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Source: *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2012), pp. 48-63

Published by: Canadian Society for the Study of Education

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/canajeducrevucan.35.3.48>

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Learning the Way: Teaching and Learning with and for Youth from Refugee Backgrounds on Prince Edward Island

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Abstract

This article presents one component of a qualitative study that explored teaching and learning with and for youth from refugee backgrounds in Prince Edward Island (PEI) intermediate and high schools. Specifically, this article presents data and discussion regarding some of the challenges and professional development needs of teachers working with refugee youth. Findings from this study confirm that improvements are needed in services available to these students such as teacher training, resources, and school inclusive practices. Teachers also expressed the need for ongoing professional development related to areas such as teaching basic reading and working with students who have experienced trauma. Practical implications for policy and practice are discussed in relation to current research literature.

Keywords: refugee youth, teaching, teacher training, language acquisition, inclusion

Résumé

Cet article présente une composante d'une étude qualitative qui s'est intéressée à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage avec, et pour les jeunes à l'école intermédiaire ou secondaire appartenant à la population de réfugiés directs ou indirects sur l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard (Î.-P.-É.). Plus précisément, cet article présente des données et des discussions qui concernent certains des défis et des besoins au niveau du développement professionnel des enseignants travaillant avec des jeunes réfugiés. Les résultats de cette étude confirment que des améliorations sont nécessaires dans les services offerts à ces étudiants tels que la formation des enseignants, les ressources et les pratiques inclusives scolaires. Les enseignants ont également exprimé la nécessité d'un développement professionnel continu relatif à des domaines tels que l'enseignement des connaissances de base en lecture et le travail avec les élèves ayant subi un traumatisme. Les implications pratiques du point de vue politique et de la mise en pratique sont discutées en lien avec la littérature de recherche actuelle.

Mots-clés: les jeunes réfugiés, l'enseignement, la formation des enseignants, l'acquisition du langage, l'inclusion

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION 35, 3 (2012): 48-63
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In a report by the Canadian Council on Social Development, it was estimated that by 2016, 25% of Canada's children and youth will have arrived in the country as immigrants or refugees (PCCY, 2006). Children and youth who are coming to Canada from refugee backgrounds represent a particularly vulnerable portion of the population. Many of these young people have experienced war, violence, separation from family and friends, loss of home and country, and/or interrupted educational experiences (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Helmer & Eddy, 2003; Stewart, 2007, 2009, 2011).

This is particularly salient and troubling when placed in the global context. According to the Global Trends Report 2010 that was published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 43.7 million individuals worldwide in 2010 who had been forced to leave their homes and countries due to war, violence, and persecution (UNHCR, 2011). Moreover, of these individuals who were forced to flee their homelands, 44% were children under the age of 18 years (UNHCR, 2011). When these children and youth arrive in Canada, they deserve a safe place to live, grow, and learn. However, recent research has shown that these children and youth often face further barriers in Canada such as racism, discrimination, and poverty (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011).

Between 2006 and 2009, schools in Prince Edward Island (PEI), particularly those schools in the province's capital, experienced a four-fold increase in immigrant students (EAL database, 2010). Of these newly arrived students, approximately 14% had come from refugee backgrounds (EAL database, 2011). In particular schools within the capital city, the percentages of immigrant children and youth from refugee backgrounds in the student population could range from 5% to 40% (EAL database, 2011). The number of students from refugee backgrounds in PEI schools, combined with the specialized teaching methods and resources that may be required to meet the educational needs of these students, highlights a need for research that will serve to guide policy and practice.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the teaching and learning practices surrounding students from refugee backgrounds on Prince Edward Island (PEI). The study examined the challenges and joys expressed by teachers, the learning needs and strengths of students from refugee backgrounds, and the practices and strategies being employed by teachers. The specific research questions addressed were:

- What is being done in other provinces in Canada to engage learners from refugee backgrounds?
- What are the teaching practices, challenges, and opportunities as encountered by educators, and what are the challenges and opportunities as experienced by students from refugee backgrounds?
- What programs, supports, or pedagogical strategies could be integrated into Prince Edward Island educational contexts in order to enhance educational experiences for students from refugee backgrounds?

