

# FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN SYRIAN REFUGEE FAMILIES' JOURNEYS TO SOCIAL INCLUSION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

JENNIFER DODD, D. JEAN CLANDININ, GILLIAN VIGNEAU, HIROKO KUBOTA & VERA CAINE  
*University of Alberta*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper offers a review of the research literature on the experiences of young children and their families who left Syria as refugees and resettled in Canada. We identify five key factors that influence Syrian refugees' experience of social inclusion within the context of the public-school systems as well as unveil the silences in and across the current studies. The five factors are pre-arrival experiences, mental health, social supports, acquisition of English language skills, and lack of preparedness of teachers and schools. Based on limited availability of research, we outline needed research to better understand social inclusion of Syrian refugee families with young children in Canada. There is a call to pay particular attention to their educational and social encounters.

**FACTEURS À CONSIDÉRER DANS LE TRAJET DES FAMILLES DE RÉFUGIÉS SYRIENS VERS L'INCLUSION SOCIALE : UNE REVUE DE LA LITTÉRATURE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article propose une revue de la littérature de recherche sur les expériences des jeunes enfants et de leurs familles qui ont quitté la Syrie en tant que réfugiés et se sont réinstallées au Canada. Nous identifions cinq facteurs clés qui influencent l'expérience d'inclusion sociale des réfugiés syriens dans le contexte des systèmes scolaires publics et dévoilons les silences dans et à travers les études actuelles. Les cinq facteurs sont les expériences avant l'arrivée, la santé mentale, les soutiens sociaux, l'acquisition de compétences en anglais et le manque de préparation des enseignants et des écoles. Vu la disponibilité limitée de la recherche, nous décrivons les recherches nécessaires pour mieux comprendre l'inclusion sociale des familles de réfugiés syriens avec de jeunes enfants au Canada. Nous devons porter une attention particulière à leurs rencontres éducatives et sociales.

In her memoir *The Boy on the Beach*, Tima Kurdi (2019) recounts her family's escape from war-torn Syria. After fleeing to neighbouring Turkey, Kurdi's brother and family embarked on a perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea with the hope of finding a brighter future in Europe. Kurdi's sister-in-law and two

young nephews drowned during the crossing. On the morning of September 2, 2015, the world awoke to the image of Kurdi's three-year-old nephew, Alan, lying face down and motionless along a Turkish shoreline. The photograph of Alan's tiny lifeless body in a red T-shirt and blue jean shorts raised the global consciousness to the plight of Syrian refugees and prompted an outpouring of generosity from the international community. Alan Kurdi's death was a wake-up call for the world.

Alan Kurdi, his brother, and his mother did not live to arrive as refugees in a European or any other country. Many children and families are, however, finding their way out of refugee camps and into Canada, where they are in the midst of a transition to a new country and a new home. We know little about the experiences of children and families as they endured upheaval in Syria, as they fled, as they became refugees and, later, when they arrived in Canada.

Since the eruption of Syria's brutal civil war in 2011, countless families have endured loss and suffering. To date, over six million Syrians have fled their homeland, constituting approximately one-third of the total global refugee population (UNHCR, 2019). Although many Syrians found asylum in countries throughout the world, they continue to experience adversity once they arrive in resettlement countries (Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2016). Many dominant narratives depicted by media sources in Canada have fueled stereotypes of Syrian refugees as needy, helpless, and potentially dangerous; in all cases, subordinate to Canadian-born citizens (Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Such national discourses create less-than-hospitable social and cultural milieus as Syrian refugee families resettle to start a new life.

In this article, we review the education literature on the experiences of young children and their families who left Syria as refugees and resettled in Canada. We identify five key factors that have influenced Syrian refugees' experiences of social inclusion within the context of Canada's public school system as well as unveil the silences in and across the current studies.

Social inclusion is a term commonly used in social policy, sociology, and political science to describe the bonds that bring people together in contexts of cultural diversity. There is no single agreed-upon understanding of the key terminology of social inclusion in the research literature (Allman, 2013; Wong & Turner, 2014). By social inclusion, we draw attention to spaces where dignity and safety are norms; diversity is recognized and accepted; and everyone feels encouraged, supported, and included. Socially inclusive spaces provide opportunities for identity building based on relationships, respect, and responsibility. Such spaces also allow for authentic interaction and learning to occur between different parties.

Based on the limited availability of data and research in this area, our purpose is to integrate current publicly accessible research to better understand what is known about the social inclusion of Syrian refugee families with young children

in Canada. There is a need to pay particular attention to their educational and social encounters. First, however, we provide a brief overview of the Canadian contexts of Syrian refugees with particular attention to the authors' home province, Alberta.

