Ontario Secondary Teachers’ Experiences of Supporting Refugee Students

By:

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Abstract

Refugee settlement organizations in Canada have never before been faced with so many refugees in such a short period of time and schools are an important place for many of these newcomers. Ontario secondary teachers and refugee students are faced with many challenges beyond learning a new language. Beyond language barriers exist a wide array of barriers such as the concept of school itself, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and feeling safe. To gain a deeper understanding of the factors and influences that impact refugee student outcomes and successes, the present study examined Ontario secondary school teachers’ experiences of supporting refugee students. Findings from this study highlight similarities and differences among teachers’ approaches to teaching refugee students. Interviews with two Ontario secondary teachers yielded findings about mental health, training and other preparation to teach refugee students, teaching practices and perceptions related to teaching refugees, and culturally relevant pedagogy and student success. Participant accounts and the literature review highlight how the response of school communities towards refugee students can both positively and negatively affect refugee students’ success at school.

**Key Words:** refugee students, best practices, secondary schools, Ontario, Canada

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Apart from First Nations peoples, Canada is a country established predominantly through historical and contemporary immigration. While most Canadian citizens were either born in the country, or followed standard immigration proceedings, the nation has a strong history of accepting those seeking refugee status due to war, natural disaster or persecution. Canada has accepted refugees from all over the world, including countries like Vietnam and Somalia. Refugees have experienced the horrible hardships of oppressive governments, war, and loss of life and dignity. While escaping conflict in their home countries is a critical part of the refugee experience, arriving to a welcoming country with readily implemented infrastructure is crucial to their future success. Thus, exploring how Ontario secondary teachers are working towards ensuring there is appropriate support for refugee students is an extremely relevant topic for research and discussion today.

In 2014 alone, Ontario welcomed more than 11,400 refugees from around the world to start a new life in the province (Government of Canada, 2015). This new influx of refugees – the majority of whom are children below the age of 13 – are attending Ontario schools, and as such, it is essential that teachers have the resources to support and integrate these new students (Government of Canada, 2015). In response to the recent Syrian civil war, Canada has accepted over 30,000 refugees (Government of Ontario, 2016). To ensure a successful integration process, it is important to address and improve policies to ensure that newly arriving students will be properly integrated into the Canadian school system. As most refugees adopt Canada as their new home and do not return upon the cessation of conflict, a long-term comprehensive solution is necessary (Government of Canada, 2015).
In the media, there has been much debate on whether Canada should accept refugees into the country. While Canada self-identifies as a peacekeeping and multicultural nation, the debate around the acceptance of Syrian refugees has been ongoing. When the study began, the newly elected Ontario Liberal government’s promised to bring in 25,000 refugees by the end of the year (Government of Canada, 2016). Today, 40,081 refugees have been resettled under the Liberal government’s initiative (Government of Canada, 2017). Thus, integrating refugees in Ontario schools is a challenging but essential task, which can ensure that refugees are afforded the same opportunities for an education as any other Canadian citizen. Currently, school boards are moving towards policies to ensure the transition to Canadian classrooms for refugees is as seamless as possible (Government of Canada, 2016). Additionally, elementary and secondary educational institutions are fundamental in establishing a sense of Canadian identity. Any successful integration plan will therefore need to ensure that schools are equipped to accomplish this onerous task (Strong, 2015).

1.1 Research Problem

Secondary teachers prepare students for their futures and have a key role in the development and outcome for their students. Refugee secondary students are of particular interest to secondary teachers due to their previous exposure to other school systems. Secondary students who have been exposed to war and are now attending schools in Canada represent a particularly vulnerable group of students, as they have a deeper understanding of the horrors of war (Stewart, 2011). Research suggests that the number of refugees reporting downward mobility is significantly high and for adolescents, this downward trend often starts in high school where a record number of refugees are dropping out (Stewart, 2011). Being at low levels of education most often leads to poverty for refugee students, which is not improving over time. Furthermore, teachers have the
power to address issues refugees might face, such as social and intellectual barriers preventing them from becoming future contributors to Canadian society.

The Toronto District School Board reports having groundwork in place for refugees; however, literature on the topic is sparse. Despite Canada consistently accepting refugees from around the world, the recent influx of Syrian refugees is the largest influx since the Vietnam War in 1979 (Government of Canada, 2015). Thus, the policies currently put in place based on older knowledge may not be relevant today and may not offer enough support for the newcomers due to their outdated nature. It is important for teachers to have the resources to support refugees so that the outcome of their teaching practice is an environment where anyone can succeed.

The Liberal federal government has promised to invest $10.5 million dollars over two years to help support refugees; however, there is no clear outline of direct money allocation (Government of Canada, 2015). While the response to addressing the needs of Syrian refugees has mostly been focused on food, shelter and medical attention, it is important to note that the displacement of so many young refugees has exacerbated the difficulties associated with pursuing education in Canada. Schools in Ontario are overwhelmed. The language barriers, as well as the fact that many of the children have been without formal education for an extended period of time means that they are well behind their peers academically (Stewart, 2011). Ontario secondary teachers need to have the resources to teach refugee students, so that these students can have access to education, as well as a mechanism to aid these students to reach their appropriate grade levels. The refugee children need to have access to the resources to become future contributors to Canadian society. As a result, secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students is a vital area to investigate.

1.2 Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Ontario secondary teachers who are currently supporting recent refugee students. To study this topic, I interviewed a small sample of these teachers about: how they describe and understand the needs and experiences of refugee students; practices teachers are reportedly using to support refugee students; supports and barriers that have reportedly affected teachers’ work with refugee students. By performing a qualitative analysis through interviewing teachers who have had experiences teaching refugee students, suggestions can be made on how to improve policy for the future. Canada’s recent and unprecedented changes to the immigration and refugee system changes the classroom for teachers, and it is important that teachers share their experiences working with refugee populations to ensure that they receive appropriate support to handle these changes.

A further purpose of this research is to report and share practices of Ontario’s secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students so that these practices can help develop better programming for these and future refugee students. Additionally, this information can help inform teachers to better their practices in order to assist refugee students with a smooth integration. I hope that these findings on teachers’ experiences will also enable future teachers to address more complex issues such as, trauma, violence or displacement and ensure that teachers have access to the right resources to help these students.

Supportive and inclusive schools are important in helping refugees settle into Canadian society. School is one of the first places newcomers and their families form connections with their local communities and as such, it is important these connections are positive. As the world grows more politically complex each day it is important that Canada continues to promote multiculturalism and acceptance, thus investigation into past experiences is essential to improve the current system.
1.2 Research Questions

The central research question guiding my study is: What are Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences of supporting recent refugee students? Listed below are sub-questions that further guided my investigation:

- How do these teachers describe and understand the needs and experiences of refugee students?
- What practices are these teachers reportedly using to support refugee students, and what are some perceived outcomes?
- What supports and barriers have affected these teachers’ work with refugee students?

1.3 Background of Researcher

The topic of Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students is particularly interesting to me because of my academic background in sociology, politics and history. As demonstrated through its domination of news coverage in the past two years, the issue of refugee outcome is more relevant than ever. Resources must be made available for both teachers and students so that the same issues that exist in other countries where refugees are stuck in a cycle of poverty do not occur in Canada. Additionally, with the current rise of Islamophobia, it is important to distinguish between extremists and innocent people. Currently, the myriad of abuses taking place in Syria is disturbing.