The significance of this study is found in the unique challenges and learning needs faced by students who come to the Canadian school system from refugee backgrounds. This work aims to address a gap in the scholarly literature, as there is currently a paucity of research available in Canada that focuses on the schooling of youth from refugee backgrounds. This study highlights issues and provides new understandings regarding teaching youth from refugee backgrounds with the hope that this will help enhance the educational experiences of these youth. As well, there is currently no policy in existence on PEI that relates to the teaching and learning of youth from refugee backgrounds, though the Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Minister's Directive (MD) on Special Education (2001) does recognize that students may require assistance or special considerations if there are "cultural and/or linguistic factors."

The significance of this study is also rooted in the challenges faced by teachers who are teaching students from refugee backgrounds, and the challenges those students are working to overcome as they adjust to a new country, culture, and language. As of August 2011, the students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in PEI schools were from 16 different countries and spoke 16 different languages (EAL database, 2011). This cultural and linguistic diversity points to a myriad of teaching challenges for teachers working with refugee children and youth. Many PEI teachers who have traditionally taught in monolingual classrooms now have to adjust to teaching in classrooms in which students can speak any number of languages and who are learning English as an additional language.

Youth from refugee backgrounds also present teachers with unique challenges regarding how to teach students at the intermediate and high school levels who are not literate in their dominant language, who may have experienced trauma, who have been forced to leave their countries, and who may have difficulty trusting authority figures such as teachers (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Dooley, 2009; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Hones, 2007; Miller, 2009). Some refugee youth have limited levels of literacy in their first or dominant language, and as a result experience more difficulty learning English and developing English literacy skills (Brown et al., 2006; Cummins, 1996, 2001; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). Specialized teaching methodologies and strategies are necessary to help these students maximize their educational potential (Dooley, 2009). As well, special efforts may be needed to help students from refugee backgrounds learn the cultures, expectations, and routines present in their new schools (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; Helmer & Eddy, 2003).

The extent to which students are made feel they belong within the school learning community depends on the values and attitudes expressed by the teacher and, by extension, the students in the classroom (Cummins, 1996, 2001). Moreover, the work of theorists such as Dewey (1938/1997) and Freire (1998/2005, 1970/2009) states that education and learning should be student-centered. Freire (1998/2005) states, for instance: "educators need to know what happens in the world of the [students] with whom they work" (p. 130) and further that "it is impossible to teach content without knowing how students think in the context of their daily lives" (p. 140). This paper builds on the theories of Cummins, Dewey, and Freire in order to explore the teachers' perspectives regarding teaching and learning with and for youth from refugee backgrounds.

Literature Review

Children and youth who have come from refugee backgrounds often have unique learning needs due to the trauma they have experienced (Brown et al., 2006; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011).

Teachers often feel unprepared to teach these children and youth due to issues such as lack of adequate professional development, preparation, or support (Gunderson, 2007; Stewart, 2007, 2011; Whiteman, 2005). Moreover, Frater-Mathieson (2004) states that some teachers internalize the pain and trauma of the children and youth from refugee backgrounds with whom they work. Teachers require both professional support systems as well as adequate training opportunities in order to help children and youth from refugee backgrounds maximize their learning experiences. This review of the scholarly literature will aim to provide an overview of existing research as it relates to the learning opportunities and challenges of refugee youth, as well as the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers who are working with and for these children and youth.

Opportunities and Challenges in Educational Contexts for Refugee Youth.

The research literature consistently reports that youth from refugee backgrounds and their families place a great deal of importance on education (Kanu, 2008; Rummens & Dei, 2010; Rummens, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Ferguson, 2008; Stermac, Elgie, Dunlap, & Kelly, 2010; Stewart, 2007, 2011). Moreover, several studies noted that schools were the places where these youth most wanted to be (Rummens et al., 2008; Stewart, 2011). However, when youth from refugee backgrounds arrive in Canadian schools, they often face experiences of marginalization and exclusion (Kanu, 2008; Rummens & Dei, 2010). Further, a large number of youth who have come from refugee backgrounds fall through the cracks of an educational system that is not adequately equipped to meet the “unique social and psychological needs of these students and they are not provided with an appropriate education” (Stewart, 2011, p. 6).

Literacy and language acquisition. One challenge that Miller (2009) brings to light is that refugee students are entering English content classes in which they have to learn complex content in a new language when they have only limited conceptual development and basic vocabulary due to limited schooling. Miller asserts, “Students with interrupted education lack the topic-specific vocabularies of academic subjects, understandings of register and genre, cultural background knowledge to scaffold their understanding and learning strategies to process content” (p. 573). This is significant because research in the areas of literacy and language acquisition has shown that when students have strong academic literacy in their dominant language, they will learn a new language more quickly and easily than students who have limited literacy abilities (Coelho, 2004; Cummins, 1996, 2001; Miller, 2009; Turnbull & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009).

