



Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling: The View from Small Communities in Manitoba, Canada

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KEY FINDINGS

The arrival of refugee newcomers to small communities elicited a strong public response from local stakeholders. Support for refugees was aided by strong collaborative relationships between Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) and school staff. Refugees were strongly impacted by their pre-migration experiences and faced significant academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges following resettlement. Educators embraced a culture of caring, integration, inclusion, and appreciation of cultural diversity in their teaching approaches and use of best practices, however gaps in services and supports as well as retention of refugee youth in smaller communities are major concerns. The study concludes with a series of recommendations.

BACKGROUND

While refugees across Canada are largely destined for resettlement in large, urban centres, the proliferation of community support networks and collaborative partnerships involving government-funded newcomer serving provider organizations (SPOs), Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs)[i], umbrella groups[ii], and other local bodies have resulted in more rural and small communities welcoming refugee newcomers (Esses & Carter, 2019; Haugen, 2019; Janzen et al., 2021).

Achieving positive educational experiences for refugee youth in small communities necessitates broad-spectrum collaboration and mutual learning between formal SPOs, the wider array of non-refugee and non-newcomer-specific agencies responsible for rural and remote service provision, other groups and individuals that can positively contribute to a “welcoming community”[iii] for refugee youth and their families, and the provincially-funded education system (see also Silvius & Boddy, 2023).

In our study, schools, school divisions, and other bodies responsible for supporting the educational pursuits of refugee youth in small centres may be considered as stakeholders who have a responsibility in offering newcomer-and specifically refugee-oriented services. They may stand to benefit from mutual learning and capacity building through collaborating with SPOs, LIPs, and umbrella groups. Attaining higher education plays a pivotal role in the integration and inclusion of refugees into Canadian society (Bajwa et al., 2017), but achieving it requires involvement from both within the formal education system and outside of it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & PROJECT COLLABORATORS

This project was funded by the [Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition](#) (CYRRC) out of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) partnership grant



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THE MANITOBA CONTEXT

Over the last decade, increasing numbers of refugees have been arriving in Manitoba. The Manitoba Immigration Facts Report, 2021 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.) showed that between 2011 and 2021, there were 18,480 resettled refugees and protected persons admitted to the province, with 61% (11,310) arriving within the last five years despite the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee arrivals and related travel restrictions (Helps et al., 2021). Winnipeg attracts the largest share of newcomers (about 90%), but some smaller cities and towns are also welcoming refugees to their communities through both private- and government-sponsored resettlement programs.

Such growth of refugees resettling in Manitoba necessitates that systems must respond to the presence of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), especially in high school. While some resettled refugees have had formal schooling, others may never have attended any formal schooling before and may have differing levels of first language as well as English language literacy. With their unique backgrounds in education, resettled refugee youth are more at risk with respect to school performance and general well-being within the high school population as a whole (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Hos, 2020; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016).

Multiple complex factors interact to create challenges to successful schooling for refugee youth and their families that settle in Manitoba (Ennab, 2017; Jowett et al., 2020; Kanu, 2008; Rural Development Institute, 2016; Stewart, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019). Academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges, compounded by experiences with racism and discrimination, can interfere with refugee youths' social integration and educational success, thereby setting the stage for feelings of rejection, marginalization, and frustration, as well as the desire to drop out of school (Kanu, 2008).

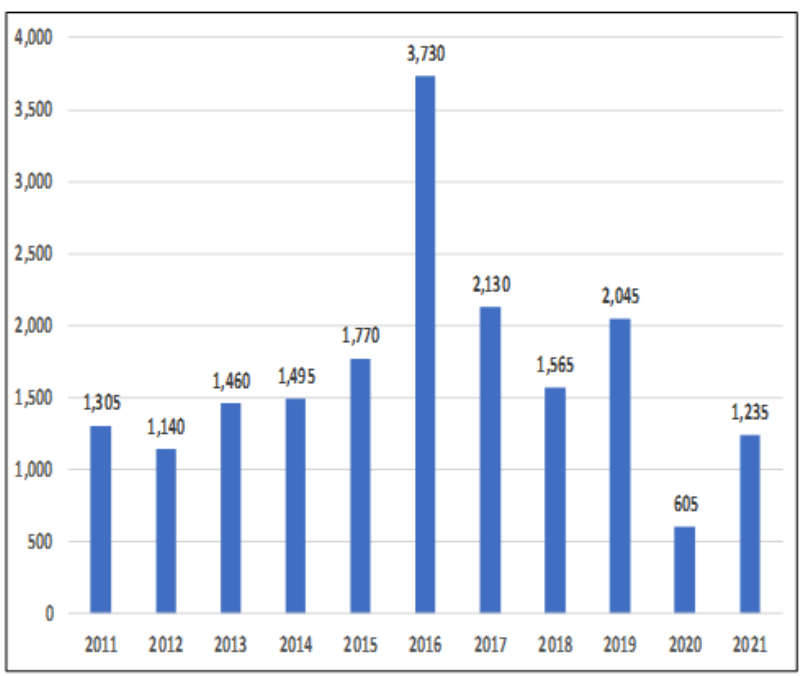
Table 1. Admission to Manitoba of Resettled Refugees by Census Division and Census Subdivision

