that during class, you only spoke to X student when you had a question, but not to the teacher. Can you tell me why that was?" Doing so helped to clarify the researchers understanding of specific behaviours and interactions. It also allowed participants to ensure their attitudes and actions were accurately understood.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved collected, coding (both open and axial), and organizing data into themes. From these themes, categories are then created which represented the data and formed an interpretation of them [10]. Concepts were identified, labelled, and categories were created based on the similarities and differences, as well as patterns and structures, amongst concepts [2]. In analyzing the data, student data was first compiled into labelled folders with participants' pseudonyms. Each folder contained transcriptions of their interviews, observation notes (including ELL teacher comments) on the participants.

To begin the analysis, open coding was applied to the first set of interviews and observations. Once all the raw data had been collected from the first round of interviews, and observations, a second interview session was held. Upon completion of the second phase of data collection the new quotes, comments, notes, and stories were again coded, and applied to the categories that had emerged in the first round of data collection - where relevant. A new document with new categories based on the study's core questions was created, from which the process of axial coding commenced, and an attempt to relate the main codes to each other, and to the core questions being asked was made [10]. The first two rounds of data were used to sort into the core question categories. The data was then divided into naturally emerging thematically based categories, core question categories and outliers, which were data that did not seem to fit in any category. Finally, codes, categories, and core questions, were sorted and compared, to look for themes and patterns, a third time. Throughout the narrative inquiry process, the researcher employed reflection and reflexivity as important elements of the process which help to keep in check bias perspectives and assumptions [23].

Guarding against personal bias was further reinforced by the development of categories that were supported by multiple pieces of data that shared similar themes and were not just bits and pieces of information. Furthermore, participants were frequently consulted with that their voices were

being expressed accurately and that the analysis and theories that emerged were consistent with their views and experiences. Participants were asked to read over their interviews, and to expand upon certain situations that had arisen during the observation periods, both in and around the school community.

#### 4. Discussion

The study found that students from refugee backgrounds develop a sense of belonging in school (SOBIS) through their attachment to their school, community, and their perceived acceptance within that community.

In the secondary setting, sense of belonging is not so straightforward for newcomer or Canadian-born students alike either. Constantly shifting and changing senses of identity and self-concept amongst all adolescents, convey that many students in the secondary school settings, whether newcomer or Canadian-born, do not feel a strong connection to, or belonging in, their high school generally [8]. Strong peer relationships are also essential for students from refugee backgrounds to experience a SOBIS. Social acceptance becomes increasingly important throughout adolescence generally as teens begin to place a higher value on the expectations and opinions of their peers [4]. It is even more important to students from refugee backgrounds as they strive to feel accepted and a sense of belonging within their new country. While the participants in this study were well supported and accepted in the ELL community, they struggled to find greater acceptance within the wider school community once they were integrated into the mainstream academic courses, despite their great desire to fit in with their Canadian-born peers. This was largely influenced by language barriers and the fact that other teachers and students struggled to communicate with, and relate to, them. As a result, the participants felt largely ignored by other teachers and socially isolated from their Canadian-born peers in the wider school community. Iris, a study participant comments on her experience trying to make meaningful connections with her peers.

*I was only by myself at this school, I did not know anything... I did not make many friends here [at school]...not good friends that you can sit and talk to. (Iris, Interview II, June 9 2017)*

Alternatively, students from refugee backgrounds felt acceptance amongst their peers from refugee backgrounds, who had similar stories of migration, upheaval and displacement, but more importantly perhaps, had the same desires and goals to make friendships, develop a community and find academic success. Hada conveys that her closest friends are

those that she met first upon arrival at the Welcome Centre, a centre that introduces students to their new communities and assesses their academic ability.

*It was not easy making friends...we met at the Welcome Centre. My other friends are just like 'hi, hi,' not like Vania. (Hada, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

The friendships, even if not deeply meaningful, provided support and comfort to students from refugee backgrounds, and reinforced that their experiences were shared by others. These friendships provided a place of acceptance, and the ELL classroom and teacher, provided a feeling of belonging upon initially arriving to their new school. Iris conveys the strong relationship she formed with her ELL teacher.