As a practicing member of the Jewish community, I understand the historical importance of helping those who seek refuge. In fact, the United Nations defined what it means to be a refugee after the world was recovering from a deeply traumatizing and destructive period of genocide and many other human rights violations committed on a horrendous scale during, the Second World War. I think about the members of my community and the other innocent victims
who were persecuted on the basis of race, sexual orientation and religion who attempted to seek refuge in countries like Canada; however, the world remained silent. In 1939, a ship named the St. Louis carrying hundreds of refugees destined for extermination was turned away from Canada (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d). Although the scope and motivation of the Holocaust is completely different from the Civil War in Syria, this unprecedented example reminds us how cruel human beings can be. Although the Holocaust and the Syrian Civil War are different events, the theme of turning away refugees is familiar. It is important that Canadians remember that despite their social and political situation, refugees are no less human than any other citizen.

As a Master of Teaching candidate, I believe it is important to address topics that are deemed as controversial, so that teachers are able to encourage mutual understanding, multiculturalism and fair access to resources to all despite ones personal background. I believe that by engaging in cultural exchanges, students can build partnerships with people from different backgrounds to promote a peaceful living environment. Since the refugees coming to Canada have experienced unimaginable horrors, it is exceedingly crucial that teachers are prepared to understand the needs and experiences of these students.

1.4 Overview

This research project is organized into five chapters. I review the literature in the areas of secondary teacher experiences supporting refugees in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 I describe the research methodology and include information about the participants, the data collection, and study strengths and limitations. In Chapter 4, I report and discuss my research findings. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I review the implications of the findings and make recommendations for future directions. References and a list of appendixes are found at the end.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas pertaining to Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students. More specifically, I review the varying definitions of what it means to be a refugee, and what criteria are used to distinguish refugees from other immigrants. Next, I consider how refugees are integrated into Canadian society. I then consider important topics such as educational experiences, teacher experiences and successes and failures with integration. Lastly, I investigate some of the practices that have been suggested and implemented in order to improve policies to ensure that newly arriving students will be properly integrated into the Canadian school system.

Before I begin reviewing research findings, I will briefly address the definition of ‘refugee’ and offer some historical background information. The term refugee does not have one universally accepted definition however, there are two definitions that the majority of countries follow, including Canada. The definition used in Canadian law is widely accepted internationally and this definition was created in the 1951 Geneva Convention (Bonita, 2015). To meet the definition, a person must be outside their country of origin and have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion in their country of origin (Bonita, 2015). In 1967, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) removed geographical and temporal restrictions from the refugee definition (Davies, 2006). This allowed other groups of people to be considered refugees, including people who are affected by humanitarian crises and those who are identified as stateless (Bonita, 2015). Additionally, the UNHCR definition suggests that one must be outside of one’s country of citizenship, nationality, or habitual residence, in the case of those persons
without a citizenship or nationality (Lister, 2013). Thus, it is evident that the definition of a refugee is situational. This definition is helpful because it allows for an almost wholly encompassing approach to refugees. Whereas the 1951 definition would often have precluded those in situations of war, natural disasters, or without citizenship from receiving protections under the refugee protections, the newer expansion ensures protection and aid in these circumstances.

Defining what it means to be a refugee is imperative. It not only ensures that state protections are afforded to people who fall under this definition, but it also educates the global population on the various hardships refugees face. However, while the UNHCR has a global definition of refugee, each nation state still maintains an internal definition of refugee. Consequently, as this study focuses on Ontario, this paper will adhere to the Canadian national definition of a refugee. In addition to accepting the terms of the United Nations Convention on Refugees, Canada has added a category known as Persons in Need of Protection. To qualify under this designation, one must face at least one of three dangers in their home nation: a danger of torture, a risk to their life, or a risk of cruel or unusual treatment or punishment (Government of Canada, 2012). This allows individuals that may experience persecution individually, rather than as part of a systemic social problem, to seek protection under Canadian law.

Canada has a history of being unique in terms of its refugee policies (Drywood, 2014). Moreover, Canada has embraced multiculturalism and has a proud history of immigration. In 1986, Canada received the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees’ Nansen medal in recognition of extraordinary dedication to the service of refugees (Dauvergne, 2012). Among the refugees, the majority of them are under the age of fifteen. Canada has sought out an international leadership role in human rights protection. This suggests that Canada applies its
constitutional rights structure to everyone, regardless of citizenship, and the Canadian populace is understanding as a whole of broad immigration policies (Dauvergne, 2012, p.2). Furthermore, a key way to improve support for refugee students is to understand how current school boards are preparing for the arrival of these students, which this study will further examine.

2.1 Challenges Facing Refugee Youth

Refugee students’ emotional stress begins long before they transition to a host country (Hodes, 2000). Research (Perry, 2000) suggests that 40-60% of students who have been exposed to traumatic events will go on to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Additional studies link families’ pre-migratory experience to PTSD, which is commonly results from experiences in refugee camps and war settings, where people are exposed to murder, death, torture, and other deplorable conditions (Berman, 2001). The emotional wounds refugee students have can carry into their new country of residence and spill over into the school setting (Ellis, 2013). Specific examples of emotional distress amongst refugee students will be further discussed below. The most common effects of trauma in refugee students recognized by school staff are anxiety and depression (Hart, 2009). Students may also have additional untreated emotional issues that are not easily identifiable. Some issues that may go unnoticed are lapses of memory, poor behavior, difficulty developing relationships and difficulty concentrating (Hart, 2009). Furthermore, refugee students have higher rates of depression and PTSD levels than other immigrant students (Hart, 2009).

Berman (2001) interviewed 76 Somali refugees ages 12-19 living in Portland, Maine and the Boston, Massachusetts area. Through interview processes, researchers measured the effects of war trauma, sense of school membership, PTSD, depression, and self-efficacy. The study suggested that sense of school belonging affected depression and self-efficacy positively.
Moreover, although this study took place in the United States, it is relevant to Canadian research because it indicates that feeling a sense of belonging to a school community decreases depression amongst refugee students. Berman also used a database referred to as National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), where the researchers chose 60 children from the database who had all been exposed to war or political violence. This is significant due to the age of the participants. Other research has suggested that the low performance of secondary newcomers has prompted educational researchers to identify specific needs and programs that might address support for refugee students (Short & Boyson, 2004). The above studies unanimously agree that refugee experiences affect performance in school upon arrival to a new country.