#### SITUATING THE REVIEW

As part of the Government of Canada's Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program, Canada received over 52,000 Syrians between November 2015 and March 2018 (IRCC, 2018). Between November 4, 2015, and August 25, 2016, Alberta received about 3,800 Syrian refugees, 47% of whom were children 14 years of age and younger, and 16% of whom were children between 0-4 years of age. More have arrived since then, and refugees from Syria will continue to arrive in 2020 and beyond.

Considering a growing number of Syrian families with young children have entered Canada as refugees, it is imperative to think about how to create safe and inclusive places for them with new perspectives that highlight the complexity and diversity of each refugee family. Preschool is often the first contact for refugee families and children with the new dominant culture (Adair & Tobin, 2007; Grieshaber & Miller, 2010), providing opportunities for families to come to understand something of their new society (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009). However, the Canadian approach to early childhood education may not be easily understood by refugee families. Few studies have investigated the transition experiences of refugee children and families into early childhood settings (Gioia, 2015; Grieshaber & Miller, 2010). Poor transition experiences have been identified as a potential contributor to increased stress and long-term health and well-being consequences for refugee children and their families (Sims & Hutchins, 2001). Given the increasing numbers of refugee children and families, it is important that the narratives of the transition process become a focus of inquiry. We cannot assume that the experiences of all refugee children and families are similar to one another as they transition into early childhood education and schooling. Cultural, familial, religious, and institutional narratives may significantly shape the experiences of refugees from different countries that make their way to Canada. We do know that refugee children and families require access to socially inclusive spaces in schools that will afford them a sense of belonging and allow them to shape meaningful stories in, and of, schooling and education contributing, over the long term, to their social inclusion into new places and new homes. Social inclusion can only be fully understood in relation to membership, belonging, and social integration. Belonging is held to be a foundational human need.

Omidvar and Richmond (2003) point out five critical dimensions, or cornerstones, of social inclusion:

- 1) *valued recognition* (conferring recognition and respect on individuals and groups)
- 2) *human development* (nurturing the talents, skills, capacities, and choices of children and adults to compose lives they value and to make contributions both they and others find worthwhile)
- 3) *involvement and engagement* (having the right and the necessary support to make / be involved in decisions affecting oneself, family, and community and to be engaged in community life)
- 4) *proximity* (sharing physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interactions, if desired, and to reduce social distances between people)
- 5) *material well-being* (having the material resources to allow children and their parents to participate fully in community life)

Another view of social inclusion is offered in which attention is not directed at political, legal, or managerial measures, but instead towards connecting people by opening a dialogue in which life stories are exchanged.

## METHODS FOR UNDERTAKING THE REVIEW

In this integrative literature review (Torraco, 2016), we were focused on the experiences of refugee children and their families as they navigated unfamiliar preschool settings in Canada; an integrative literature review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of a specific topic. Recognizing factors that potentially affect the experiences of young refugee children and identifying the role that the educational encounter plays in their transitions could significantly shape the knowledge foundation for further studies with refugee families with young children from Syria. The literature on refugee children from Syria and their transitioning experience into educational settings in host countries encompasses a wide range of academic disciplines including education, sociology, developmental science, health science, public health, social work, and psychology.

We conducted a literature search for both peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature including theses, dissertations, and government or non-government reports. We included a search of the grey literature using Google to identify unpublished government reports. We completed searches by accessing several databases: Academic Search Complete, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), CINAHL, MEDLINE, SocIndex, Sociological Abstracts, Proquest Dissertations & Theses Global, and NEOS Catalogue. In addition, we reviewed reference lists of our selected articles and hand-searched key journals, including

the *Canadian Journal of Education*. A combination of the following terms was used for each search: Syria AND refugee or asylum seeker AND preschool, kindergarten, child, or toddler. Our initial inclusion criteria were: 1) literature written in English, 2) studies that focused on Syrian refugee children and their parents, and 3) studies that examined the intersection between Syrian refugee children and school settings.

With these key terms and inclusion criteria, we identified 170 relevant titles. We further scanned and assessed the titles and abstracts of these 170 titles with a second set of inclusion criteria: 1) studies done in Canadian contexts and 2) studies that focused on the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their parents within primary school settings. Among 170 titles, most of the literature focused on the contexts of Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, including refugee camps. These studies directed attention to an emergency response to children's educational needs. The focus was often on policy reviews related to education or the immediate mental health needs of refugee children from Syria rather than on the long-term adjustment processes of refugee children. Overall, there is a paucity of studies concerning early childhood experiences of Syrian refugee children in preschool settings globally, including in Canada.

