

# SOMALI REFUGEE STUDENTS IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: POSTMIGRATION EXPERIENCES

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper reports on the postmigration experiences of a group of Somali refugee students attending public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada. The findings were drawn from a qualitative study that was conducted to investigate the participants' postmigration experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with six participants. Data analysis reveals that study participants faced many postmigration learning difficulties and socio-cultural challenges. The findings also show the strengths of the participants related to resiliency and perseverance. Educators, administrators, peer students, and members of the school community could play a central role in supporting Somali refugee students after resettlement. This paper proposes strategies and approaches to support educators and the school community in their work with refugee students of Somali background and other cultural backgrounds.

## LES ÉLÈVES RÉFUGIÉS SOMALIENS DANS LES ÉCOLES CANADIENNES: EXPÉRIENCES POST-MIGRATOIRES

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article rend compte des expériences post-migratoires d'un groupe d'élèves réfugiés somaliens fréquentant les écoles publiques d'une ville du sud-ouest de l'Ontario, au Canada. Les résultats sont tirés d'une étude qualitative qui a été menée pour étudier les expériences post-migratoires des participants. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entrevues semi-structurées en tête-à-tête avec six participants. L'analyse des données révèle que les participants à l'étude ont été confrontés à de nombreuses difficultés d'apprentissage et à des défis socioculturels après l'immigration. Les résultats montrent également les forces des participants liées à la résilience et à la persévérance. Les éducateurs, les administrateurs, les élèves pairs et les membres de la communauté scolaire pourraient jouer un rôle central dans le soutien des élèves réfugiés somaliens après leur réinstallation. Ce document propose des stratégies et des approches pour soutenir les éducateurs et la communauté scolaire dans leur travail avec les élèves réfugiés d'origine somalienne et d'autres origines culturelles.

Thousands of people worldwide are forced to leave their homes every year due to wars, violence, or natural disasters. The people who flee their home countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution are called refugees (Government of Canada, 2016). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Canada (2020), 70.8 million refugees worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes. Canada plays a key role on the international stage in helping refugees resettle and in providing them with a safe haven. Through the United Nations' refugee resettlement program, Canada welcomes thousands of refugees every year and provides them with an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

Because of the displacement from their homes and the long period of time living in refugee camps, refugee children are usually not familiar with formal school rules, procedures, and expectations. They often have limited literacy and numeracy skills in English as well as their mother tongue (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; Courtney, 2015). When refugee children attend school in Canada, schoolteachers and staff are challenged to meet their needs since they often have a limited understanding of refugee students' experiences and lack training on best educational practices geared towards meeting the emotional, social, and learning needs of refugee children.

The literature points to two important areas of focus for refugee students to experience success and have their needs met in school in the host country. First, the voices of the children need to be heard. Although there is evidence in the literature pertaining to the socio-cultural, emotional, and learning challenges experienced by refugee children in their host country (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Smyth, 2013; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Wilbur, 2016), the current literature offers little information about refugee children's experiences told using their own stories and from their own perspectives (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010; Smyth, 2013). Second, it is essential for school educators to have professional development opportunities to develop a knowledge base and pedagogical skill set that will support their work with refugee students (Loerke, 2009; Ministry of Education of British Columbia, 2015; Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2013).

This study embarked on addressing this literature gap by asking Somali refugee students to describe their experiences and challenges in attending elementary public school in Ontario, Canada. The following overarching research question guided our study: What socio-cultural, emotional, and learning challenges do Somali refugee students face during their elementary education in Canada?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned, the literature pertaining to the educational experiences of Somali refugee children in Canada is limited. Therefore, this literature review focuses on refugee children from Somalia as well as other nationalities and cultural

backgrounds. The review of the extant literature will be organized into four areas of focus: Somali refugee crisis, resettlement and integration, school challenges for the newcomers, and the role of school educators.