2.1.1 Refugees’ social integration (society)

Education is considered to be one of the most valuable socializing activities for most youth. For refugee youth, school is one of the first places where Canadian culture is introduced and learned, as well as where much of their integration into Canadian society takes place. There are reasons why refugee integration issues may be distinct from those concerning other immigrants who choose to leave their country of origin, which warrants more studies focusing on refugees (Warmington, 2007). Refugees are admitted to Canada primarily on humanitarian rather than economic grounds. The key selection criteria for immigrants are: economic potential demonstrated by principal skilled workers and business applicants, and the presence of economic and social supports in Canada for family class (Warmington, 2007). Integration has multiple meanings and can be an indicator of a refugee’s success or failure in terms of fitting into a new society. The stress and experience of how a newcomer connects to a new area of residence are shaped by the evolution of their social networks and how they form their identity in a new society (Plasterer, 2010). Thus, enhancing social interactions between refugee students and their
local peers is vital for their success. Furthermore, in Canada, education is widely valued as the major pathway to economic advancement. Therefore, there is strong evidence to suggest that the success of refugee students in high school is essential to ensure success later on (Plasterer, 2010). Furthermore, there are few studies that directly examine the integration patterns of refugees in Canada, making the information scarce. Some authors attribute this dearth of research into integration being due to the elusiveness of the concept, which is harder to define due to its lack of quantitative evidence (Yu, Oullet & Warmington, 2007).

Wilkinson suggests, due to the strong correlation between scholastic success and social success, academic performance is often a strong determination of how well refugee students are integrating into Canadian society (Wilkinson, 2002). It also determines how well refugees will be integrated in the future as adults. Wilkinson showed that, in Canada, approximately one half of refugee youth were succeeding in the Canadian school system. This was measured by their enrolment in classes that lead to post-secondary education. Other key elements identified as contributing to refugee success include family and a sense of community (Wilkinson, 2013). Providing a sense of belonging for refugee students has proven to be successful in ensuring refugees have positive experiences in their host countries (Wilkinson, 2013). All in all, there have been stories of success reported in Canada for about half of refugee students; however, there is clearly more work that needs to be done through additional resources and consideration.

The theory of acculturation (Berry et al., 2006) suggests that refugees’ perceive themselves to be in one or more of the following categories: marginalization, separation, and participation in origin culture, assimilation, integration, and identifying with host country. A study (Berry et al., 2006) done showed that integration was the strongest preference. However, assimilation was favored least, as retaining a strong cultural connection was seen as important.
Researchers went on to suggest that there were significant differences in preferences between ethnic groups and between countries of origin (Berry et al., 2006). Countries that have accepted large populations of immigrants and refugees over an extended period of time, such as Canada and the United States, have significantly higher levels of integration than do countries that have experienced a diverse set of immigrant settlers over a short period of time, such as the European Union nations (Berry et al., 2006).

Portes & Rumbaut (2005) suggest that the number of refugees reporting downward mobility is significantly higher for adolescents; this downward trend often starts in high school with record numbers of refugee students dropping out. Additionally, according to underclass absorption theory, difficulty in communities helping parents adjust to life in Canada may also have a negative effect on education status (Wilkinson, 2002). Being at low levels of education most often leads to poverty for refugee students, which is proving not to improve over time in Canada (Wilkinson, 2013). Furthermore, many experts see education as the key to changing this social and economic trajectory for refugee families (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006). Moreover, the intermediate years of schooling are a critical time for refugee students to further their education to ensure success in the future. Refugee students face the choice of staying dedicated to their studies or abandoning the pursuit all together, which can result in future financial struggles (Portes & Rumbaut, 2005).

Some studies report that refugee students face most of their acculturation challenges within school settings because students’ adjustment to school culture is considered the primary sociocultural task for adolescents (Phinney et al., 2001). Schools are often seen as a space for upward mobility. However, if refugee students do not feel welcomed, they might perceive the school climate as negative and hostile (Phinney et al., 2001). Negative attitudes from teachers
and schoolmates can add to the difficulty of social acculturation (Lockwood, 2010). Overall, transitioning to high school can be hard for all students; for refugees who are transitioning into a new society altogether, high school entrance can be a further source of anxiety (Lockwood, 2010).

**2.2 Teacher Experiences of Supporting Refugee Students**

This section will discuss teacher’s experiences supporting refugee students. Georgis (2014) conducted a study that addressed the social needs of refugee students and suggested refugee students are an important part of the educational process and these teachers recognized that there are issues and challenges when it comes to including youth from refugee backgrounds into the community. Various studies found that marginalization existed within the schools these youth attended. MacNevin (2012) found that some refugee students in schools were socially isolated. Lockwood (2010) found that teachers reported challenges in supporting refugee students within the classroom if the students had limited English proficiency (Lockwood, 2010). In Georgis’ (2014) study, teachers at the senior levels indicated that skills in teaching basic literacy would be useful, because refugee students often need to learn literacy skills in English. Furthermore, many teachers believe that staff need better training to ensure teachers are equipped to provide opportunities for refugee students to develop cultural awareness (MacNevin, 2012). Some teachers reportedly believe that they need policy that would better advocate for refugee youth, so that teachers can better support their students (MacNevin, 2012).

Research demonstrates that there are various advantages of refugee parental involvement in school environments. However, parental involvement is often influenced by socioeconomic factors. An important obstacle to note to parental involvement is a lack of comfort (Turney & Kao, 2009). Teachers and school administrators can misinterpret the lack of involvement
amongst refugee parents as a deficit in the parents’ value system, rather than understanding the cultural and socioeconomic barriers they might face (Georgis, 2014). Various teacher practices were put in place to create an inclusive school environment for all. Teachers identified the barriers that existed and concluded that main obstacle was limited English proficiency. Additionally, teachers realized it was essential for there to be a presence of cultural brokers, so that refugee parents felt involved with the school (Georgis, 2014). Furthermore, it should noted that traditional ways of getting parents involved in school environments, may not be applicable to refugee parents, due to various barriers they might face.

2.3 Refugee Students and Academics

A study conducted by Bennett, revealed that despite refugee students’ experiences with trauma, they still processed a profound desire to achieve academic success (Bennett, 2014). Refugee students that were successful benefited from educational services that addressed their needs, such as language assistance and psychological services (Zhou, 2001). Nevertheless, research suggested that better policies are needed to be put in place because students still did not feel they could reach their full potential under past policies. Research indicated that often, refugee students would be placed in accordance with their age, rather than their academic backgrounds (Schroeter, 2014). This policy made it difficult for teachers to meet the needs of their students. This provides insight into the ways refugee students are being integrated into Canadian schools (Lerner, 2012). It is important to note that based on research there is a lack of integration of refugee students and several recommendations were made to encourage schools to create opportunities for refugee students to involve themselves in the development of English language and support for vocational aspirations.

2.4 Integration Success and Failures
Schools that have a range of programs in place for refugee students have an overall positive impact on their lives (Loshini, 2011). Schools that had programs that empowered kids who were talented, but lacked confidence due to language barriers, were the most beneficial to refugee students. Some schools implemented tutoring sessions with teachers and professional tutors during lunchtime, which was a valuable experience for refugee students because it presented hands-on help and support (Wilkinson, 2011). Additionally, another beneficial practice for teachers was including culturally relevant literature for refugee students (Loshini, 2011). This helped refugee students identify with what was being taught to them. Understanding one’s learners and acknowledging their cultural background can encourage learning (Wilkinson, 2011). Moreover, schools that developed a culture that represented refugees in a positive and empowering environment produced refugee students that were the most successful academically (Naidoo, 2012).