*If I have a problem I would not talk to other teachers, but I'll talk to Ms. M...I like Ms. M. because she says, how are you? Where are you from? (Iris, personal communication, June 9 2017)*

However, as students stayed longer at their new school, they began to seek out other ways to fit into the dominant school culture by looking outside the confines of the ELL community and into the wider school community. Unfortunately, acceptance and belonging within the wider school community was difficult to achieve for the study participants. Few of the participants joined school clubs or teams. The three main reasons for this were the high costs associated with joining these groups; the times in which the groups were offered conflicted with familial responsibilities; and many of the students did not feel empowered enough to seek out information regarding these clubs, resulting in missed club meetings, avoidance of team try-outs and general non-participation. Iris and Hadarah share their desires to participate in the wider school community, and to engage in more meaningful relationship building, but the obstacles they face in trying to do so.

*No, I do not participate in any clubs or groups [at school]...because most of them they need money. You have to pay. I like [the idea of the clubs] but I do not want to pay...ya, [also] I do not know when they [the clubs] are...I do like programs where we can sit and talk and listen to other girls' thoughts and stories though. (Iris, Interview II, June 9 2017)*

*No, I do not participate in any clubs...but sometimes yes, I would like to be part of a club at school, yes...like a club where they like games or knowledge... (Hadarah, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

Increasing numbers of students from refugee backgrounds who joined teams and clubs were more likely to make Canadian-born friends or

acquaintances, these relationships were felt to be superficial that did not form stronger more meaningful connections and did not extend outside the classroom or wider school community. Iris further conveys that a challenge is also posed by the age and the perceived maturity differences between her and some of her peers.

*I do not make friends in my classes, just hi hi, but you know, they're young. (Iris, Interview II, June 9 2017)*

Subsequently, students from refugee backgrounds often felt disconnected from their Canadian-born peers, who they felt largely ignored them. Study participants believed that this had to do with language and cultural barriers, as well as preconceived prejudices. This was particularly true for the participants of Muslim background who wore hijabs and traditional clothing. They often felt that others, students and many teachers alike, had preconceived ideas about them, their beliefs and their values, and did not make an effort to get to know them on an individual level. A dialogue between sisters conveys the prejudice they have faced in relation to their religion and culture by their Canadian-born peers and teachers alike.

*...in the media like many bomb blasts happen or gun shots, like someone shoots someone and it says it was a Muslim who shot the people or uh...who drive the bomb into the people. (Qabila, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

*...but like in Islam, there is no right to kill another person. If you kill another person it means like you kill the world, all the world of people, so you do not kill another person. I do not know why they are blaming Islam...I hate the media, I hate it. (Hadarah, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

*...like what can we do to make them [Canadian-born students] our friends and to show them that we are not bad people? (Qabila, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

The above comments convey both the frustration that Qabila and Hadarah feel towards bias media coverage, as well as the desire to dispel the prejudice, discrimination, and racist attitudes they feel from their communities. Their comments are rooted in the desire to enhance understanding, convey peaceful values, and make meaningful friendships within their new school communities.

An inclusive education system as Canada claims to have must support the media literacy of all students and staff alike. Students, whether Canadian-born or newcomer, must be taught to both consume media that is credible and reliable, as well as question and take a critical view of media that is bias and discriminatory. Teaching staff must act as social

models for their students. Teachers that have stronger social-emotional competencies and who teach in an inclusive and supportive way to all students, have the ability to influence the social climate in their classrooms and make their schools more accepting, welcoming and supportive for all students. But to do so, teachers need time and resources to learn and strengthen their best practices for working with diversity in their classrooms.

#### 4.1. Happiness and Belonging

SOBIS is also fostered when students experience happiness in coming to school [22]. All seven of the study participants expressed gratitude, and happiness to be at school, as conveyed by Qabila when asked which subject was her favourite in school.

*All four of them [classes] are my favourite classes, because I learn things... (Qabila, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

They all entered into their new school excited to be given the opportunity to learn in a peaceful and safe environment. However, over time, this enthusiasm tended to erode, in varying degrees. Despite studying and working hard, many students were not earning high grades, as shared by Hadarah who had entered into a senior science class, in her second semester at the school, while still learning English.