### *Somali Refugee Crisis*

With an estimated population of 15.89 million people (World Population Review, 2020), Somalia is an African country with a majority Muslim population. A combination of major droughts and an ongoing civil war that started in Somalia in 1991 has forcibly displaced thousands of Somalis, creating a large refugee population (Courtney, 2015). Somali refugees make up the “third largest group of refugees under the United Nations’ responsibility” (Nilsson et al., 2012, p. 240). Maintaining its humanitarian tradition, Canada has welcomed thousands of Somali refugees to resettle in Canada since the civil war started in 1991. According to Bokore (2018), Canada welcomed about 38,000 Somali newcomers in the late 1990s and early 2000s after the Somali government collapsed.

### *Resettlement and Integration*

Having already experienced war trauma, violence, or difficulties in refugee camps (Beltekin, 2016; Courtney, 2015; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Wilbur, 2016), refugee families experience additional challenges when they arrive in Canada or other host countries (Nofal, 2017; Roxas & Fruja, 2019). Many issues may emerge for refugee families and children after resettlement, which include depression associated with multiple losses; post-traumatic stress and psychological challenges for people who witnessed or experienced violence; and difficulties adjusting to a new culture, language, and social life in the host country (Bokore, 2018; Pine & Drachman, 2005; Roxas & Fruja, 2019; Wilbur, 2016).

After resettlement, financial challenges also become a source of frustration for refugee families as they struggle to meet the family’s needs. Past studies have found that some refugee children experienced mental health symptoms due to severe family financial difficulties (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). Refugee youths may feel obligated to work to support their families. Roxas and Roy (2012) reported that a young refugee man was working late hours to support his family in paying bills while he attended school during the day.

Refugee children who witness or experience traumatic events in refugee camps or conflict zones may develop emotional challenges (Bokore, 2018; Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Pine & Drachman, 2005). Ehnholt and Yule (2006) noted that trauma is characterized by experience or exposure to an extremely stressful event, such as violence or the loss of a family member. Such psychological distress and mental health challenges remain with some refugee children after resettlement in a host country and may put them at a high risk for experiencing difficulties with concentration, behaviour, and overall, being successful in school (Bokore, 2018; Nilsson et al., 2012).

While refugee students want to assimilate into the mainstream culture in their host country, most refugee parents expect their children to maintain their family and cultural traditions and beliefs. Somali refugee parents and community leaders worry that Somali refugee youth are “forgetting their culture, their language, and most important, their religion” (Courtney, 2015, p. 23). This process of assimilation can create tension between refugee children who want to assimilate into the mainstream culture and refugee parents who require their children to maintain their heritage culture traditions and beliefs.

### *School Challenges for the Newcomers*

Upon entering school in their host country, refugee children face challenges with adaptation to a new school system (Roxas & Fruja, 2019). One of the biggest challenges for the newcomers is adapting to formal school education and becoming familiar with school procedures, routines, and expectations. They often arrive with limited school experiences due to the lack of educational resources in their country of origin or refugee camps (Courtney, 2015; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Children with disabilities or financial difficulty are almost entirely out of the education system in refugee camps (Beltekin, 2016; Courtney, 2015). Due to this limited experience with formal schooling, Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) noted that one of the issues refugee students face is “having to adapt to the expectations and culture of formal education” (p. 152).

Refugee students also face challenges in their host country due to gaps in their learning resulting from interrupted or missed years of education prior to resettlement (Nofal, 2017; Roxas & Fruja, 2019). Receiving basic or little education in refugee camps results in limited literacy and numeracy skills in the mother tongue / language (Courtney, 2015; Hos, 2016). This makes it more difficult for them to learn a second language and puts them at educational disadvantages. As emphasized by Oikonomidou (2007), newcomer students need extensive support in learning the new language to experience success in school in the host country.