Integration failure for refugees in education systems is problematic as it is a major barrier to future success. Furthermore, when refugee students are placed with younger classmates they may experience social and emotional difficulties because of the differences that exist in the development of children of unlike age groups (Naidoo, 2012). Thus, this can exacerbate resettlement stress. Research suggests that many schools lack the resources necessary to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, which makes it challenging for refugee students to develop language skills (Naidoo, 2012). Schools are an important place for building an identity and students fit into groups based on their identified characteristics. O'Rourke (2014) demonstrates that refugees are expected to function like other students, yet are categorized as different. Consequently, this leads to discriminatory practices on the part of teachers and peers, which leads to refugee students’ social isolation (Lerner, 2012). It is evident that greater attention
needs to be paid to refugee children. Teachers need to focus their practices to be inclusive and responsive to refugee students, refugee parents, and the school community (Lerner, 2012). Prevalent outcomes have been identified as unsatisfactory and there are various factors that cause these secondary students to struggle. Furthermore, by reflecting on what practices were successful, teachers can develop best practices for refugee students to expand their understanding of the needs of refugee secondary students.

2.5 Recommendations

The majority of academic articles point to the fact that schools must develop more mental health and multicultural training in schools (Beiser, 2015). Multicultural training has been a suggested service for refugee students, which can be very advantageous. Models of multicultural counselling can generate further dialogues, discussions and inquiries related to best practices for multicultural counselling training and supervision (Kuo, 2013). Educating educators on multiculturalism can make teachers more empathetic to the discrimination refugee students and their parents feel (Kuo, 2013). Therefore, transforming school communities through proactive outreach programs that cater to refugee populations can be extremely effective.

An example of the success of these programs can be demonstrated by an outreach workshop that took place in one school in Scarborough (Dippo, 2015). This outreach program brought attention to the challenges refugee families face by holding in depth community discussion on current issues. Another suggested program was to integrate curriculum topics to issues refugees might face (Dippo, 2015). For example, teachers can assign assignments where students can explore neighbourhood schools and analyse the resources invested and equity measures taken by the school. Thus, students can engage in a comparison of schools and communities, and discuss different communities and their access to different programs (Dippo,
2015). This can introduce students to different challenges communities face. If refugee communities feel alienated by their children’s schools, then more action must be undertaken to ensure that refugee children become part of the community and school’s agenda (Beiser, 2015).

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined research related to refugee students, experience, integration, teaching experience successes and failures. This review emphasizes the importance of supportive and inclusive schools in helping refugee students settle into Canadian society. It also raises questions about current practices and what can be done to improve the situation for refugee students. The research points to the need for further research on refugee outcomes and the importance of exploring the experiences of secondary teachers that support the learning of refugee students. However, most of the existing literature treats Canada as a whole, and there is a lack of scholarly work done that isolates the issues faced by particular provinces.

I hope to contribute further to this literature by suggesting ways to improve the current system by investigating teacher practices in support of refugee students. Research has demonstrated that refugee students need further support, mainly due to trauma. This research study approaches the issue of Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students by using semi-structured interviews with intermediate teachers who have previously taught refugee students in Ontario. This study addresses how teachers support refugee students with past and present resources in place. By identifying how educators prepare and support refugee students, it is my hope to provide better practices and suggestions so that refugee secondary students have access to the resources to become future contributors to Canadian society.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I explain the research methodology I used in order to conduct research on my chosen topic on Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students. I begin by identifying the various methodological choices that would be most valuable for my specific research purpose and questions. I discuss the research approach and procedures, prior to explaining the main instrument of data collection. I go on to identify the participants of the study, recording sample criteria, describing the sampling procedures and providing brief information about the participants. Furthermore, I then discuss how I have analyzed the data, prior to reviewing ethical issues that have been considered. Finally, I discuss some of the methodological limitations of study, while addressing the study’s strengths.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This research study was conducted through a qualitative approach, encompassing a review of existing literature and conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two teachers. Broadly, qualitative research attempts to explain phenomena without using statistical procedures (Jackson, 2007). Additionally, the study’s function was to investigate answers to questions about the evolution of a phenomenon through a humanistic, interpretive approach (Jackson, 2007). Thus, qualitative research attempts to comprehend phenomena from the perspective of the participant, not of the researcher.

Gerrish (2011) argues that qualitative research is presented with a number of methodological challenges. Part of this is because some researchers gather data by means of interviews and observations, techniques normally associated with qualitative methods, which can lead to biases. Furthermore, Gerrish insists that qualitative research requires researchers to
understand and apply methodologies that are complex, which is essential for certain types of research. For example, qualitative research methods can be used to obtain specific details, including feelings and emotions about phenomena that are difficult to gather information about using a quantitative research approach. For this reason, Gerrish points to the need for adaptability and sensitivity when carrying out qualitative research.

In qualitative research, the researcher does not rely on numerical data; rather the researcher relies on responses involving reflections on experiences (Jackson, 2007). Given my research purpose and the questions that I had, a qualitative research study was an appropriate approach for me, as it provided me a way to investigate into Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences of supporting refugee students. By using qualitative research, I was able to answer the “how?” and “why?” questions through a humanistic approach.

### 3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Collecting data in a qualitative research study might take place by document analysis, observations, or interviews (Gerrish, 2011). The use of multiple methods can improve the validity of the findings. For this small study, however, the primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This helped me gain in-depth insight into the perspectives of those affected by the phenomena under study.

According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), the individual in-depth interview allows the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters. I was interested in Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students, and interviewing teachers who had previous experience teaching refugee students or were currently teaching refugee students allowed me to access the most relevant insights. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are organized around a set of open-ended questions, to encourage dialogue between
the interviewer and interviewee(s) (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In this study, this was helpful as open-ended questions allowed for an in-depth interview and insights into a lot of knowledge and experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This allowed for my research to be both in-depth and meaningful.

Moreover, I organized my protocol (located in Appendix B) into four sections, beginning with the participants’ background information, followed by questions about their experiences teaching refugee students. I then proceeded to ask participants about the resources made available to them in preparation for teaching refugee students. In the concluding part of the interview, I asked the teachers questions regarding challenges, supports and next steps for teachers who teach refugee students. My interview questions included:

- What kinds of attitudes and behaviours exist towards refugee students at your school?
- In your view, how do the needs of refugee students differ from those of other students?
- What practices do you use to support refugee students, and what are some perceived outcomes?
- What supports and barriers have affected your work with refugee students?
- How are refugee students integrated into your school?