Psychosocial challenges. The challenges faced by youth from refugee backgrounds extend beyond linguistic and academic challenges and can include such areas as: adaptation and acculturation challenges, social isolation due to negative environments at school or in the community, interruptions in past educational experiences, and the failure on the part of the school to recognize past knowledge and educational attainments (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Rummens & Dei, 2010; Rummens et al., 2008).

Refugee youth are a particularly vulnerable population, in part due to their pre-migration experiences, which are those experiences they have had before moving to a new country (Khanlou, 2008). According to Khanlou, these pre-migration experiences can include “exposure to one or several of the following: war and war related trauma, chronic conflict and political instability, physical and sexual violence, death of family and friends, [and] multiple displacements across refugee shelters” (p. 515). Depending on the culture, life experiences, and refugee camps students are coming from, they may, as Kanu (2008) finds, have a “fear and distrust of authority figures like teachers” (p. 924). This could be due to a wide variety of life experiences in which adults or authority figures were responsible for, or connected to, some of

the violence or trauma in their lives. Therefore, “restoration of a sense of safety is a top priority for refugee children” (Frater-Mathieson, 2004, p. 39).

Opportunities and Challenges for Teachers Working With and For Refugee Youth.

Depending on the situation in their home countries, students coming from refugee backgrounds may “have experienced war and economic devastation, and face daily the negation of their languages and cultures in a new society” (Hones, 2007, p. 9). It is therefore important that when teaching students—especially those from refugee backgrounds—to ensure the school is a welcoming place for students to continue to grow as learners, feel valued and welcomed, and build individual identities (Cummins, 2001; Dooley, 2009; Gunderson, 2000; Hones, 2007; Kanu, 2008; Loewen, 2004; Stewart, 2009). Similarly, Tilleczek (2008) points out, “[School] is an important key to unlocking inherent potential, useful predictor of subsequent life outcomes, and for immigrant and refugee youth, a useful indicator of successful integration within the receiving society” (p. 76). In order to ensure that students from refugee backgrounds are successful, it is important to include them, as much as possible, in all activities of the learning community. Strekalova and Hoot (2008) state that it is important for teachers to:

...recognize barriers [these students] encounter following a history of traumatic experiences prior to their arrival in this new country. Those barriers include the challenge of identifying themselves in a new cultural context, facing discrimination from culturally inexperienced people, living in families with lower [socio-economic status] or without family, and conflicts with their traditional cultural values. (p. 24)

It is important that teachers are sensitive to the students’ experiences if the students are to experience success. It is also important for teachers to recognize that students’ acculturation to their new cultural environment is a process and students may need time to get to know their new school and community (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). Further, Gunderson (2000) asserts that “teachers, particularly those who teach ‘academic’ classes, must know about culture. If not, immigrant students will continue to fail because culture is part of identity, and identity relates to how well a student does in school and society” (p. 693).

Teaching these students requires a whole new set of skills and tools and can be a daunting task to teachers already working in classrooms that contain a variety of learning abilities, needs, and styles. Students from refugee backgrounds, or students who have had limited to no schooling, pose challenges to teachers because “there is also considerable pedagogic innovation on the part of teachers ... as they discover that pedagogies, which worked for [English additional language] learners with continuous and high-quality prior schooling, are inadequate for [certain groups of] refugees” (Dooley, 2009, p. 8). Classroom teachers, many of whom are already differentiating instruction to reach the diverse learning needs of the individuals in their classrooms, have to further adjust their teaching to include both English language learners and students who have had limited prior schooling. Intermediate and high school teachers, who would normally focus on content-based instruction, are now faced with teaching basic language and literacy skills (Dooley, 2009).