Being attentive to the experience of young Syrian refugee children and their parents during their transition into Canadian school settings, we reviewed articles and extracted information from six relevant scholarly works that met our inclusion criteria: four peer-reviewed journal articles and two master's theses (see Table 1). We reviewed these six scholarly works and identified potential factors that affected the experiences of young Syrian children and their families in their first encounters with Canadian educational systems. We also raised silenced aspects such as religious beliefs, which do not appear in the current literature yet are significant in shaping the experiences of Syrian children and their families. As recommended by Torraco (2016), our analysis focused on the "literature's strengths, deficiencies, omissions, inaccuracies, and any contradictions about the topic" (p. 66).

TABLE 1. Summary of included studies on Syrian refugee families and their preschool experience.

Author / Year / Source	Research question	Methods / Population	Results
Clark, A. K. (2017). Master's thesis, University of Toronto.	What are the experiences of teachers of Syrian refugee children?	An interview study with two Ontario teachers of Syrian refugee children.	<p>1. Teachers identified the importance of recognizing the specific needs of newly arrived Syrian refugee students to develop appropriate support strategies.</p> <p>2. Teachers identified the need for support in using English language learning (ELL) pedagogies to support the emotional and academic growth of newly arrived Syrian refugee students.</p> <p>3. Teachers felt a lack of readiness, experience, and support in teaching the children, including appropriate ELL strategies.</p> <p>4. Teachers noted that students who had previously lived in a refugee camp were more responsive to socioemotional triggers.</p> <p>5. Teachers identified rehabilitation needs connected to trauma that have been unmet.</p> <p>6. Friendship is an important support system to develop a sense of belonging for both children and parents.</p>

<p>Gagné, A., Schmidt, C., &amp; Markus, P. (2017). <i>Intercultural Education.</i></p>	<p>Inquiring into and addressing issues of teaching about refugees in initial teacher education and professional development for teachers in Canada.</p>	<p>Using a self-study approach, two of the authors (teacher educators working in universities) and one author (a teacher leader in the largest school district in Canada) reflect on their practices by sharing narratives of their experience.</p>	<p>Teacher education needs to be informed by the lived experiences of refugee students, and culturally responsive pedagogies should be developed based on the students' diverse backgrounds and complex cultural identities. It is important to encourage teachers to move beyond teaching strategies to become agents of change who challenge and transform systemic inequities.</p>
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<p>Hadfield, K., Ostrowski, A., &amp; Ungar, M. (2017). <i>Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne</i>.</p>	<p>Understanding pre- and post-arrival mental health of Syrian refugee children and adolescents in Canada.</p>	<p>Literature review on pre- and post-arrival factors of Syrian refugee children and adolescents resettled in Canada and the impact on their mental health.</p>	<p>Young refugees experience traumatic events before resettling in Canada such as “living under war conditions, witnessing events of violence, the torture or murder of family members, parental imprisonment, separation from parents, personal injury, and living in a refugee camp” (p. 195), which harmfully affect their mental health. Post-arrival factors such as family support, peer relationships, social cohesion, and service provision are influential to the mental health of refugee children and their sense of well-being. Cross-sector and interdisciplinary approaches are necessary to help them cope with various potential difficulties in their resettlement countries.</p>
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<p>Walker, J., &amp; Zuberi, D. (2019). <i>Journal of International Migration and Integration</i>.</p>	<p>Understanding school-aged Syrian refugees' pre-migration and resettlement experiences and their educational challenges in Canada to respond to their needs and address potential gaps in educational support and resources.</p>	<p>Data analysis and research on school-aged Syrian refugees and social / educational discourses in Canada. No clear methodology / method was identified. No age was identified for the children.</p>	<p>Five recommendations are posited for Canadian public schools to promote psychological well-being and academic achievement of school-aged Syrian refugees in Canada: 1) strategic planning on school inclusion, 2) special education resources to offer individualized educational support, 3) teacher training in trauma-informed care / practice, 4) professional development for teachers in culturally competent teaching strategies and techniques, and 5) clinical training for school-based mental health professionals in trauma-informed interventions for children.</p>
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<p>Yamashita, A. C. (2018). Master's Thesis, University of Toronto.</p>	<p>What are the factors contributing to refugee families' migration experience in relation to the language and literacy development of Syrian refugee children in Canada?</p>	<p>Participants were five Syrian refugee families and nine children (6 to 14 years) in the greater Toronto area of Canada. Interviews with parents and with children. Quantitative language measures with children.</p>	<p>1. Found the importance of first language maintenance as well as the importance of second language acquisition.</p> <p>2. Quantitative language measures showed children were significantly behind compared to their peers in language and literacy development.</p> <p>3. Findings from interviews with children showed English played an important role in their integration and making friends, a key support system for the children. Learning English was a high priority for them.</p> <p>4. Findings from interview with parents showed learning English was more difficult and posed an obstacle for career advancement and for their involvement in their children's school lives. Parents' lack of English proficiency was a barrier to them becoming more involved in their children's school experiences.</p> <p>4. All families spoke of the importance of preserving their first language at home.</p>
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<p>Yohani, S., Brosinsky, L., &amp; Kirova, A. (2019). <i>Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education.</i></p>	<p>What are the strengths and barriers that Syrian refugee families with young children face during early resettlement?</p>	<p>The authors use a community-based participatory research approach and critical incident method involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 10 Arabic-speaking cultural brokers working with Syrian refugee families during early resettlement.</p>	<p>The research provided a framework for educators to guide them in identifying both strengths and challenges that face Syrian refugee children and their families during early resettlement within a school context. Drawing on their previous research, this article highlights the vital role that educators play in the psychosocial adaptation of refugee families with young children during early resettlement in Alberta, Canada.</p>
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**RESULTS**