As noted by Loerke (2009), refugee students also have difficulties establishing friendships, experiencing isolation that may result in negative feelings about themselves and school. In some of the research on refugee students (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Smyth, 2013), the newcomers identify bullying and verbal teasing due to their backgrounds as one of the biggest challenges they face at school after resettlement. Smyth (2013) learned from newcomer students that “strong friendships were perceived to be a significant support” (p. 44), while Nofal (2017) found that emotional well-being could influence students’ educational success. There is a clear need for programs to support newcomer students in overcoming the frustrations and stress associated with integration and cultural adjustment (Hos, 2016; Kilbride & Anisef, 2001).

### *The Role of School Educators*

As global refugee crises — such as the current Syrian refugee crisis — continue to force thousands of displaced people to resettle in host countries, Roxas (2011a, 2011b) has stressed that teachers working with newcomers need to provide an education program responsive to their unique needs. Educators should find the best ways to teach both newcomer students and other students (Roxas, 2008) even though challenging when they occupy the same class (Miller et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, educators are often not familiar with the newcomers' realities and their premigration and postmigration experiences. For educators to be in a better position to support refugee newcomer students, they must understand the reasons why refugees escaped their country of origin as well as learn about the barriers to integration (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Wilbur, 2016). As described by Kopish (2016), one of the ways to facilitate such learning is for educators to “collaborate with colleagues and members of their local communities to design opportunities for cross-cultural experiential learning” (p. 94).

The literature also reveals that some educators working with refugee students may struggle in meeting students' emotional and psychological needs. For example, Szente et al. (2006) found that “teachers did not feel prepared to address the emotional stress experienced by refugee children” (p. 16). VanderPlaat (2017) noted that Canadian teachers felt “they were inadequately equipped to deal with the complex psychosocial needs of the Syrian refugees” (p. 54). Although some educators may not have the background knowledge or training to meet the psychological needs of refugee students, newcomers benefit from a caring, safe environment where they feel welcomed and accepted (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016).

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand refugee students' school experiences in Canada, we rely on the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and the acculturation development model (ADM) framework. The concept of CRP emphasizes valuing different ways of knowing and stresses an education program that uses this cultural knowledge to provide sound educational experiences for all students (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). A culturally responsive educator celebrates and values students' cultural backgrounds, previous educational experiences and ways of knowing, and different languages spoken to be able to provide an education program that is welcoming, inclusive, and responsive to students' needs (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

The ADM (Oppedal et al., 2005) offers a framework to understand the students' acculturation experiences after resettlement. In multicultural contexts, the acculturation process involves social and “psychological adjustment both within the heritage cultural domain and that of the majority society” (Keles et al., 2018, p. 52). With refugee newcomers, the resettlement process involves acculturation-

related challenges such as establishing social connections and “navigating different norms, behaviours and values of two cultures” (Keles et al., 2018, p. 59).

Oppedal et al. (2005) have asserted that the development of immigrant and refugee children in the host country is quite complex. Their development is influenced by their own heritage culture through their families, friends, neighbourhood, and religious and ethnic communities. It is also influenced by the new culture in their host country, which includes four major areas: school, media, healthcare, and workplace. They note that the adaptation and well-being of immigrant and refugee children in the host country is dependent on their cultural competence in both their own heritage culture and the host culture. Alves et al. (2011) have focused on the home and school environments as the “two central life domains for the socialization of children and adolescents” (p. 3).

The ADM framework helps to understand the experiences of refugee newcomers as they transition and integrate into the host society. Since students spend long hours at school, their educational and socio-cultural experiences there will have an impact on their well-being even as school plays a part in shaping their identities. We drew on both CRP and ADM as a theoretical lens to understand the Somali students’ experiences with a new culture and school system in Canada and hear the participants’ stories and experiences. Applying this lens, we collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, and we proposed strategies for educators to support refugee students with adaptation to the school system in Canada.