A further challenge to teachers, according to Sutner (2002), is that “in addition to newcomers’ typical challenges, grasping a strange language, fitting into new social circles, and learning a different culture’s customs, refugee children often contend with a host of psychological problems” (p. 37). Teachers who are working with these students not only have to provide language instruction, they must also “attend to cultural and social needs” of the students (Yoon, 2008). This means adapting their teaching practices in such a way as to affirm the

cultural identities of all the students in their classes. It is crucial, therefore, to provide support to classroom teachers so the teachers in turn can provide the best education possible for each individual student in their classrooms. However, in their review of the literature regarding the education of English language learners in high school, Jimenez and Teague (2009) found that there is often a “lack of support provided to teachers. Indeed ... teachers lack even basic curricular and material support” (p. 130).

Design and Methodology

The goal of this study was to explore the educational directions for students from refugee backgrounds in PEI intermediate and high schools. The educational directions were explored through the detailing of practices and perspectives of teachers who worked with refugee youth in PEI schools and the experiences of refugee youth themselves (MacNevin, 2011). As such, the methodological orientation for the thesis was qualitative, drawing on interviews, journals, observations, and textual analysis of documents. Rothe (2000) states that qualitative research “emphasizes action, process, perspective and knowledge as they influence the development and completion of acts” (p. 7). Additionally, qualitative research “permit[s] one to understand the world as seen by the respondents” (Patton, 2002, p. 21), or to view the world “through the eyes” of the individual participants (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009, p. 134).

Methods

This article highlights one component of an exploratory qualitative study that employed a bricolage of methods inspired by ethnography. This research approach used methods inspired by ethnography because an ethnographic study, according to Patton (2002), “presume[s] the centrality of culture in explaining human experience” (p. 131). The human experiences explored in this study include those of classroom teachers teaching students from refugee backgrounds, as well as learning experiences of refugee youth. The principles and practices of ethnography encompass the various data collection methods that were employed.

Ethnography further inspired the methods employed in this study by providing a means of viewing the data from the observations and interviews through new eyes. According to Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma (2001), “the task of a school ethnographer is to make the familiar strange” (p. 188). Accomplishing this task requires what C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) called the “sociological imagination” (p. 7), which he states is the “capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and its components” (p. 211).

Data collection. Data for the study were collected in four ways: 1) a document analysis of eight policy and guideline documents from four Canadian provinces that focus on immigrant and refugee students, 2) interviews with classroom teachers and itinerant teachers who worked with students from refugee backgrounds, 3) classroom observations, and 4) journals completed by students from refugee backgrounds (MacNevin, 2011). Since this article focuses on data collected from the interviews with teachers regarding professional development and training, this article will only discuss the data collection methods that relate specifically to the participant interviews.

Interviews were a useful method of data collection since one aim of the research was to find out what teachers were doing in their classrooms to help students from refugee backgrounds through gathering their stories or narratives as they relate to teaching practices. According to Gerson and Horowitz (2002), “interviews offer a systematic way to uncover people’s

experiences over time as well as their perceptions, motives, and accounts of these experiences and actions” (p. 221). The interviews with teachers were semi-structured since, according to Bryman et al. (2009), this form of interviewing process is “designed to bring out how the *interviewees themselves* [original emphasis] interpret and make sense of issues and events” (p. 160). The purpose of the teacher interviews was to answer the second and third research questions.

Participant sampling and recruitment. Teachers were invited to participate following ethical approval from the University of Prince Edward Island, the external review committee of the English Language School Board, and the Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The researcher contacted the participants via e-mail, in person, or through personal contacts. According to Bryman, et al. (2009), these methods of contacting participants are a “combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling” (p. 202). The researcher interviewed the teachers who agreed and were also available to participate. Since most of the participants were teachers who worked full-time, interviews were held after school, at the convenience of the interviewees.

All seven teachers interviewed had worked with students from refugee backgrounds at the intermediate or high school levels at the time of this study. The participants were all experienced teachers, with seven to 35 years of teaching experience. All of the participants had experience teaching youth from refugee backgrounds although the number of students from refugee backgrounds that each participant had taught varied. Participants reported that they taught in classes in which a range of between two to five languages was present on any given day.

Four of the interview participants worked, or had worked in the past year, as English additional language (EAL) itinerant teachers for immigrant and refugee students who are learning English as an additional language. One of the EAL teachers worked as an EAL itinerant teacher at the intermediate level, but also worked in a classroom at the high school level. One of the teachers interviewed worked as an EAL itinerant teacher during the previous year, but no longer worked for the PEI Department of Education and Early Childhood Development at the time of the study. Two of the teachers interviewed were classroom teachers at the intermediate level who had taught students from refugee backgrounds in their classes. Originally, I had hoped to interview more classroom teachers; however, due to time constraints and lack of response from mainstream classroom teachers, I chose to use two classroom teachers and five EAL itinerant teachers. The interviews conducted with the classroom teachers offer a different perspective and these different viewpoints provide more depth and richness to the data collected. In order that participants remain anonymous, pseudonyms have been used for each teacher.