Overall, the studies we reviewed speak to the complexity of social inclusion of children in schools and take children, families, and teachers into account. Yet

current studies neither forefront children's nor families' voices, nor do they engage in a contextual analysis of phenomena under study. We structured our results around five key factors discussed in the existing literature that influence the experience of Syrian refugee children and families in relation to schools. While these factors intersect and often work synergistically, it is important to understand the depth of each one. These factors include pre-arrival factors, mental health, social support, acquisition of English language skills, and lack of preparedness of teachers and schools.

### **Factor 1: Pre-Arrival Factors**

Pre-arrival factors are important in the resettlement of refugees. Pre-arrival factors are inclusive of three stages: pre-departure, flight, and first asylum (Merali, 2008, as cited in Yohani et al., 2019). There is little research on the departure and flight stages of pre-arrival factors in the research literature, although information about these stages can be inferred from journalist accounts and agency reports. For instance, *Homes: A refugee story* (al Rabeeah & Yeung, 2018) provides an autobiographical account of one boy's pre-departure and flight experiences.

Yohani et al. (2019) note that an important pre-arrival factor is trauma. Trauma can be caused by war, violence, separation from loved ones (Hassan et al., 2015), disrupted schooling, food shortages, unemployment, language difficulties, mental health, and overall health concerns. Experiences during the pre-arrival stage in the first place of asylum are pivotal for young refugees (Clark, 2017; Yohani et al., 2019); these experiences shape their lives in significant ways.

In Clark's (2017) interview study with two Ontario teachers, participants pointed out that first asylum living situations are important, noting differences between refugees living in apartments or other types of housing versus those living in temporary structures in refugee camps. Participants noticed that students who had lived in a refugee camp were more responsive to socioemotional triggers, which called forth emotions such as fear. The triggering of such emotions can impact a student's sense of belonging, which is critical to social inclusion. Therefore, refugees are often in survival mode and have difficult life experiences that contribute to how they conduct themselves and respond to situations once they are resettled. Finally, the teachers in Clark's (2017) study also noted that during the first asylum, many girls were required to take care of the home and family whereas boys were able to go to school, which afforded them opportunities to socialize outside of the home.

### **Factor 2: Mental Health**

Mental health is both a pre- and post-arrival factor for Syrian refugees. Exposure to armed conflict, displacement, separation from loved ones, or threats to personal safety increase the likelihood of developing a mental health condition (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019). Refugee children in particular tend

to experience high rates of psychological trauma symptoms (Hadfield et al., 2017; Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Psychological trauma can impair a child's social, emotional, and cognitive functioning, as well as negatively affect growth and development (Stewart, 2014; Walker & Zuberi, 2020).

Refugee children are vulnerable to mental health difficulties and tend to experience more sleep disturbance, psychosomatic symptoms, issues with attention, and separation anxiety, and they may demonstrate externalizing behaviours such as aggression (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019). Protective factors, however, such as family, peer, and community support, may help to mitigate the impact of pre-arrival trauma on young Syrian refugees (Hadfield, et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019).

In Walker and Zuberi's (2020) literature review, the impact of pre-migration trauma and post-migration stressors on the resettlement of school-age Syrian refugees in Canada was examined. They pointed out gaps in the literature on how to best support the psychological well-being of Syrian refugee children within Canadian public schools. Most school-based counsellors and Canadian teachers feel inadequately prepared to work with children who have experienced trauma (Stewart, 2014). They proposed five recommendations for Canada's public school systems: 1) address issues of inclusion at school; 2) provide adequate funding to reduce wait times for psychoeducational or language assessments; 3) provide ongoing training in evidence-based, trauma-focused care to teachers and school administrators in schools where a large number of refugee students are enrolled; 4) offer teachers professional development opportunities that consider culturally relevant teaching strategies; and 5) provide school counsellors with specialized training in evidence-based, trauma-informed care (Walker & Zuberi, 2020).