3.3 Participants

In this section, I review the sampling criteria I established in search for participants. Additionally, I review a range of possible approaches for participant recruitment. The following sample of participants share critical commonalities where they have had previous experience teaching refugee students. Below I address all the methodological decisions related to the research participants.
3.3.1 Sampling criteria

For the purpose of this study, the participants have experiences teaching refugee students in schools. Additionally, teachers who have experience working with the recent influx of Syrian refugees were preferred interview candidates, as the information they provided allowed me to gain insight on the most updated information. This increased the richness of the data obtained from this small sample. In order to maintain a geographic focus, teachers were employed within the Greater Toronto Area and its surrounding areas, in order to create a geographic focus.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

In qualitative research, there are three major sampling methods: convenient, purposeful and theoretical sampling (Gentles, 2015). Purposeful sampling is the most commonly described means of sampling in the qualitative method literature today (Gentles, 2015). In purposive sampling, participants are selected to answer a particular question to ensure that all the key topics are covered (Gentles, 2015). Convenience sampling involves the selection of the most accessible participants (Gentles, 2015). Lastly, theoretical sampling occurs when the researcher samples people based on what they can contribute to the development of theoretical construct (Gentles, 2015). Due to the methodological parameters of my research study, I employed a combination of both convenience and purposeful sampling. Those I interviewed met a set of defined criteria in order to provide the richest possible data. Additionally, participants were employed within Ontario, specifically in the Greater Toronto Area and its surrounding areas. I also asked participants to recommend other individuals who may have experiences teaching refugees. Through a face-to-face interview process I was able to collect insightful data on the challenges that exist when teaching refugee students.
3.3.3 Participant Bios

**Angie** teaches in Ontario and has over twenty years of teaching experience and has taught both primary and secondary grades in the past. Currently, Angie is teaching in a board-wide role, as a teacher on special assignment with responsibility for ESL and ESD programing. Angie has worked with refugee students for many years.

**Estelle** has been working as a high school teacher in the GTA for several years. She has taught refugee students in the social sciences and Spanish in her teaching career. Estelle has had past experiences supervising school-wide initiatives including cultural programming.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis comes in different forms and can be explained as the way data is arranged, conceptualized, refined, and understood (Thorne, 2000). It is important to recognize that qualitative data analysis is not entirely distinguishable from the actual data (Thorne, 2000). It is also important to note the theoretical lens from which the researcher approaches the issue, the approaches the researcher uses to collect the data, and what information the researcher considers relevant when considering what influences the data may all impact the data analysis (Thorne, 2000). Furthermore, this information suggests the processes of data analysis are not always completely unbiased from the actual data acquired. Lastly, analysis also requires an understanding of the phenomena being studied, as well as having the ability to make connections and contextualizing the information found (Thorne, 2000).

Data analysis allows researchers to collect data, which can then be compared to other data, allowing the researcher to find patterns throughout the information (Merriam, 2002). DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006), describe this as the template approach, where patterns are given codes and are sorted into categories. For my analysis, I used this procedure, which
involved coding data so that I was able to contextualize information. This helped me identify themes or inconsistencies in my findings, in order to discover the significance of my research.

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

According to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000), ethical issues are present in any form of research. However, as a researcher it is essential to eliminate issues that might be deemed as unethical. Furthermore, those being interviewed must be protected in order to avoid ethical issues.

The topic of Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students may trigger those participating into feeling emotional, which may cause the interviewee to feel sensitive and vulnerable. Reminiscing on helping those that experienced trauma may also trigger emotional distress. I decreased the likelihood of this occurrence by informing participants with interview questions ahead of time, and by emphasizing to the participants throughout the interview and in the consent letter that they have the right to abstain from answering any questions that make them uncomfortable.

Participants were interviewed in a safe and comfortable environment. The researcher ensured participants that all information given is confidential and anonymous. Establishing a safe and comfortable environment is essential in order for those participating to give honest and truthful answers (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Another risk is privacy and confidentiality. All data collected from my research was saved on my password-protected phone for five years. The information collected will be deleted after the five-year period. Participants signed a letter of consent (Appendix A) to ensure the research had both written and oral consent.

### 3.6 Methodological Limitations and strengths
One limitation of this study is that the data was not generalizable to the population because of the few participants I interviewed (Mason, 2006). However, this study allowed for a much more in-depth analysis of Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students than could be provided by a generalizable quantitative study. Conducting interviews with teachers gave me in-depth knowledge and first-hand accounts.

Research suggests that the interviewer plays a key role in influencing the data collected and it is important to monitor the ways in which they might be influencing the information being given (Merriam, 2002). However, as the researcher, I strived to remain unbiased and not influence the participants in any way. Given the limits of the study, the interviews provided me with valuable first-hand information including, opinions and experiences. This is a positive strength of this type of research as it provided personal experiences of teachers, which could lead to more meaningful data.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the research methodology. First, I discussed the research approach and procedure, including the appropriateness of qualitative research for my topic. Further, I highlighted the importance and relevance of qualitative research to my own topic. I then described the tools of data collection and explained that interviews provided the main source of data. I described what I looked for in participants and the procedures I used in order to analyze the data collected. Specific ethical issues were then discussed and tools to combat this issue were also addressed. Lastly, I discussed the limitations of the study, while simultaneously highlighting its strengths. In the next chapter, I will report my research findings.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Chapter Introduction

The goal of my research study was to examine Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students. The interviewed teachers are from distinct areas of the Greater Toronto Area, and provided regional insights into the difficulties associated with providing top-level education to these new students. This chapter will address the research findings of this paper. First-person accounts will be provided from interviews with teachers who have current and direct experience teaching children who have escaped conflict.

I set out to understand how a small sample of teachers working with refugee students in Ontario is adjusting to the needs of the recent influx of refugee students. Additionally, I wanted to gain an understanding of refugee students’ experiences from teachers’ perspective in Ontario schools. I also looked into how these educators develop relationships with refugee students in order to best support them in achieving success both inside and outside the classroom. A number of themes emerged from the collected data as a result of interviewing these two participants. These themes include mental health, lack of training of eliciting other, teaching practices and perceptions related to teaching refugees, and culturally relevant pedagogy and student success. In addition, both participants touched on difficulties due to cultural asymmetry (differences), which may affect the growth of refugee students in comparison to Canadian students.

This chapter is organized into main themes and subthemes that were identified in the data. I also consolidate findings with the research reviewed in Chapter Two, highlighting the convergences and divergences. Due to the nature of the organization of this section, themes will be addressed in depth, and each theme will have several nuanced components addressed in detail.

4.1 Mental Health Reportedly Impacts the Success of Refugee Students at School
Both participants discussed a need for more information and resources on supporting the mental health and well-being of refugee students. Both participants are dedicated to supporting the mental health of refugee students. However, they each reported not receiving related training, education or support from their respective schools. When questions were asked about factors that hinder success in school for refugee students, both participants suggested mental health played a large role. Angie has been teaching refugee students for 10 years and Estelle for 6 years. Both participants discussed the importance of sharing and communicating the need for mental health support staff for refugee students. Issues with mental health amongst refugee students aligned with the literature on the issue. I will discuss three dimensions of mental health as a consideration for teachers’ supporting refugee students: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), lack of professional mental health care workers, and a need for a calming environment.

4.1.1 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and student success

Through analysis of the data collected from both interviews, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental disorder that results from experiencing or witnessing trauma, was perceived by these teachers to be one of the major factors that reportedly inhibits a refugee students’ success in the classroom. Angie articulated how Syrian refugees in particular are traumatized: “People are traumatized. There is no doubt about it and this is going to go on for the rest of their lives.” Participants emphasized student experience with PTSD in particular and the specific mental health needs of refugee students. The participants expressed a need to improve accessibility to mental health care professionals for these students. Estelle expressed this by saying, “school counselors and social workers having too many kids on case load, if you’re really traumatized, you are waiting a long time.” Overall, both participants expressed the need for greater mental health support for refugee students.
Research links refugee experience prior to the arrival to a new country to PTSD, which commonly results from experiences in refugee camps and war settings, where people are exposed to murder, death, torture, and other awful conditions (Berman, 2001). Thus, refugee students can carry their emotional wounds into their new country of residence which inevitably may spill over into schools (Ellis, 2013). According to both participants, refugee students have experienced terrible trauma and, as a result, need access to mental health care professionals in order to deal with this trauma. I discuss this need in the next section.