Coding and analysis. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The recording ensured that the exact words and phrases of the interviewees were captured. Recording (as opposed to taking detailed notes) enabled the interviewer to cultivate and maintain a conversational flow throughout the interview (Patton, 2002). Notes were also taken during the interaction since, as Patton (2002) points out, audio-recordings do not eliminate the need for notes, but rather allow the researcher to take more focused notes that highlight particularly compelling quotes, ideas, and other salient forms of data.

The interview transcriptions were thematically coded. The division of themes and sub-themes emerged through a process of reading, organizing, re-reading, and re-organizing the data.

Research rigor. According to Bryman et al. (2009), trustworthiness “entails both following proper research procedures *and* [original emphasis] submitting the findings to the people studied for confirmation that the account is in agreement with how they see their world”

(p. 132). To ensure credibility, therefore, I gave the research participants copies of the transcribed interviews in order to provide them with an opportunity to respond to the data. This also functioned to clarify misunderstandings in the data and provided deeper insights since interviewees could clarify their thinking and add details they had wanted to mention during the interview process.

The findings from the interviews are as credible as possible because proper research procedures were followed through careful note-taking, attention to detail, double-checking the data by repeatedly re-visiting the data during the analysis and verifying details and information with each interview participant.

In order to confirm validity, I continually referred back to the original research questions as well as to the original research proposal. The questions asked in the interviews were also carefully crafted and double-checked in order to ensure that they asked what I intended, and elicited the kind of information I meant to research.

Results

The data analysis revealed that though the majority of teachers interviewed enjoyed working with youth from refugee backgrounds because they found the perseverance and resilience of these youth inspiring, the teachers also shared a great many challenges and concerns (MacNevin, 2011). For the purposes of this article, I will present a discussion of the results from the teacher interviews as they relate to professional development, training, and the need for policy development that would guide teaching practices.

During the interview process, teachers were asked what professional development they had received or attended that related to teaching students from refugee backgrounds, and what kinds of future professional development they felt would be beneficial. The coding revealed that three interview participants felt they had received professional development regarding the cultural aspects of EAL students, some of which focused on students from refugee backgrounds. Four participants stated they felt they had received no professional development, or that what they had received or attended was inadequate. This section will examine what teacher participants felt they had received, and then follow with a discussion of the types of professional development and training they felt would be most beneficial.

Professional Development and Training Participants Reported Receiving

Four of the teachers interviewed said they did not receive any professional development, or they felt the training did not relate to teaching students from refugee backgrounds. Anne stated that teaching refugee youth at the intermediate level was “really like feeling your way in the dark.” When asked what professional development she had received, Erin responded:

This question asks about preparation and PD and I’d say no, neither. No, comma, neither. I didn’t have any of that. I’ve never been to any ... PD sessions that address the needs of refugee students ... at all. This ... was a real jump into the deep end kind of situation...

Dawn also voiced similar concerns by stating that the professional development often did not support “...what both the regular classroom teacher and the itinerant had to deal with on a daily basis.” Anne stated that even though she had Bachelor of Education and Master of Education degrees, she had not received any training in teaching students from refugee backgrounds. She said that the professional development she did receive came from initiatives

taken by the school staff, or sessions she had attended on her own. Anne further stated that the professional development she had received had been:

...PD that we, as a school, have decided that we need because our EAL population is increasing every year, and PD that I have just decided to go to at different PD workshops and things like that. I've taken that on myself.

The type of professional development she received focused mostly on EAL students rather than on the specific needs of refugee students:

I've had PD that addressed teaching EAL students, but not specifically refugee students ... I haven't had specific PD around refugee students and I do think it would be really helpful if I did because when the immigrant students come, they have formal education background ... but a lot of refugee students that I have taught, they don't have very much formal education experience, or it's really interrupted because they've been in a refugee camp...

Teachers indicated that students who have had interruptions in their educational experiences may not have a solid base on which to build. Therefore, the teaching strategies for teaching students who have to start at a basic level would be different from those strategies used for teaching students who have attended school without interruptions.