*I'm so mad! I worked so hard and I studied so much and I only got this bad mark, in Science, argh [defeatedly]...it is not fair. I work so hard studying, all day and all night...I'm so stupid. (Hadarah, Interview II, June 7 2017)*

The study found that the students attributed academic setbacks to their slow language acquisition, inequitable teaching and assessment practices that presumed they had both access to and knowledge of how to use various learning tools, (such as technology), as well as varying degrees of positive relationships with teachers and support service providers. Furthermore, SOBIS requires a feeling of fairness in school and the study found that the students from refugee backgrounds were treated equally to their Canadian-born counterparts but were not being treated equitably. This meant that study participants were not getting any individual accommodations to make up for their gaps in knowledge or understanding to help them be better able to complete their assignments. Qabila highlights the inequity in the classroom environment and her frustration in trying to focus as a result.

*In school so many kids are not paying attention to what the teachers are saying...they are texting...if there are two friends sitting together, they do not pay*

*attention to the teacher, they just like talk and nothing happens [there are no consequences]. I cannot hear the teacher talk. It is sooo annoying.* (Qabila, Interview II, June 7 2017)

Qabila suggests that poor classroom management contributes to a frustrating and inequitable learning environment. Study participants also felt that they had the same expectations placed on them as their Canadian-born counterparts by their teachers. When they were asked to complete the same assignments as their peers, they felt that they had to put in a much larger and more time-consuming effort, because they first needed to learn the skills required to do the assignment and then apply these new skills to complete their work. Rather than being treated equally, students from refugee backgrounds need to be treated equitably by being provided the skills, tools and supports to meet their specific needs.

Despite their determination and motivation to do well academically, study participants felt frustrated at feeling like they were always trying to catch up. These feelings of frustration, disappointment and unfairness over teaching practices and assessments detracted from their enthusiasm and general happiness to be at school.

Homogenous education policies and generalized teaching practices are ineffective in highly diverse schools. The complexity of learning needs amongst diverse student populations requires a more individualized approach to curriculum and teaching practice. Public schools in British Columbia experience wavering financial support, and as a result, there is inconsistent funding for specialized populations, from ELL to special needs students [3]. This means that teachers are teaching to many complex needs, and they often lack the resources and supports to do so well [3]. The differentiated learning that is required within these diverse classrooms, cannot be adequately supported if teachers are overwhelmed with the number of students and diverse needs in their classrooms. Educational policy must recognize that generalized teaching practices do not support student learning, and teachers require more time to create differentiated learning opportunities (through increased preparation hours); schools need more resources to meet the complex needs of students (including well trained support staff, such as educational assistance); and that school districts require opportunities for administrators to best support the complexity of needs in their schools (such as reduced classroom sizes and increased teacher training for working with diverse student populations).

## 4.2. Positive Relationships and Belonging

Students from refugee backgrounds SOBIS was also strengthened by strong and positive

relationships with teachers from whom they perceived a genuine sense of support and care [12,19,20,29]. Study participants explained that teachers who asked them about their day, inquired if they looked unwell or simply greeted them upon arriving to class, were “nicer” than other teachers. “Nicer” teachers were perceived as being easier to talk to, kinder and more accepting. The study found that in classrooms where the students perceived their teacher as being kind and helpful, the study participants were better able to self-advocate and seek out help when they needed it in their learning. Their sense of belonging was developed as being part of a learning community, in which questions were encouraged and mistakes inevitable, as opposed to being the one isolated student who did not understand the lesson. These students did better academically in supportive teachers’ classes.

Unfortunately, the study participants identified on average only three teachers (of the eight-to-ten they may learn from in any given year), with whom they felt a supportive relationship. These teachers were generally the LST, ELL and one or two other specific teachers in the entire school, which the study participants identified as being supportive. ELL teacher Priya conveys the desire she has to get to know her students on an individual level, but the frustrations that emerge in simply trying to connect with students and their families.