## METHODS AND PROCEDURES

### *Research Design*

This study used a qualitative design to investigate the experiences of Somali refugee students attending public schools. The qualitative design, as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019), explored the experiences of the participants using their own words and perspectives. The research design of this study employed ethnographic methods to examine school experiences as perceived by the participants (Berg & Lune, 2012). Ethnographic methods are centred around exploring the experiences of a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), conducting the research in a natural setting familiar to the participants (Gay et al., 2011), and often involving face-to-face interaction with participants, which leads to establishing trust and a positive rapport (Gay et al., 2011). The study also utilized a multiple-case study approach. A case is a bounded system or phenomenon. It refers to the individual refugee student in this study. By studying multiple cases, the researchers were able to develop an in-depth analysis of refugee students’ experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

### *Research Setting*

This study was conducted in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada. The Somali-Canadian population in this urban city was last estimated (based on ethnic origin) at 875 individuals (Statistics Canada, 2015, National Household Survey 2011 section). The study gained assistance from a Somali community nonprofit organization, which provided after-school educational and social support programs for Somali-Canadian youth. With permission from the president of the organization, the researchers volunteered in some of the organization's programs. This helped the researchers make connections and establish rapport with the members of the organization and as well the children and their parents.

Both researchers are immigrants to Canada. While neither of them had any prior connection with the Somali refugee community, their transition experiences from home countries to Canada set up a foundation for their sympathy to refugee students and families. It did not take the researchers very long to build a trust relationship with them. However, both researchers were well aware of their potential biases that might influence the study. Therefore, they always kept their personal perspectives in check in order to provide study findings and conclusions that represent refugee students' authentic experiences.

### *Selecting Participants*

Qualitative researchers almost always follow a purposive sampling approach (Gay et al., 2011) to gain useful information, working with key informants familiar with the research setting (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The criteria we used for selecting participants were based on culture, age, gender, and language proficiency. The particular criteria were used to focus the study on a group of students who shared the same cultural background so as to be able to relate the findings across the cases. Since the experiences of youth vary by age, having a particular age range (intermediate school graders) led to a more focused exploration and understanding of the participants' experiences. Efforts were made to have a mix of boys and girls participate in the research to ensure an even spread of genders and to hear the perspectives of both. The participants also had to be comfortable enough to complete the one-on-one interview in English.

Six participants were recruited on a voluntary basis: three females and three males. They were all Somali refugee students attending public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada. The participants came to Canada from refugee camps in Kenya and Eritrea. Their ages ranged from 12–14 years old. Three participants only spoke Somali, while the other three spoke Somali and some Arabic when they first resettled in Canada. At the time when this study was conducted, three participants had been in Canada for five years, and the other three for seven years.

### *Data Collection*

A semi-structured, one-on-one interview was conducted with each participant at the Somali community organization – the participants’ natural setting. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) have explained that a semi-structured approach allows for additional questions to be asked during the interview based on the participants’ answers. Our interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions carefully developed to avoid any unnecessary discomfort for the participants and contained five sections: demographic information, socio-cultural experiences in school in Canada, emotional challenges, learning experiences, and existing support systems.

The participants were comfortable completing the interview in English. On average, each interview took about 40 minutes to complete. All interviews were transcribed. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data, individual meetings took place with the participants for member-checking to confirm they were comfortable with the information provided. As part of an exit plan, the researchers continued to volunteer in the organization for a short period of time after the data was collected. This played an important role in showing our appreciation for the participants and members of the Somali community organization who supported this study.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative researchers construct meaning by exploring themes that emerge from human experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Gay et al., 2011). Gay et al. (2011) have explained that “one of the most frequent data analysis activities undertaken by qualitative researchers is coding, the process of categorically marking or referencing units of text with codes and labels as a way to indicate patterns and meaning” (p. 469). To understand the participants’ adaptation experiences in Canadian schools, we examined interview data through the combined lens of CRP and ADM. A content analysis approach was used to identify themes and patterns. While reviewing the entire data set for each participant, an open coding technique was used to mark units of text (e.g., sentences, paragraphs, quotes) with codes. Then, similar codes were grouped together to form themes with subcategories.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings from the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the participants revealed three themes on postmigration experiences: (1) socio-cultural challenges and the associated learning difficulties, (2) behavioural challenges, and (3) resilience and passion for learning. The participants’ stories and dialogues cited in this section were kept in their original form without grammatical corrections in order to keep the original dialogues intact.