Teachers in Clark's (2017) study noted the unmet rehabilitation needs of children that are connected to trauma. Many Syrian refugees resettled in Canada feel social isolation and loneliness (Yohani et al., 2019). Yamashita (2018), in her study with five Syrian refugee families and nine children in greater Toronto, noted refugees' socioemotional well-being may be related to their resettlement in an ethnically diverse, liberal society where they experience culture shock and find it difficult to navigate the lack of gender segregation. Many refugees also face discrimination (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019) and some experience hate crimes (Walker & Zuberi, 2020). These experiences greatly affect how people feel about, and engage with, their new communities.

Yohani et al. (2019) identified the importance of Syrian refugee parents' mental health. Children's psychological well-being is strongly influenced by their caregivers' emotional state. Some Syrian refugee mothers, during pregnancy or postpartum, have reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. Syrian refugee parents face a number of psychosocial stressors that may negatively affect mental health, including language barriers, social isolation, discrimination (real or perceived), poverty, and challenges navigating social, educational, and health systems.

### *Factor 3: Social Supports*

It is important that Syrian refugee families with young children be connected to social support systems to mitigate potential challenges that accompany the experience of relocation. Social support can help facilitate a smooth resettlement in Canada. Hadfield et al. (2017) noted that the well-being of young refugees is closely related to their perceived degree of social cohesion, that is, their sense of belonging and integration into a new environment.

Refugees often experience systemic barriers that are part of education and health systems in Canadian society. Their experiences with these barriers often prove debilitating (Yohani et al., 2019). Yohani et al. (2019) noted financial challenges and poverty. Furthermore, many refugees found the healthcare systems challenging to navigate and the needs of children with disabilities unmet. While many refugees find support through their private sponsors, government agencies, mosques, and the Syrian community (Yamashita, 2018), proper support does not exist for effective integration (Clark, 2017). Without connections to communities, some struggle to build a sense of belonging (Clark, 2017). Experiencing language barriers can contribute to a lessened sense of belonging, which inhibits integration and the ability to make friends (Clark, 2017; Yamashita, 2018). Language is also a barrier to pursuing career aspirations, progressing in school, or attending post-secondary educational institutions (Yamashita, 2018; Yohani, et al., 2019).

The social support resources that encourage social connection and that refugee families find helpful to develop a sense of belonging in Canada are as follows: 1) extended family, 2) sponsors, 3) communities, 4) friends, and 5) school. First, extended family serves as a vital source of social support for Syrian families; they rely on extended families for support in raising children, maintaining daily life, and promoting the well-being of family (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yamashita, 2018). However, when Syrian refugee families are physically separated from their extended families, they experience disconnection (Yamashita, 2018).

Secondly, sponsors are also a social support for refugee families. While most Syrian refugees in Canada are government-assisted refugees, some refugees are privately sponsored (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yamashita, 2018). Sponsors are the first point of encounter for refugee families upon their arrival in Canada, and sponsors provide them with basic supports such as housing, finances, various registrations, skill support, and orientation in the local community (Hadfield et al., 2017). Syrian refugee families who have private sponsors are reported to receive more personalized and constant support in finding housing, enrolling children in schools, arranging work, becoming familiar with new lifestyles and environments, and integrating into Canadian culture than government-sponsored refugees (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yamashita, 2018). Privately sponsored families largely depend on their sponsors for both practical and emotional support, which may differentiate the resettlement experience of government and privately sponsored refugees.

Thirdly, Yohani et al. (2019) reveal “the importance of having social connection to one’s community in increasing children and family’s overall sense of well-being” (p. 24). Community entails relationship-building that is not limited to family or physical locale, but also includes cultural, ethnic, or religious communities, such as Syrian communities, English classes, or mosques. Yohani et al. (2019) demonstrate the significant role of community-based cultural brokers in establishing connections between refugee families and social environments. These cultural brokers can serve as important liaisons between refugee families and useful community resources, offering them a sense of community through their relational support (Yohani et al., 2019).

Fourthly, friendship is an important support system for children and families and plays a role in developing a sense of belonging (Clark, 2017; Yamashita, 2018). Hadfield and colleagues (2017) note that peer relationships promote social adjustment and confidence in refugee children. Friendship can grow into a significant source of support for English learning for both parents and children (Clark, 2017; Yamashita, 2018). For children especially, having friends helps them adapt to their new school environments and foster social networks. It also facilitates smooth integration into new social and school lives (Yamashita, 2018).