January 2015 - September 2023

Location	Number	Percent
Winnipeg	13,720	89.9
Altona	80	0.5
Brandon	915	6.0
Dauphin	25	0.2
Portage la Prairie	30	0.2
Steinbach	65	0.4
Winkler	160	1.0
Other	260	1.7
Total	15,255	100

Source: This data was accessed through the *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* website.

Figure 1. Admission to Manitoba of Resettled Refugees and Protected Persons in Canada as Permanent Residents (2011-2021)



Source: This data was accessed through the *Manitoba Immigration Facts Report (2021)*.



These research findings are consistent in calling for more economic, social, and school-based supports such as language programs, staffing, and interpreters for refugees in Manitoba, as well as more culturally appropriate and inclusive approaches. With increasing numbers of refugees resettling in Manitoba, educators and administrators need to be well-informed about the challenges facing refugees as they can determine how best to meet the educational needs of these students (Jowett et. al, 2020; Stewart, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019).

As Manitoba continues to resettle increasing numbers of refugee families, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of refugees' experiences as they attempt to settle into smaller communities. Research can assist in identifying local awareness of priorities for developing policies, programs, and services to address the ongoing needs of refugee youth with interrupted schooling.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The purpose of this research was to build on the previous *Supported Transitions*[iv] project and the partnerships already established with Immigration Partnership Winnipeg (IPW), the Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO), and the Newcomer Education Coalition (NEC) to gather insights, strategies, and suggested best practices from participants on ways to address interrupted schooling among refugee youth in smaller Manitoban communities.

Using a community-engaged participatory research methodology, all data were collected from four cohorts that included interviews with 11 refugee youth, six school personnel (educators), two senior administrators, two Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), and a focus group with SWIS who were not part of the interviews. Data was collected from smaller communities (broadly defined as those with a population of 55,000 or less), in three geographic regions in Manitoba (Central Plains, Pembina Valley, and Westman) that had higher concentrations of refugee youth and a federally funded immigration services centre with SWIS.

FINDINGS

Pre-Migration Experiences

Many students reported that they had had limited or no formal schooling experiences before arriving in Canada. Some participants who had attended school in refugee camps reported that there was overcrowding, and punishment was used as a form of discipline in the school. Displacement and temporary residence in one or more countries also contributed to interrupted and/or irregular education.

Refugee Resettlement and Newcomer Service Provision in Smaller Communities

The impending arrival of newcomers to smaller communities elicited a strong public response, with many local stakeholders joining together to welcome refugees and their families and provide formal and informal settlement supports. These included schools, educational institutions, municipalities, faith-based groups, private businesses, and volunteer networks. Social and personal connections, and wider social support networks that later yield practical advantages, are an important community resource for resettled refugees and are vital to successful resettlement. This kind of partnership and collaboration was clearly evident in the approach taken in the local communities.

Settlement Workers in Schools Supporting Refugees

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) play a vital role in supporting the successful integration of former



refugee students and their families into the community and are generally one of the initial points of contact when refugee families first arrive to help them settle and connect with services. SWIS worked closely with educators and helped organize essential tasks including intake and registration, school orientation, information sessions, cultural events, and other activities.

SWIS and School Collaboration

There were strong, collaborative, and close-working relationships between SWIS, school divisions, and schools in supporting refugees, although some communication concerns were raised. Examples of collaborative programs and activities are peer mentorship/leadership, Lunch and Learn, After School, Summer Team Camp, and cultural events.

Post-Migration and Resettlement Experiences

The pre-migration (before migration to Canada) challenges and resettlement experiences of refugee youth can lead to issues and problems when students arrive in their host country. Many refugees faced academic challenges because of consequent disruption to access to formal schooling in their country of origin, in refugee camps where they have been displaced, or in their arrival to their country of resettlement. These included language barriers, being negatively impacted with age-appropriate grade placement, inadequate staffing resources and programs for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) learners, being granted E-credits/designations that do not permit access to post-secondary institutions, navigating unfamiliar pathways, and information barriers.

Older refugee youth (defined in this study as those between 16 and 25 years of age) experience a considerable increase in family responsibilities following migration, having to become interpreters, service navigators, and caretakers for their families. Economic considerations and the immediate need to earn a living often overshadow longer-term goals of accessing post-secondary education at college or university and developing English language skills, which can lead to lower income and fewer advancement opportunities over time.