### *Socio-Cultural Challenges and Associated Learning Difficulties*

The participants shared that they experienced many socio-cultural challenges as they tried to adapt to a new culture and school system in Canada. They faced challenges in making friends and communicating with teachers, were teased by other students, and experienced many associated learning difficulties.

**Difficulty Making Friends.** All the participants reported difficulties in making friends in Canadian schools because they did not know English and lacked the requisite social skills and self-confidence. Most of them were only able to form few friendships with other students who spoke Somali or Arabic. One of the participants shared how he lost motivation for attending school because he had no friends: “I didn’t like going to school because nobody talked to me and nobody knew Somalian. It was hard to speak to teachers.” He then added: “First I was interested in learning English, until I had no friends and stuff, then I didn’t like to go to school and learn.” Most of the participants felt isolated, mainly during unstructured school time (e.g., recess, nutrition break, lunch). One participant recalled feelings of loneliness during nutrition break: “I used to always feel lonely at school because no one talked to me, and when it was nutrition break, everybody was eating and sitting with their friends. I used to be sitting by myself ... that bothered me.” Another participant preferred to stay home because he felt lonely:

I felt lonely when I first came, I felt like I didn’t wanna go to school, whenever someone says a word to me and it hurts my feelings, I wouldn’t wanna go to school ... and my Mom would say: ‘Why are you not going to school?’ I am embarrassed to tell her why, so I say: ‘Because today we have a test.’

**Challenges with Communicating with Teachers.** All the participants experienced challenges in communicating with teachers. One student shared that he did not feel comfortable talking to teachers generally about the challenges he was experiencing because he was worried he would be embarrassed, which he had seen happen in his earlier schooling:

I didn’t tell the teacher about my problems because most likely she would tell the children. In my home country if you say to the teacher: ‘Sir I don’t know this,’ and you say it as a secret, he says it loud like: ‘You don’t know this? ... This kid doesn’t know this,’ and everyone laughs. I thought that’s what’s gonna happen to me if I tell the teacher here.

Another participant explained how it took him a long time to open up to his teachers about his challenges: “I just started talking to the teachers now about my problems and challenges. It took me five years. This is my first year actually talking to the teacher and telling her what my challenge is.”

**Teased by Peer Students.** Some of the participants struggled with being called names and being teased by other students. One student shared how other students teased him because of his skin colour: “I would be bullied because of

my colour. Some students used to call me the n-word just because I'm black." Another participant worried about teasing during group work:

It was hard to work in groups. One time they [students] asked me my birthday, and I didn't even know my birthday, and then they all laughed at me, and when I come outside [recess] they would tease me about it ... and well I don't know my birthday because there [in refugee camp], they don't even care about birthdays.

This participant added: "I didn't like being at school when I came. School is like one of the worst fears I used to have."

**Low Engagement in Extra-Curricular Activities.** Most of the participants did not participate in extra-curricular activities in their school (e.g., sports teams, math club, art club, media club, chess club) because they felt they lacked the knowledge and skills to be successful in those activities. One of the participants explained: "I didn't like to join clubs because I was scared about what they're gonna ask me ... like chess club, sometimes it includes math, or sometimes it includes your mind, and I didn't know all that." Due to low participation in extra-curricular activities, the participants did not benefit from the social skills and connections that would normally develop from these activities.

**Difficulty Working in Groups.** All the participants experienced challenges with group work. According to one participant, "When I first came [to Canada], I didn't feel comfortable working in groups because they always speak English and I didn't know anything about it ... and when the teacher says 'do something,' I didn't know what she was talking about." Although working in groups was difficult, the participants benefitted from working with others when they understood the task at hand and when the language was simple for them to understand.