Lastly, positive school experiences can be a protective factor to mitigate risks and create a foundation for academic, social, and emotional growth and empowerment as well as integration into a new country (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019).

#### *Factor 4: Acquisition of English Language Skills*

Learning to speak, understand, read, and write a second or additional language is often one of the primary barriers for all non-English-or-French-speaking refugees coming to Canada. English language classes are often provided early for children, youth, and families through settlement programs. When children and youth are enrolled in schools, English as an additional language is given high priority. Adults are encouraged to attend English classes for as long as they are able. Clark’s (2017) study identified the importance of recognizing the specific needs of newly arrived Syrian refugee children when developing appropriate support strategies. One area where support was needed was in using ELL pedagogy to support the emotional and academic growth of students.

Developing abilities in English is interwoven with the mental health of Syrian refugee children and youth (Hadfield et al., 2017). As noted earlier, the mental health of children and youth is influenced by adults’ mental health. As Hadfield et al. (2017) suggest, language as a social determinant affects parenting and parent-child relationships and may influence the mental health and development of children and youth. Without English skills, parents struggle to find employment and, if they do find employment, they struggle to find time to learn English. Hadfield et al. (2017) cite other researchers (e.g., Danso, 2002; Renzaho et

al., 2011; Thomas, 1995) working with refugee populations who found that parents may be forced to take menial and labour-intensive jobs due to their poor English skills or low levels of education, resulting in less time to parent their children. They suggest that, without fluency in English, parents struggle to learn Canadian child-rearing customs and regulations. While refugee parents want to help their children, they may be unable to access many services due to language, transportation, and childcare barriers. Language acquisition is an obstacle for refugees, given that acquiring basic language competency does not translate into academic language and literacy skills (Stewart, 2014). Walker and Zuberi (2020) also highlight that students' poor English language skills can negatively affect teacher ability to assess refugee students' strengths and needs. Unfortunately, English language acquisition is often not well supported because of financial constraints.

Yamashita (2018) highlighted the importance of first-language maintenance and second-language acquisition. Quantitative language measures demonstrated the Syrian refugee children were significantly behind norms in language and literacy development. Yamashita's results, from her interviews with children, indicated that English played an important role in children's integration and making friends, a key support system for the children. Learning English was a high priority for them. For their parents, however, learning English was more difficult and posed obstacles for career advancement and involvement in their children's school lives. All families spoke of the importance of preserving their first languages through speaking their first language at home and through media, religion, and upbringing. They did not draw attention to the ways that, as children became more fluent in English and as parents struggled to learn to speak English, there was the possibility of distance between parents and children that may lead to difficulties for both. Yohani et al. (2019) raised the concern that many children enter schooling before they are fluent speakers of their first language and can lose their first language because they perceive English to be the legitimate language. They also suggest that the loss of the first language has harmful effects on the relationship children have with their parents and extended families.

#### ***Factor 5: Lack of Preparedness of Teachers and Schools***

School is one of the most influential contextual post-arrival factors for families. It is vitally important that educators recognize the social, political, and cultural contexts from which refugee students come from before arriving in Canada (Clark, 2017; Gagné et al., 2017). Teachers who understand children's unique cultural identities can better support their transition to the classroom (Clark, 2017; Gagné et al., 2017). Without cultural awareness, teachers and administrators may assume that refugee students who are from the same part of the world share a collective identity (Clark, 2017). In Clark's (2017) study, for example, a first-year Ontario teacher reported that six newly arrived Syrian refugee students in grade 4 were



placed in the same classroom because teachers and administrators believed they would feel more comfortable staying together, yet these students varied greatly in their religious and cultural practices, socioeconomic status, language, and dialects. Consequently, one of the six Syrian refugee students was shunned by her Syrian peers because she came from a lower social class (Clark, 2017).

While some Canadian teachers have attempted to develop culturally relevant pedagogies and curricula to support the inclusion of Syrian refugee students into the classroom environment, many report significant systemic barriers (Clark, 2017; Hadfield et al., 2017; Walker & Zuberi, 2020; Yohani et al., 2019). Limited opportunities for teacher development, lack of communication between various levels of the education system, lack of adequate notice to prepare for the arrival of Syrian refugee students, and a paucity of resources, including ESL teachers, have left educators feeling unprepared to address the complex needs of Syrian refugee students (Clark, 2017; Gagné et al., 2017; Hadfield et al., 2017; Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Clark (2017) explained that a “lack of communication between the Ministry of Education and schools, insufficient teacher development opportunities and ineffective resource distribution lead to a significant lack of teacher readiness” (p. 33).