*Getting to know the students’ backgrounds and knowing they’re refugees, I wanted to know more about them...I often wish I could just pick up the phone and call [parents] but we always need multicultural workers and sometimes it takes weeks for them to get back to me...I wish we had a multicultural worker in the school who was always around...we need translators...before we can have a dialogue to get to the point of [even a simple] situation.* (Priya, Interview I, April 4 2017)

In addition, adolescents’ attitudes, choices of activities and emotional well-being are closely linked to that of their peer groups, and sense of belonging largely depends on the acceptance attained by peer groups [4]. The study participants from families that provided the most support and encouragement for them to explore their new communities, were more involved in the school and wider community, and generally had more friends and acquaintances outside the ELL classroom. Furthermore, their level of English was stronger than that of their newcomer peers, which can be attributed to more time spent with native English speakers through the clubs, teams, organizations and jobs in which they participated. The study also conveyed that students felt that their Canadian-born peers largely ignored them in class discussions, in group work and in the hallways. They believed this to be a related to their

language abilities and the fact that their peers had difficulty understanding them. As a result, study participants were more reluctant to speak up in class and often withheld their opinions for fear of their peers whispering about them, even if only to clarify what they had to say.

Canadian-born students must be engaged in their classroom experience. When new students arrive in their schools, administrators and teachers must socially model what inclusive and welcoming behaviour looks like. They must create meaningful opportunities for students to work together, to get to know one another, and to learn from each other.

Creating diverse working groups of students to solve critical thinking challenges or collaborate on solving large problems (even if these problems are teacher simulated), has been shown to be highly effective in breaking down superficial barriers between students [5]. Creating ongoing opportunities to do so, will strengthen social connections between students, and enhance understanding and inclusion between all students.

#### 4.3. School Community and Belonging

Many services are available for schools and the wider community and families from refugee backgrounds. However, there is a high demand for these services that will continue to grow as Canada accepts more refugees and immigrants. ELL teacher Maria conveys the challenge with the number of resources compared to the need that exists. There are many challenges [with the availability of services] we see them right now. For example, [with] the refugees from Syria, we have so many, but we do not have enough multi-cultural workers [MCWs] to support them... we have two Arabic speaking MCW workers for the whole school district! They hired more settlement workers for those families, but we need an Arabic speaking person a few times a week [here at school]. Amira\* is one [MCW] who is assigned to [another] Secondary School because their community of Arabic speaking kids is huge over there too, but our school is one that she's also supposed to be supporting, she's supposed to be here every Friday, but she is never here, never.

*I do not blame her, because there's so much work to do, but this is just the beginning.* (Maria, Interview I, April 3 2017)

The ability of these service to fulfil their roles is significantly reduced by the immense demands placed on them. There are simply not enough settlement workers in schools, multicultural workers or school counsellors to support the number of students and families who require their services. As a result, the issues that students and families from refugee backgrounds come to these providers with

may not get completely resolved, or they may “fall through the cracks,” letting them linger for prolonged periods of time. This places ongoing demands on these services for work only partially completed or support only partially fulfilled. Most of the study participants' families did take advantage of the services provided, and it was only the minority who failed to use the support services available. ELL teacher Maria reinforces the value in these services.

*...these programs and the people that run them are such great supporters of our students...because they [the students] go outside of...their comfort zone, because they have to go to places that are not at school and meet new people.* (Maria, Interview I, April 3 2017)

However, parents who lack skills training, language abilities and may be suffering from mental health challenges, as an after-effect of war, struggle to support their families, both financially and social-emotionally. This stress is carried largely by their children who come to school requiring support for everything from lunch programs to clothing, to help with hygiene, to counselling. This places greater demands on school systems, which are often unprepared and ill equipped to offer this kind of support. The poverty and on-going daily challenges that students from refugee backgrounds experience at home, results in students who are frequently stressed out and worried at school, which further interferes with their cognitive abilities to perform well academically.