**Lack of Academic Support from Parents.** Participants received little support from their parents with school-related work. The participants attributed this to their parents' limited school experiences and lack of English language skills. One student explained his family's situation: "My Mom and Dad can't help me with school work because they don't know English. They never went to school, never saw school." Another participant added: "My Mom at home tries to teach me, but she doesn't know more than me. She doesn't go to school. I got no one to teach me." The participants expressed that they appreciated the learning support they received from the programs offered by the Somali community organization.

**Fast Transition from ESL to Regular Class.** All the participants attended ESL classes. Some of them felt they were transitioned to regular class too early when they did not feel ready for it. One student explained: "Sometimes in regular class

the work is too hard for me, and if I don't understand, I'm not learning, I'm just staying there." Another participant shared how he was not ready for group work in regular class: "I'm not good with working in groups in regular class because students think very professionally. They think at very high levels. They think like Level 4 [A average]. They're gonna talk like high English that I don't even understand." Most participants wished they could have stayed longer in the ESL program.

***The Need for Happiness Before Learning.*** Some of the participants made a connection between happiness and learning – they needed to feel happy to experience success with learning. One student said: "If I'm not happy, I can't learn. For me to learn, like, I need happiness in my life. If you don't have happiness, if you don't have good thoughts, you can't learn." Some learning activities triggered painful memories with some of the participants, making it difficult for them to focus on learning. One of the students shared the following example:

I don't like history because you know Black something day [Black History Month], it's all about the slavery day. We watched a movie about slavery. I was crying, me and another kid who came from refugee camp in Africa ... that kinda annoys me because it reminded me of my pain, so I feel bad for them, I cry, and it brings my memory back.

### ***Behavioural Challenges***

The participants shared stories about conflicts they encountered in school with other students. The boys experienced more behavioural difficulties than the girls did, and the conflicts the boys were involved in occasionally led to fighting. Some of the participants felt that they needed opportunities for their voices and stories to be heard.

***Behavioural Challenges with Boys.*** The behaviour problems the male participants encountered took place mostly during unstructured school time (e.g., nutrition breaks, lunch). These problems resulted from isolation or other students making fun of them. One of the participants explained why Somali refugee students experience behavioural problems: "If Somali students are in trouble and like hands-on [physical fighting], they don't really know what's hands-on ... In Kenya [refugee camp], if people call you names or push you, you just push them back, and a fight starts." Another student described how kids in refugee camp used to fight a lot: "Where I came from [refugee camp], little kids fight. The only way to get food, to have respect, is fight back ... the only way to protect your property is fight back ... kids there are used to that." He added: "That's why when you see Somali kids with scratches all over, it's not their Mom or brothers who did that to them, it might be their little baby sister, but most likely it's the fights they went into."

**Conflict Resolution.** The participants had a difficult time resolving problems and were also reluctant to approach a staff member to ask for help. One student recalled how other students used to bother her, but she was unable to ask for help from a teacher: “Students tried to bully me and say, ‘She’s look ugly, she don’t know how to speak English’ ... I didn’t tell the teacher. I couldn’t. My English was horrible. I couldn’t speak English. I couldn’t tell her for help.” Another student explained how he tried to run away from school when he was upset over problems:

When I was upset, I tried to run away from school because I wanted to go home. I didn’t like students making fun at me, and they used to push me around and stuff ... Whenever I tried to tell the teacher I didn’t know how to do that, and whenever they do something to me and a problem happens, I get in trouble. I didn’t like it, so I wanted to go home.

**Resilience and Passion for Learning.** Despite the many challenges the participants experienced, they shared many stories that demonstrated resiliency. They appreciated life and the opportunities they had in Canada. They had a strong passion for learning and persevered through challenges.

**Feeling of Appreciation.** The participants greatly appreciated life in Canada. One of the students recalled the moment when his family first arrived in Canada:

I was scared of Canada, and then when I came first time here, I couldn’t even walk. I was shaking, and then like all I see is my Mom. I never saw my Mom happy and laugh for once before, and then she laughed, her first time laughing, and then my Dad was so happy, and then we all cried, and then my Mom said: ‘We’re safe now.’