### 4.1.2 Absence of mental health professionals

These teachers perceived another major obstacle that can contribute to a child’s inability to recover from trauma: a lack of access to mental health professionals. In order to understand the current absence of access to mental health professionals, I sought to understand the current support systems in place for my participants. Angie argued that: “Our mental health system does not recognize the needs of these children.” The participants both agreed that refugee students’ memories are often traumatic and as a result, learning becomes a significant challenge.

Educators cannot teach students if students do not have adequate mental health support or readiness to learn. Thus, the realization that refugee students have unique mental health needs can be a lesson for other teachers. For example, both participants emphasized that the psychological needs created physiological barriers for refugee students and it is vital for teachers to be aware of these issues. The participants’ accounts of their experiences with refugee students emphasized the absence of essential psychological infrastructure for these students. In a study of students, Zhou (2001) found that that refugee students who were successful in school benefited from educational services that addressed their needs, such as psychological services. As a result,
due to specific psychological needs, in terms of resources, the average investment per refugee child needs to be significantly higher than other children.

4.1.3 Need for calming environment

Both Angie and Estelle discussed creating an environment where refugee students can succeed as their top priority. Angie, being an ESL teacher, even said that creating this environment is a larger priority above academics. She believed that without the creation of an environment where refugee students feel ‘safe’ and comfortable, their daily interactions on all levels could be affected. In particular, both of my research participants described a need for a calming space for refugee students. The participants explained that due to the unique psychological needs of refugee students, some spaces could become a trigger for students. Angie stated: “Students need a quiet environment because being in a busy, narrow hallway can trigger bad memories associated with experiences in refugee camps or under bombardment.” Estelle stated that she would “let students walk through a quiet hallway to create an environment of calming.” Thus, my research emphasized what was discovered through the literature that an empowering environment produced refugee students that were the most successful at school (Naidoo, 2012). Estelle and Angie attributed the need for a calming environment to mitigate psychological distress and trigger. Furthermore, this section has addressed mental health as a consideration for teachers’ supporting refugee students.

4.2 Lack of Training

Participants are aware that resources do exist to aid teachers in supporting refugee students; however, both stressed that, in their view, many teachers are not informed and therefore feel inadequate when teaching refugee students. MacNevin (2012) found that many teachers believe that their school staff need better training to ensure that they are equipped to provide
opportunities for refugee students to develop cultural awareness. When Angie was asked if she had any training prior to the arrival of refugee students she said: “Absolutely not! I had no training. I had ESL training by choice. Teachers are in tears and are feeling inadequate; of course they are not. But, these kids bring a lot of needs.” Estelle emphasized that teachers need access to information about refugee students so that they can be informed and know how to get help if they need it. Estelle made a point of making herself aware of the different programs offered by the school board for teachers to support refugee students, so that she was able to help them be successful.

Both Angie and Estelle also discussed how their colleagues have felt overwhelmed due to a lack of training. Both teachers described the importance of acknowledging that they do not know everything about refugee communities, and they also stressed the importance of asking for help. The important thing to note is that many teachers may not ask for help when it comes to supporting the needs of refugee students. Estelle described her struggle in teaching refugee students because of specific needs and not always initially knowing about existing programs to help these students. Angie explained: “Our system doesn’t see them [refugees] or their strengths.” As a result, Angie made it clear that she would benefit from additional training to help refugee students, which ultimately can enhance the academic performance of these students.

### 4.2.1 Resources available are not enough

Another barrier to supporting refugee students for these two teachers was the available resources that they have access to. Based on the interviews, lack of access to resources is one of the factors contributing to refugee students’ success or failure. My participants also noted that many teachers are unaware of the existing infrastructure in place for refugee students. Estelle describes these resources as such: “It is wonderful the amount that is being done. But it’s really
just a well without a bottom.” Angie explained that “most teachers are unaware of supports that exist.” By identifying how educators prepare and support refugee students, it is my hope to provide better practices and suggestions so that refugee students in secondary schools have more access to relevant resources so that they can become future contributors to Canadian society.

Although both participants recognized resources in place which is being done is some communities, both expressed a need for more. Research supports that many schools lack the resources to provide for refugee students, which makes it challenging for refugee students to develop necessary academic and social skills (Naidoo, 2012). Dippo’s (2015) study with a group of students, found that if teachers are aware of the different resources available to support refugees, refugee communities are less likely to feel alienated by schools. This demonstrates that resources and training play a large role in the success of refugee students. This disconnect between teachers of refugee students and resources in support of refugee may lead to gaps in refugee education.

4.3 Responses Elicited from Other Stakeholders

In the experience of my participants, the response of a specific school community towards refugee students can positively or negatively affect refugee students’ success at school. Descriptions provided by the participants varied in terms of their school community’s ‘acceptance’, but the connection was otherwise clear. One key difference between their experiences of acceptance or a lack thereof is the expression of violent behaviours towards refugee students. Isolating this theme helps to identify what factors and structural elements impacted the responses to refugee students.

4.3.1 Response from classmates to refugee students
Perceptions from other students in the classroom also affects refugee students success. Much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggested that school integration is essential for refugee success. A key aspect of school integration is relationships between refugee students and other students. Estelle emphasized the importance of educating her students about anti-refugee sentiments inside the classroom:

I was privileged because I belonged to the same community as the refugee students I was teaching. However, part of my job was to teach students how to advocate and I facilitated a conversation about refugees from the past with Jewish refugees who were discriminated against despite immense contributions, all the way to the present.

Here, Estelle acknowledges that anti-refugee sentiments do exist in her school, to the extent that she realizes refugee students are likely to have issues with not being accepted by peers. Although this bias against refugees did not play out in front of Estelle directly, Angie offered several examples of refugee students being mistreated by other students including other refugees from the same country of origin:

There are other distinctions we do not know about! We don’t know what the underlying stuff is. For example, there are tensions between Christian and Muslim groups, agrarian and businessmen. I had a seven-year-old child who refused to sit with another Syrian refugee he said: “I’m not sitting with him.” … Can you believe this? I had one kid say to another student: “I hope Assad kills your brother.” There is a divide between pro-Assad groups.

The quote above suggests that, Angie is admitting her own ignorance of the particular ethnic tensions at play in her classroom. These two quotes and examples suggest that anti-refugee sentiments and persistent tensions between ethnic groups that are at play in ongoing conflict in
their home countries can reportedly play a role in refugee students’ experience in the classroom. According to these two teachers, the interplay between cultural tensions and stereotypes can prompt students to bully one another, which can inhibit a child’s ability to be successful in the classroom.