## LIMITATIONS

Literature on the resettlement experiences of Syrian families with young children who came to Canada as refugees is scarce. To date, most studies have focused on the mental health of Syrian refugees while living in their first place of asylum, including refugee camps, and few have been conducted outside of the Middle East. While these studies are important, there is a risk of perpetuating dominant narratives rather than hearing more nuanced and contextual understandings of the lives of children and families. All six scholarly works included in this literature review considered the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugee families with children within school contexts. While we were particularly interested in the experiences of young children, given the scarcity of available research we also included studies that involved older children. Including studies that involved older children might have identified factors not as relevant to young children. None of the studies we found mentioned religion explicitly. This was surprising, as religion (with most of the population identifying as Sunni Muslim) shapes many of the values of Syrian families. To our knowledge, no studies have focused specifically on narratives about the transition process within the preschool context over time.

## DISCUSSION

In our integrative review, several insights were uncovered, which provided us with a comprehensive understanding. Firstly, we found that forced migration has a profound impact on the mental health of refugees. Mental health is one of five

key factors that determine how well Syrian refugee children will transition into Canadian classrooms. Exposure to war and violence, and separation from family and friends, increases the risk of developing a mental health condition (Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019). Yohani et al. (2019) reported that many Syrian refugee families feel socially isolated and lonely. Other families struggle with living in a culturally diverse and liberal society (Yamashita, 2018). Syrian refugee children in Canada reported high rates of symptoms of psychological trauma, and many reported being the target of racist bullying by their peers (Hadfield et al., 2017; Walker & Zuberi, 2020). While Walker and Zuberi (2020) found that school settings are one of the best places for school-age Syrian refugees to access mental health support, Canadian teachers and school counsellors are not trained in trauma-informed care. As Walker and Zuberi (2020) cautioned without this specialized training, it will be challenging to address the unique needs of Syrian refugee students who require mental health support.

Another major factor that influences social inclusion within the context of Canada's public school system is the acquisition of English language skills. Yohani et al.'s (2019) research highlighted that learning to speak English while maintaining the first language is important as the first language is woven tightly with cultural, religious, and familial threads. The authors suggested that it is difficult to isolate language as a separate factor in the experiences of refugee families. What also became evident is that learning to speak English is experienced differently by children. Children are motivated by social integration and achievement in schools, while parents are motivated by a desire to obtain employment, explore career possibilities, and access resources, including school resources, for their children. There is generational tension between encouraging speaking English and maintaining culture and relationships through a first language.

Several researchers cited issues with the lack of teacher and school preparedness to receive Syrian refugee students. It is clear that more preparation, resources, and training are needed to provide educators with the tools they need to adequately meet the unique needs of the Syrian student population. While some Canadian teachers have tried to prepare culturally relevant pedagogies to support newly arrived Syrian refugee students, many teachers are unaware of these pedagogies. Teachers have reported systemic barriers including a lack of communication between provincial departments of education and schools, lack of notice to prepare for the arrival of Syrian refugee students, and a dearth of resources, including ESL teachers (Clark, 2017). As a result of trauma exposure both pre- and post-arrival, and because teachers have little or no training on how to adapt the curriculum to address the unique needs of refugee students, educators in Canada may be unintentionally causing further psychological distress (Hadfield et al., 2017).

## FUTURE RESEARCH

What was most surprising about the literature was the absence of the voices of Syrian refugees. The stories of forced migration and resettlement in Canada, as told by Syrian refugee children and their families, remain hidden. As the global refugee crisis continues, and as Canada continues to accept children and families from war-affected nations, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of refugee children and their families' experiences of belonging, agency, and identity as they attempt to settle into Canadian society. Preschool is often one of the first places that Syrian refugee families and their children encounter Canadian culture. Educational institutions and early childhood settings, in particular, are uniquely positioned to provide safe and socially inclusive spaces for Syrian refugee children and their families. Creating socially inclusive spaces within the preschool context, where diversity is celebrated, and where people typically feel supported and included, may help to facilitate integration and alleviate the distress caused by transitions. Research in this area is urgently needed.