The children were very thankful that their basic necessities of life, such as food, water, shelter, clothes, and medical assistance, were being met in Canada. One of the female participants explained: “In Canada, we get enough food for our family, and there is nothing to wreck our houses or anything, so we thought it was a good place here.”

**Passion for Learning.** When discussing their learning experiences in school, it was apparent that the participants had a strong passion for learning and wanted to be successful. For example, for one of the participants, being a good reader was his dream in Canada: “Sometimes I’m just sleeping and I’m dreaming about me reading ... when I was back home [refugee camp], my dream was ‘get food,’ here [Canada], my dream is ‘learn,’ learn to read, be capable of stuff, get a job.”

**Perseverance.** Despite all the challenges that the participants experienced, they were determined to be successful in school in Canada and had a very positive attitude towards their futures. In essence, they had a growth mindset. For example, one participant explained how his hard work and persistence

helped him succeed with his learning: “When I first came here [Canada] I didn’t know anything, and then I started trying harder and harder to learn, and I started learning better.” Another participant had to provide self-encouragement: “It was hard to, like, get back from the dark and to the light; sometimes I even get stuck in the middle, and I have to encourage myself ... Sometimes I had to tell myself: You’re gonna be okay.”

## DISCUSSION

The exploration into the participants’ postmigration experiences shows that they faced socio-cultural, learning, and behavioural challenges. It also shows that the participants had unique strengths – they were resilient and had a strong passion for learning. In this discussion section, these findings will be situated in the body of knowledge in the literature. Some strategies and approaches will be recommended for educators and the school community to support Somali refugee students.

### *Postmigration Challenges in Canada*

The participants reported that they experienced many socio-cultural challenges, including social isolation, difficulty making friends, and lack of participation in extra-curricular activities. These experiences align with other research findings discussing the challenges refugee students face with establishing friendships and isolation that lead to negative feelings about themselves (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Hos, 2016; Kilbride & Anisef, 2001; Loerke, 2009; Roxas & Roy, 2012). These challenges may hinder the participants’ adaptation to a new majority culture and school system in Canada.

All study participants experienced learning difficulties, mainly with literacy and numeracy. Most of them also struggled with group work and a fast transition from the ESL program to regular homeroom class. These discoveries substantiate the discussion in the literature about refugee students’ limited prior school experiences, which puts them at an academic disadvantage in their host country (Beltekin, 2016; Courtney, 2015; Hos, 2016; McBrien, 2011; Ministry of Education of British Columbia, 2015; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). These findings also suggest the need for a CRP approach where educators invest the time to understand the students’ previous experiences and knowledge and provide an education program that is responsive to their needs.

Most of the participants encountered teasing or bullying situations with other students in school and struggled with conflict resolution. The male participants reported incidents where conflicts sometimes turned into hands-on fights. These findings validate the discussion in the literature about the behaviour challenges and frustrations experienced by refugee children and the need for programs that focus on integration, conflict resolution, and social skills (Hos, 2016; Kilbride & Anisef, 2001; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Nilsson et

al., 2012; Oikonomidou, 2007; Smyth, 2013). Keles et al. (2018) emphasize that interventions with such acculturation hassles in the host country could make a difference in the lives and experiences of newcomers.

All the participants expressed a strong passion for learning and shared stories where they demonstrated excellence in perseverance and resiliency. Some of the discussion in the literature highlighted the unique strengths of refugee families and students. For example, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) emphasized that refugee students have strengths and positive elements to bring to the classroom and should not be viewed as only a source of challenge. Smyth (2013) highlighted how Somali newcomer students in a New Zealand primary school thrived on the support they received from strong friendships. Bokore (2018) also discussed “Somalis’ resilience and inner strength” when overcoming forced displacement, migration, and dealing with traumatic experiences (p. 101). However, the literature pertaining to refugee students’ unique strengths is limited. The findings from this study pertaining to these areas of strength will help expand the discussion and knowledge in this regard.