Perceptions from parents and the community also reportedly affect refugee students, whether positively or negatively. Integration has multiple meanings and can be an indicator of a refugee’s success or failure in terms of fitting into a new society (Warmington, 2007). A community’s perception of refugees is correlated to whether or not refugees will be successfully integrated into Canadian society. Providing a sense of belonging for refugee students has proven to be successful in ensuring refugees have positive experiences in their host countries (Wilkinson, 2013). Thus, it is evident that a refugee child’s success has direct relationship to the environment in which they are situated in and this could have a large effect on success. Angie emphasized various examples of the community not reaching out to refugee students effectively:

Parents tend to want to do something, donate backpacks, and help out in short-term ways. These kids still need to be invited to a birthday party. There have not been too many issues. Some parents donated granola bars, but these kids have never eaten granola bars their whole lives.

This example suggests that refugee students need long-term support by the community to help them be successful socially and academically. Teachers and community members need to bring awareness to the needs of refugee students, to prevent bullying and ‘Band-Aid’ solutions.

4.4 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Refugee Students

During the course of the two interviews, both participants emphasized culturally relevant pedagogy and scaffolding as the most important teaching methods to instruct refugee students.
Both Angie and Estelle found that by relating curriculum to the culture of the refugee students, students were more engaged and academically successful. They found it to be beneficial to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy because of the importance of making something of interest the center of discussion to cultivate meaningful understandings of the topic.

Both teachers perceived that their students were more engaged by curriculum expectations when the culture of the refugees was acknowledged. Angie explained:

Thai kids played with beetles on a string in refugee camps. So, one day I brought a book about beetles and the kids loved it! So, I told the kids to take what words they understand and make a story with it. It was a language experience story. It is important to make something of interest the center of discussion for longer than people think.

Estelle also described: “Students react positively to culturally relevant pedagogy.” Having teachers create this type of learning environment where refugee students’ culture is celebrated is extremely advantageous for the students because it makes them feel like their culture and identity is important and appreciated.

Loshini (2011) found that a beneficial practice for teachers was including culturally relevant literature for refugee students because it helped refugee students identify with what was being taught to them. Both teachers asserted that understanding one’s learners and acknowledging their background can help refugees be successful at school. Additionally, Naidoo (2012) found that schools that developed a culture that represented refugees in a positive and empowering environment produced refugee students that were the most successful at school. Students enjoy being in a classroom where they feel important and both teachers found the need to ensure that refugee students’ culture was being acknowledged.

4.5 Conclusion
In this chapter, I shared relevant findings in the data collected from interviews with two senior level high school teachers in Ontario, Canada regarding their experiences teaching refugee students. Overall, findings from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 align with the experiences of the educators interviewed for this study. Both teachers were reportedly committed to providing the best possible learning environment for refugee students and had a clear desire to share their personal accounts of working with this population. Differences in participants’ responses emerged in how they applied teaching practices; however, teaching insights and approaches were similar. This could be a result of training in ELL and being veteran teachers. Overall, the participants were willing to discuss barriers they faced and approaches they took to ensure success amongst refugee students. In the next chapter, I address the implications of these research findings in relation to the teaching community. I also make connections between what is being offered as support. Finally, I conclude this study by making recommendations and suggestions for future research on this topic, so that teachers are better supported in helping refugee students be successful in the classroom.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I review the initial goals, outcomes, and key findings of my research study. In my literature review, I looked at what researchers found on refugee student success including, challenges facing refugee youth, social integration, teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students, academics, and integration success and failures. To gain a better understanding on this topic my qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with two experienced high school teachers currently working with refugee students in Ontario, Canada. Themes that emerged out of my participants’ responses included mental health reportedly impacts the success of refugee students at school, lack of training, resources available are inadequate, responses elicited from other stakeholders, and culturally relevant pedagogy for refugee students.

Through my participants’ accounts, I identified background barriers and limitations that affect refugee student’s experiences in Ontario’s school. Furthermore, in the remainder of this chapter I will provide an overview of the major findings of my study and the impact of these findings on the educational community. Additionally, I will elaborate on the implications of this study, while making recommendations that might contribute to the teacher community on how to effectively teach refugee students. I will then discuss gaps in my research that need further investigation and make concluding comments on the importance of my research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

In this section, I provide an overview of the key findings and their significance to the central research question: What are Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences of supporting recent refugee students? This study identified different experiences of teachers in teaching refugee
students. Various key findings that emerged including mental heath, lack of training of for teachers, teaching practices and perceptions related to teaching refugees, and culturally relevant pedagogy resulting in refugee student success. Similarities between participants were reflected in their approaches on building positive connections with refugee students. Research participants noted the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, in order to help refugee students reach academic goals and feel comfortable in the school environment. By relating curriculum to the cultures of the refugee students, both participants found students were more engaged and academically successful. Ultimately, the importance of making something of interest the center of discussion created more opportunities for student success. This highlights that understanding the cultures of refugee students is important for student success because culturally relevant pedagogy reflects different identities in the classroom. Thus, teachers need to educate themselves beyond curriculum documents on how to best support refugee students. It is important to note that understanding one’s learners and recognizing their experiences can help refugees be successful academically and socially.

Both participants expressed a need for mental health care professionals to address the specific needs of refugee students. Teachers perceived unique mental health needs amongst refugee students to be a significant obstacle in helping them. The participants interviewed emphasized refugee students’ memories are often traumatic and as a result, learning becomes a significant challenge. Overall, this seemed to be a common theme between both participants and as such, this highlights the challenges many refugee students face which may inhibit their ability to learn and create meaningful relationships at school. The importance of the responses of a school community towards refugee students can positively or negatively affect refugee students’
success at school. Ultimately, specific support is needed to make student success a reality and effectively support the needs of refugee students.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I will share implications from my findings for how Ontario secondary teachers may be preparing to teach refugee students for the broader educational community and my own personal identity and practice. I assess potential outcomes for stakeholders such as students, educators and parents and understand how it may influence educational outcomes for refugee students in Ontario.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational community

First, understanding reasons why trauma stands in the way of student success is a finding with implications for the broader educational research community. Students need resources and support to address mental health needs; however, little information was provided by participants on this topic. Furthermore, if teachers are not properly trained in dealing with issues of trauma, they may not know how to properly direct refugee students to the right resources and support. Additionally, students may feel they are in unsafe spaces at school and students should be able to have safe spaces where they can talk about struggles with adjusting to new atmosphere. Students need to feel comfortable and confident in seeking out professional help. Furthermore, teachers may not be reaching out to various stakeholders to work with various parties such as social workers, settlement workers etc. to handle concerns on refugee student success.

Seeing as many refugee students have various specific needs, it might be difficult for teachers to mentor individual students without neglecting the needs of the rest of the class. If the student does not vocalize needs, a student may not get the attention they need, which might result in students falling through the cracks. The educational research community needs to focus on
specific programming that would be effective for all teachers who will teach refugee students. In a study of supporting refugee students, MacNevin (2012) found that many teachers believe that their school staff needs better training to ensure that they are equipped to provide opportunities for refugee students to develop cultural awareness. Thus, this finding should encourage administrators in Ontario to train their teachers on the specific needs of refugee students. The educational community needs to focus on teacher preparedness.