## CONCLUSION

When waves of refugees arrive in host nations, fleeing from political instability and danger in their countries of origin, there is a tendency to create a dominant story. This dominant story is most often based on limited knowledge about the past, present, and possible future lives of refugees. Often the uniqueness of the lives of refugees is obscured, and stories are told in relation to unknown cultural, political, institutional, familial, and linguistic narratives. Despite a strong sense of a global world, and a world in which no country has been untouched by the arrival of refugees, the ordinary, intimate, and diverse lives of children and families who are refugees remain obscured. At the same time, refugees often draw on the memories of their homelands to define who they are and who they are becoming. School is an integral part of the lives of refugees. Without attending to the diverse voices and experiences of refugees and the complex history of forced migration and displacement, it is challenging to work with refugees in respectful, meaningful, and engaging ways in schools that intend to focus on social inclusion. Researchers, teachers, and school administrators have the potential to further the social inclusion of refugee children and families by attending closely to the stories they tell.

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JENNIFER DODD is a third-year PhD student in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. Her proposed research focuses on the experiences of elementary school teachers in responding to the psychosocial needs of refugee students. Jennifer is a registered nurse and registered provisional psychologist who provides evidence-based, trauma-informed, psychological therapy. [jendodd@ualberta.ca](mailto:jendodd@ualberta.ca)

D. JEAN CLANDININ is Professor Emerita at the University of Alberta. Her research areas are in curriculum studies, teacher education, and in developing the theoretical, methodological, and ethical underpinnings of narrative inquiry. [dc6@ualberta.ca](mailto:dc6@ualberta.ca)

GILLIAN VIGNEAU is a secondary school teacher of mathematics and a master's student in secondary education at the University of Alberta. Her research and pedagogical interests are focused on the experiences of students whose lives do not fit easily within mainstream schooling. Her master's thesis is focused on the experiences of refugee families and children. [gpysyk@ualberta.ca](mailto:gpysyk@ualberta.ca)

HIROKO KUBOTA completed her post-doctoral fellowship and PhD in the Faculty of Nursing, the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on lived experiences of people who are often marginalized and made silent in society, such as people who are homeless or people who experience being refugees. Her interests also extend to philosophical considerations of human life and the world in relation to marginalization. Using narrative inquiry, her doctoral research was focused on understandings of people who are homeless in Japan. [hyamane@ualberta.ca](mailto:hyamane@ualberta.ca)

VERA CAINE is a professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. She is the current board chair of the New Canadians Health Centre in Edmonton, a community health centre that serves refugee populations. Vera is also the president of the Canadian Association of Nurses in HIV/AIDS care. [vera.caine@ualberta.ca](mailto:vera.caine@ualberta.ca)

JENNIFER DODD est étudiante en troisième année de doctorat à la Faculté des sciences infirmières de l'Université de l'Alberta. Son projet de recherche porte sur les expériences des enseignants du primaire afin de répondre aux besoins psychosociaux des élèves réfugiés. Jennifer est une infirmière autorisée et une psychologue provisoire autorisée qui fournit une thérapie psychologique factuelle qui tient compte de divers traumatismes. [jendodd@ualberta.ca](mailto:jendodd@ualberta.ca)

D. JEAN CLANDININ est professeur émérite à l'Université de l'Alberta. Ses domaines de recherche sont les études sur les programmes curriculaires, la formation des enseignants et le développement des fondements théoriques, méthodologiques et éthiques de l'enquête narrative. [dc6@ualberta.ca](mailto:dc6@ualberta.ca)

GILLIAN VIGNEAU est professeure de mathématiques au secondaire et étudiante à la maîtrise en enseignement secondaire à l'Université de l'Alberta. Ses recherches et ses intérêts pédagogiques sont axés sur les expériences des élèves dont la vie ne s'intègre pas facilement dans l'enseignement ordinaire. Sa thèse de maîtrise porte sur les expériences des familles et des enfants réfugiés. [gpsyk@ualberta.ca](mailto:gpsyk@ualberta.ca)

HIROKO KUBOTA a complété sa bourse de recherche postdoctorale et son doctorat à la Faculté des sciences infirmières de l'Université de l'Alberta. Ses recherches portent sur les expériences vécues de personnes souvent marginalisées et réduites au silence dans la société, telles que les personnes sans-abri ou les personnes qui vivent l'expérience d'être réfugiés. Ses intérêts s'étendent également aux considérations philosophiques de la vie humaine et du monde en relation à la marginalisation. À l'aide d'une enquête narrative, sa recherche doctorale s'est concentrée sur la compréhension des personnes sans-abri au Japon. [hyamane@ualberta.ca](mailto:hyamane@ualberta.ca)

VERA CAINE est professeure à la Faculté des sciences infirmières de l'Université de l'Alberta. Elle est actuellement présidente du conseil d'administration du New Canadians Health Centre à Edmonton, un centre de santé communautaire qui sert les populations réfugiées. Vera est également présidente de l'Association canadienne des infirmières et infirmiers en VIH/sida (ACIIS). [vera.caine@ualberta.ca](mailto:vera.caine@ualberta.ca)