Three of the interview participants said that they had received some type of professional development that related to teaching children and youth from different countries, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. Jan, for instance, shared her past experiences of professional development and said that she had attended helpful PD:

Yes, I have attended PD that addressed teaching refugee students. I attended sessions hosted by the [PEI Association for Newcomers]. I have also obtained exceptional materials from NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders pertaining to refugees and displaced persons to better understand life in refugee camps and what life was like for children and their families.

Jan is the only interview participant to state that she had attended sessions that focused on teaching students from refugee backgrounds. She gathered other useful information on her own but has included this as professional development since it included information and learning that could be applied to her teaching. Regarding this professional development, Jan further stated that:

The PD was helpful in understanding the cultural differences but did not address the educational needs or specific strategies that might be helpful in educating EAL students without a lot of direction or resources in a classroom with 18–32 other students requiring support.

The common message, reiterated by Jan, is that these teachers want more professional training and resources that are specifically designed to meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds who are in mainstream intermediate classrooms.

Professional Development and Training Participants Would Like to Receive

Six teachers listed areas in which they felt they could use further training and development. The coded responses fell into four main areas: how to work with students who have experienced trauma, how to include students from refugee backgrounds in the classroom, how to teach basic reading to youth, and more information regarding students' educational backgrounds.

How to work with students who have experienced trauma. Six of the participants called for more professional development related to working with students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced trauma because many of these youth, as Anne stated, "have seen some pretty horrible things." The participants suggested that while some of the emotional needs of refugee youth were similar to other students in the PEI school system, the children and youth from refugee backgrounds also faced unique challenges. These unique cultural and linguistic challenges, accompanied by the lack of knowledge teachers have about the specific background experiences of refugee students, cause teachers not only to be concerned about these students' emotional well-being, but also to be uncertain as to how to approach these needs in the classroom setting. Muriel stated that she wanted to "...learn more about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I want to learn more about what to do, how I can support them..." Refugee students who have lived through traumatic experiences may, at some point, want to talk about some of those experiences. It would be important, participants indicated, for teachers who work with these students to know how to respond to what the students are saying as sometimes these stories can be difficult to hear. It is also important to know what steps to take, and other support services that are available to students and their families.

How to include students from refugee backgrounds in the classroom. All teachers interviewed felt that the social needs of students were an important part of the educational process, though teachers also acknowledged issues and challenges when it came to including youth from refugee backgrounds in the school learning community. The teachers reported that marginalization existed within the schools these youth attended. As Dawn observed at the high schools, for instance, "[students] cluster by language or they sit by themselves. And the whole social networking just doesn't happen by and large."

Several teacher participants also expressed that it could be challenging to support students within the classroom if the students had limited English proficiency or if they had experienced significant interruptions in their educational experiences. As Anne stated when discussing teaching and supporting students from refugee backgrounds:

... it's really like feeling your way in the dark ... so some specific training as to... what's the best way to begin, and how do you help them feel included in your classroom when you're going over subject area content, that sort of thing I think would be really, really helpful.

How to teach basic reading to youth. While all of the teacher participants recognized literacy in English as both a challenge for students in their classroom learning and a challenge for teachers when trying to adapt and modify programs, four participants spoke specifically about teaching basic reading skills. Two facets of teaching reading skills were found during the interview analysis: 1) knowing how to teach basic reading skills and 2) finding age-appropriate

materials that can be used to teach basic reading to students in intermediate and high school. Erin shared that the challenges for students to develop literacy skills are great:

It is an almost overwhelming need to understand their texts and things from school ... they have these huge texts from Canadian studies, science, or math and they don't even know the word 'the' sometimes. So, how do you go from 'the' to understanding a Grade 11 textbook?

Regarding the availability of resources with which to teach these youth, Louanne stated that it was difficult to find materials that were "age-appropriate because [I am] teaching intermediate students how to read, but most of the materials are elementary."

Elementary school teachers are usually given opportunities for professional development in teaching basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Teachers at the junior high and high school levels, however, are usually expected to teach content as opposed to basic reading and writing. Teachers at the intermediate and senior levels reported that skills in teaching basic literacy would be useful because students from refugee backgrounds often need to learn literacy skills in English.

Information regarding students' educational backgrounds. Six interview participants expressed an interest in knowing more about students' backgrounds, experiences, and education. Roland stated he would like "to know more about specific students' experiences and needs ... customs and traditions and ... just to have a little more background and information on the students".