5.2.2 Narrow: My professional identity and practice

In this section, I will reflect on how the study’s findings affected my beliefs about teaching refugee students. Different teachers may have access to different resources due to geographical location of their school. Thus, knowledge on available programming and resources may vary based on location. This finding will have an impact on my own practice because I have become more aware that if teachers need additional help for teaching refugee students, they must individually research ways to get help. As a teacher, I will inform my colleagues on various programs offered, such as LEAP programs (for students whose learning has been interrupted by war or disaster), and other programs that were mentioned in my interviews.

My goal is to be a teacher that supports the learning of all students despite background and I will strive to put my students’ mental health needs before delivering content to promote school achievement. I would also consider seeking out help from administrators and advocating for students who would benefit from specific programming and mental health support. Although my research is limited due to small sample size, I am sure my findings will significantly impact my professional practice because the both participants gave great insight into ongoing struggles many refugee students face.
The participants in my study emphasized that they used strategies and language that was inclusive and equitable learning for all students. As a teacher candidate, I hope that in my future classroom that despite background or abilities, every student should have the opportunity to be successful. Participants emphasized the importance of using a variety of strategies when teaching ELL students, such as vocabulary building, use of relevant and culturally relevant content, and innovative technology. These teaching techniques can help promote respect for all identities and abilities. Furthermore, the experiences shared with me taught me the importance of differentiated instruction, which embraces learners’ various skill sets.

5.3 Recommendations

There were various recommendations that emerged from my study. My participants’ accounts and literature review highlighted the response of a school community towards refugee students can both positively and negatively affect refugee students’ success at school. Thus, this demonstrates multiculturalism and compassion towards others must be promoted in the classroom to ensure refugee students are awarded the same opportunities as their peers. Administrators should focus on developing programming to train teachers on how to receive newcomers and should focus on developing safe spaces for children who might have experienced trauma. Beiser (2015) suggests that if refugee communities feel alienated by their children’s schools, further action must be undertaken to ensure that refugee children become part of the community and school’s agenda. This could allow refugee students to feel more comfortable in a new space and can help facilitate mental health to become an everyday routine for students.

Integrating a class on world cultures and multiculturalism into a teacher education program can also help teachers understand the diverse backgrounds of their different students. Educating educators on multiculturalism can make teachers more empathetic to the
discrimination refugee students and their parents are exposed to (Kuo, 2013). Ontario is extremely diverse and if teachers are narrow-minded or uneducated on different cultures it would be difficult to relate to newcomers. I recognize how this suggestion could be a contentious suggestion, seeing as it would be hard to include all cultures. However, I do believe including some multicultural education for teachers is better than none. Educational scholars should next direct their attention to promoting courses and programming offered that focus heavily on supporting refugee and immigrant students in teacher education program. Moreover, staff need better training to ensure that they are equipped to provide opportunities for refugee students to develop cultural awareness. This theme brings to light the impact of untrained teachers on refugee students, from the teacher’s perspective. This finding should encourage administrators to foster a school environment where teachers feel comfortable asking for help.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The research findings in this study are aimed to fill in the existing gaps in current literature and to help teachers feel ready to implement support strategies for refugee students in the classroom. In this research study participants were asked to share their experience teaching refugee students in Ontario. Since the need for additional mental health care is heightened amongst refugee students, further research should focus on the roles that mental health care professional may provide. I recognize that there are voices absent from this study, including parents’ voices. It would be interesting to get their perspective on best way to help children who have experienced trauma. Additionally, it would be interesting to uncover ways refugee students think teachers can best support their learning.

Although, this study is limited in scope, this research project has further strengthened my teaching philosophy that everyone should have access to education, despite background, ability,
gender, race, religion, sexuality, etc. Focusing on the challenges refugee students face and ways teachers can help these students reinforced the importance of my teaching philosophy.

5.5 Concluding Comments

I feel as though my research is more relevant now than when I first started this study. As many right-winged governments emerge globally, it is important to keep in mind that Canada is one of few countries that continues to emphasize diversity as its strength. It is essential that refugees receive the necessary support to make them successful in Canada and the key to upward mobility begins with education. As a researcher, I want to gain insight on how Ontario teachers are preparing for refugee students so that I can incorporate their best practices into my work. From this study, I learned that teachers believe culturally relevant pedagogy is a helpful tool. However, there are barriers that prevent them from successfully integrating all refugee students, including mental health struggles. My research matters because exploring how Ontario secondary teachers are working towards ensuring there is appropriate support for refugee students is an extremely relevant topic for discussion today. This new influx of refugees – the majority of whom are children below the age of 13 – are currently attending Ontario schools, and it is essential that teachers have the necessary resources to support and integrate these new students, which that is exactly what the goal of the research aimed to attain.
References


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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

April 11, 2015

Dear ______________,

My name is Rachael Jacobs and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience of teaching and supporting refugee students. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one roughly 60-75 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Rachael Jacobs Davidovitch

MT Program Contact:

Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vemic, Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Rachael Jacobs Davidovitch and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about Ontario secondary teachers’ experiences supporting refugee students. I intend on reporting implications of the findings in order to make recommendations for future directions. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experiences teaching refugee students. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. Can you describe your current school and role (subject, grade, etc.)? **Check to make sure they are going to speak about experiences at this school. If not, ask questions 2 and 3 about the other schools where they worked with refugee students.
2. In addition to your role as a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school (i.e. guidance counsellor, club organizer etc.)?
3. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (i.e. diversity, socioeconomic status)?

Teacher Experiences with Refugee Students

4. Please describe the refugee students you have worked with. (PROMPTS:)
   a. Country of origin
   b. Transit countries (on the way to Canada)
   c. Language(s) spoken
   d. Family status (people here with them or left behind/elsewhere)
   e. Particular challenges
5. For how many years have you been teaching refugee students?

What grades and subjects did you teach, while teaching refugee students?

6. Did your school give you any training prior to the arrival of these new students?
7. Have you ever shared your experiences with colleagues?
   a. If yes, in what context?
   b. If no, why not?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

1. Do you believe there are best practices when teaching refugee students? If so, please describe some of these that have worked for you and your students.
2. Were enough resources were made available for you to help integrate refugee students?
3. Do you think students who identified as refugees have unique needs?
   a. If so, what kinds of unique needs do they have?
   b. If no, why not?

Classroom Climate

1. In your experience, what are some of the factors involved in refugee students’ social integration?
   a. Attitudes and behaviors of non-refugee students
   b. Attitudes and behaviors of non-refugee parents
2. How do/did you support refugee students’ social integration in your school or classroom?
3. Currently, there is a lot of anti-refugee sentiment in the media. Is this something you address in your classroom?
   a. If so, how?
   b. If not, why not?

Supports and Challenges

1. What kinds of support systems and resources are available to you with regards to your experience of teaching refugee students? Do you think the supports made available are helpful?

Next Steps

1. What barriers do you continue to face when teaching refugee students?
   a. What do you think can be done to minimize these barriers?
2. As a teacher who is interested in promoting multiculturalism, diversity and acceptance in the classroom, what advice do you have for me and other teachers in relation to supporting refugee students?

Thank you kindly for your participation in this research study.