In summary, our study findings suggest that Somali refugee students need support from educators and the school community with their socio-cultural challenges and learning difficulties. Without this support, it would be difficult for them to experience success in school and in their communities. The findings also suggest that the participants have areas of strength that educators could utilize to enhance students’ educational experiences.

### *Strategies and Approaches for Educators and the School Community*

Educators, administrators, students, and other members of the school community could play a key role in supporting Somali refugee students. We propose the following strategies and approaches.

**Create Culturally Responsive Classrooms.** It is suggested that teachers create a culturally responsive classroom environment that is welcoming and values the newcomers’ past experiences, cultural backgrounds, and different ways of knowing. Providing culturally relevant learning opportunities and promoting cultural knowledge in a supportive environment offers effective educational experiences not only for the newcomers but for all students in the class (Hos, 2016; Howard, 2003; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016). This will help Somali refugee students feel appreciated and valued as members of the classroom and school community.

**Provide Extensive Literacy and Numeracy Support.** Unlike immigrant students who may be strong in their mother tongue and learn English at a faster rate, refugee students need more extensive support to learn English (Oikonomidou, 2007). ESL programs often also help newcomers receive extensive literacy and numeracy support. However, it is important to avoid fast transitions from the ESL program to regular homeroom class to prevent frustrations with learning. Instead, schools should ensure there is a system in place and follow a systematic approach to

transition newcomer students to regular homeroom class for different subjects as they are assessed and deemed ready.

***Provide Care and Emotional Support.*** Somali refugee students may arrive at school suffering from trauma and mental stress (Beltekin, 2016; Ehntholt & Yule, 2006; Kilbride & Anisef, 2001; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Wilbur, 2016). It is important for educators to become familiar with students' experiences and demonstrate interest in their well-being by providing care and compassion. Educators should think of the best ways of providing emotional and social support, and when necessary, consult with administration about offering the student social services through the school's social worker, with parental consent.

***Create Opportunities for Parental Engagement.*** As emphasized by Ogilvie and Fuller (2016), parental engagement with refugee families plays a key role in student success and having effective educational experiences. Although some parents may not be able to provide much learning support, they will do their best by providing encouragement, motivation, and necessary resources for learning. In fact, during the occasional conversations with some of the participants' parents, it was evident that they held high expectations of their children's education in Canada and wanted to support in any possible way.

***Provide Staff with Professional Development Opportunities.*** It is imperative for school administrators and boards of education to provide educators with professional development opportunities focusing on the experiences of refugee students and alerting them to the best pedagogical approaches. The need for such training has been heavily emphasized in the literature (Loerke, 2009; Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2013; Roxas, 2008; Szente et al., 2006; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Also, with the big influx of refugee families coming to Canada in recent years, it would be more important for teacher education programs to provide teacher candidates with learning opportunities in this area.

## CONCLUSION

Through listening to refugee students' voices about their school experiences in Canada, this study revealed that the students experienced socio-cultural, learning, and behavioural challenges that could be hindering their acculturation process. Another important discovery was that despite the many obstacles, the participating refugee students demonstrated resiliency and perseverance in dealing with their challenges.

This study has two limitations. The first one relates to the accuracy of data collected during the one-on-one interviews. Although we established a rapport with the participants, the sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed with them may have impacted their willingness or comfort level to share parts of their authentic experiences or perspectives. The second limitation deals with the generalizability of the results beyond the scope of this study. Since the study

participants may have their unique individual experiences, the findings from this study may not be representative of all Somali newcomer students in the selected region of Canada.

With the current influx of refugees from Syria to Canada, this study demonstrates the need for further research on effective ways of helping refugee students with stress, emotional challenges, and learning needs in the host country. Future research would be to compare the experiences of the participants with the experiences of refugee students from different cultural backgrounds.

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