Participants also expressed the need to know more about how to find out what students have learned and their academic skills, abilities, and learning needs. Erin stated, for instance, "at times it is initially guess-work to get a sense of prior knowledge." Teachers stated that though they were able to find out some information from talking to the students, Louanne, Jan, and Muriel said that they would like to know more about the students' previous schooling from a more objective perspective. For instance, Muriel shared that she would like to know more about:

The curriculum. What have they learned? I want to learn more about what it was like. I hear things like, you know, their school was in the middle of the street ... but I don't know ... what did they learn? What was their schooling like? What did it look like? And ... a little bit more about what they are coming into the classroom with. We try to assess them... but we still don't know... like students coming in with math: what kind of math did they learn? How is it comparable to ours?

Muriel further indicated that this information would provide important context about the student that would help her better understand and address the students' learning strengths and needs. Dawn also pointed to the questions that were left unanswered when trying to find out about students' backgrounds and educational experiences when she shared that "we could never figure out with [one student] whether it was seven years or fourteen years she'd been in a refugee camp."

Discussion

The data presented in this article converge on the need for a dramatic improvement in teacher education, professional development, preparation, and support for teachers in order to

promote and improve the learning environments for students from refugee backgrounds in PEI intermediate and high schools. Other issues highlighted in the data include the need for policy development and implementation in PEI schools.

Both the participant interviews and the scholarly literature intersect on five common points: 1) different teaching skills and pedagogies may be needed when teaching students from refugee backgrounds, 2) challenges exist in supporting refugee youth emotionally within the classroom, 3) inclusion of refugee youth both socially and academically in the learning community is critical, 4) building on students' prior experiences and knowledge is important for learning, and 5) teachers require more training and resources in order to more effectively teach youth from refugee backgrounds.

The teachers in this study expressed that they were unsure of how to teach students from refugee backgrounds who had experienced trauma. This correlates with the literature, which states that refugee students often have unique learning needs due to traumatic experiences such as war, violence, loss of family and friends, and loss of country (Brown et al., 2006; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2007, 2011). Further, the teachers interviewed for this study, as well as those in the work done by Stewart (2011), stated that they would like more information on the students before these students arrive in their classrooms. These findings point to a need to provide teachers with more preparation and professional development in teaching students from refugee backgrounds.

The teachers in this study also discussed the importance, as well as the challenges, of including youth from refugee backgrounds, both socially and academically, in the school learning community. The scholarly literature illustrates ways in which students from refugee backgrounds are marginalized due to issues such as language, discrimination, and racism (Gunderson, 2000; Kanu, 2008; Rummens & Dei, 2010; Rummens et al., 2008; Stewart, 2011). These issues stand in the way of students' belonging within the school community and point to a need for teacher training in ways of providing opportunities for students to socialize and learn with peers. These processes of marginalization of students from refugee backgrounds also demonstrate the need for developing sensitivity and cultural awareness for all staff members.

Implications for Future Practice

The data presented in this article indicate implications for future directions for professional development and training for teachers, as well as policy that will provide support for teachers and advocate for students from refugee backgrounds. Four areas of professional development discussed in this article include: 1) teaching basic literacy skills to youth in intermediate and high school, 2) differentiating instruction, 3) determining background knowledge of students, and 4) promoting social interactions between students. Professional development in these areas should be made available to teachers by the PEI Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the English Language School Board. Education and training should also be provided to teachers who are studying at the university level.

Policies should be developed at the Department and Board level that provide support for the instruction and support of EAL students, specifically those coming from refugee backgrounds. Future policy should ensure that schools provide advocacy for youth from refugee backgrounds. The need for policy that works to advocate for refugee youth has been illustrated in the literature, in which researchers state that the needs of youth from refugee backgrounds go

beyond language acquisition since these students have been through varying degrees of trauma (Cummins, 1996; Stewart, 2011).

The effects of globalization and the increased numbers of children and youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds in Canadian schools have only begun to be felt in PEI. These individuals have added a rich cultural and linguistic diversity to PEI schools and communities. In order to meet the academic and emotional needs of these children and youth, policy needs to be developed and teachers must be provided with training, support, and resources. All children and youth have the right to an education. It is important, therefore, to support educators so that they may, in turn, help students maximize their educational experiences.

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