Refugee youth who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events in refugee camps or in conflict zones can develop psychosocial challenges including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that may remain with them in the post-migration context. Some psychosocial challenges experienced by refugee youth in the study included triggering events, isolation, loneliness, difficulty forming friendships, racism and bullying, a need for safe spaces, and a reluctance to access mental health services.

Building Hope and Rising Expectations

Despite the many challenges that refugee youth may experience, refugee youth were optimistic, ambitious, motivated in their learning, and held high expectations for their future. As well, parental expectations were high. They were deeply grateful for their new lives in Canada, to be safe from violence and war, and to find teachers and classrooms that are supportive, caring, and welcoming.

Embracing a Culture of Caring, Integration, Inclusion, and Diversity

Educators are invaluable in providing supports to help students adjust and in creating a safe and welcoming space. The study found that they are advocates for their students and provide an important link between refugee youth, and their families, to supports offered in the wider community by providing referrals to the



appropriate services. They embrace a culture of caring, integration, inclusion, and diversity in their teaching approach to refugee students. The ongoing support of Manitoba Education was also recognized.

School-Based Programs, Approaches, and Strategies

Examples of program models, pedagogical practices, and teaching tools that educators use to help refugee youth with academic and social integration within the school community were highlighted in primary and secondary research conducted for this study. These include the EAL Bridging and Transitioning Program for Newcomer Youth at Prairie Hope High School, the While You Were at School Narrative Writing Project, and student presentations based on the book *Refugee*, by Alan Gratz.

Gaps in Services and Supports

Participants identified gaps in services and supports that pose serious barriers to further progress, particularly in smaller communities. Adequate services and supports are critical for refugee youth to make successful transitions through the education system to their future lives and long-term integration outcomes. These included more funding needed for EAL and LAL programs and staff, mental health supports, professional development to raise awareness about refugee students' needs, and use of culturally responsive teaching strategies and trauma-informed care techniques, funding for more SWIS staff, and the need to restore funding reductions in programs and staffing that negatively impact refugee students.

Challenges Facing Smaller Communities

Retaining newcomers is a key challenge for smaller communities due to factors such as fewer employment and education opportunities, lack of affordable housing, need for more settlement services, and lack of amenities such as ability to find cultural foods and places to worship. Smaller communities often lack the density and variety of newcomer- and refugee-specific services available in larger centres. Research suggests, however, that although Canada's major centres have been the main beneficiaries of international migration and economic growth, these trends are showing some change as more newcomers are deciding to settle in smaller centres and as resettling refugees are being destined there.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A set of recommendations are proposed to assist school divisions, SPOs, and other community stakeholders in furthering education programming, services, and supports for newcomers to improve their ability to thrive in the education system. These recommendations are framed as part of ongoing discussion, collaboration, and mutual learning amongst the settlement sector, other direct and indirect services providers, LIPs, umbrella groups, ethnocultural organizations, and the school system.

The recommendations revolve around three main areas:

- Improve services, programs, and staffing so there is adequate funding
- Expand information and education outreach among educators and principals
- Develop frameworks to support collaboration among governments, schools, and community stakeholders



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ENDNOTES

[i] Local Immigration Partnership is an initiative to support the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada by fostering welcoming and inclusive spaces, organizations, businesses, and communities through collective actions. LIPs were established by the Government of Canada and can be found across the country.

[ii] An umbrella group has a mandate to support the actions of SPOs and to offer guidance, knowledge sharing, and connecting “above” the level of settlement service provider organizations, and may involve additional stakeholders who are not formally part of the newcomer serving sector. The Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO) is a Manitoba umbrella group.

[iii] The Welcoming Communities Initiative is a three-pronged approach that focuses on creating connections between newcomers and Canadians, eliminating barriers to integration by creating welcoming communities, and educating against racism.

[iv] The Supported Transitions: Effective Educational Approaches for Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling project was conducted on cohorts based in Winnipeg. The final report was released in February 2020.

AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Kimberly Browning has an extensive background working in the K-12, post-secondary, and international education fields for the Government of Manitoba and in the private sector. She received her PhD from the University of Manitoba in 2018. Her research interests include recognition of prior learning, foreign credential recognition, international education policy, and refugee resettlement. She most recently worked as a Research Associate at the University of Winnipeg and co-authored a research report with Dr. Ray Silvius on Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling in Smaller Communities in Manitoba. We invite you to please view this [Full Report](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For full acknowledgements for the project, please see the [Full Report](#). Special thanks to Kathleen Vyrauen and Don Boddy for their contributions to the original report, as well as to the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for project funding. And our appreciation goes out to the Newcomer Education Coalition for their support in the launch of the report.

The authors would also like to thank Dr. Wayne Kelly, Director of the Rural Development Institute (RDI), Brandon University for supporting the publication of this research and to Nicole Breedon of the RDI Team for editorial and graphic design assistance.

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