#### 5. Recommendations

In the secondary setting, sense of belonging is not so straightforward for newcomer or Canadian-born students alike either. Adolescence poses developmental and social challenges regardless of background, ethnicity and personality. Future studies that compare the level of sense of belonging amongst Canadian-born students to the level of sense of belonging experienced by students from refugee backgrounds would provide greater insight into our general understanding of the development of adolescent students' SOBIS. Whether students from refugee backgrounds develop a sense of belonging in school depends on how connected and accepted they feel in their school. This is conveyed by how welcoming the school is to them as demonstrated by the closeness of the relationships they form with their teachers and peers, and the supports that are available to help them achieve success in their school. The daily stressors that continue in the lives of students from refugee backgrounds after their arrival to their new country are persistent. Poverty, low language skills, disjointed families, and mental health concerns, all contribute to poor academic

achievement and social isolation, requiring students from refugee backgrounds to have a great deal of stamina and endurance to persevere. While getting involved and actively contributing to the school and community environment are proactive measures that students from refugee backgrounds can take to start to build trusting relationships with teachers and peers, females are further challenged with gendered expectations in their homes that may pose barriers to their school and community participation.

The challenges faced by students and families of refugee backgrounds do not stop upon their arrival in their host country, and Canada is no exception. The study participants made frequent comments throughout the interviews about the high cost of living in Canada, including the cost of food, transportation and housing. Addressing ways to better support families financially as well as providing them with skills and language training, would enable parents to better care for their children and alleviate much of the stress on their children.

Many of the participants came from unconventional family structures, with siblings from many different fathers and mothers. This was the case for five of the seven participants. More research into why this is may provide unique insight into the deeper family dynamics influencing some of these students' lives, behaviours and motivations.

## 6. Study Significance

Schools and communities that are able to foster a positive sense of belonging amongst students from refugee backgrounds increase their pro-social outcomes and decrease their negative well-being outcomes. The positive academic, behavioural and psychological outcomes of students who feel a strong sense of SOBIS, results in improved self-efficacy, motivation and reduced social-emotional distress [21]. However, in order for this to occur, skills and language training, affordable housing, increased minimum wages to reflect the cost of living and affordable day-care, is required to better support families and subsequently students from refugee backgrounds.

Presently, Canada does not spend enough money on language services, skills accreditation and on training for newcomers [17]. Canadian government could significantly reduce the costs to taxpayers of paying for social services and welfare programs of newcomers if they were to put in place the proper training and resources to better support these families upon arrival to Canada [17]. The study conveys that educator should make a stronger effort to build relationships with students from refugee backgrounds. It also conveys that administrator must acknowledge that students from refugee backgrounds need to be treated equitably, and that this means providing educators the support and resources to do

so. The schools that use skills and knowledge of previous refugees and Canadian-born students in new and innovative ways, can help to create a climate of acceptance amongst newcomer students in schools. In addition, policy makers should consider the need for more supports for newcomer populations. As Canada continues to welcome immigrants, refugees and others to our schools and communities, we must also ensure that there are adequate supports to help these students and their families develop a sense of belonging and in this way positively contribute to their long-term psychosocial, emotional, and physical health and well-being.

Future studies would benefit from examining the provision of more equitable support for students from refugee backgrounds. Many students stated that they felt treated unfairly because they believed themselves to be working equally as hard or harder than their peers, yet their grades were not reflective of their efforts. A future study which examines how to provide equal access to opportunities, such as post-secondary education, while recognizing practical limitations such as language barriers, knowledge gaps (from interrupted educations), and financial barriers, is required to help students feel that their new society is supportive and a fair one that they want to positively contribute to.

Furthermore, studies that apply existing literature on media literacy and the impact of the media on the formation of ideas and behaviours by both students and teachers in schools, is required to better understand stereotypes and attitudes of discrimination that students from refugee backgrounds are facing upon entering the school system, and the impact of this on sense of belonging. Finally, schools and students from refugee backgrounds would benefit from studies that approach class composition and learning needs in new and creative ways, particularly in a climate of uncertainty and continually fluctuating government funding, priorities and interests in public education. The inclusive classroom model is only as effective as there are supports to run it.

## 7. Conclusion

Children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds are ordinary people, who have been met with extraordinary circumstances. They are capable of enhancing and strengthening the social fabric of our society, and as we continue to welcome thousands of people from refugee backgrounds to Canada annually, we have a responsibility to commit to helping support them upon arrival and throughout the settlement process, both for their well-being and for the health of our society.

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