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The nexus of war, resettlement, and education: War-affected youth's perspectives and responses to the Quebec education system



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the realities of war-affected youth living in Quebec, Canada, and in particular, their experiences and responses to education upon resettlement. In our qualitative study, using both in-depth interviews and focus groups, we queried 22 young people affected by war. Our thematic analysis describes the challenges youth faced in school after having experienced war-related trauma and migration. Despite existing international and national education frameworks, education policies and provisions are largely lacking and ill-equipped to support refugees' unique needs. Youth felt that teachers and support staff tended to overlook young people's pre-migratory lives, as well as post-migratory realities. To facilitate resettlement, war-affected refugee youth sought connections beyond school – in the form of peers, surrogate families, or community members from the same country of origin. These non-formal educational supports demonstrate youth's agency, illustrating high bonding social capital. To support youth at the nexus of war, resettlement, and education, our findings point to the need for greater consideration of both pre-and post-migratory experiences, as well as for increased bridging and social capital to strengthen the linkages across student-school-community in ways that both build upon and respond to the strengths and challenges of war-affected children.

In Quebec, between 2003 and 2012, 7 of the top 10 source countries from which refugees were accepted were war-affected nations (Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés Culturelles [MICC], 2014). These refugee young people are sometimes accompanied by a parent or caregiver and sometimes come alone, seeking asylum. Upon arrival, school generally becomes the most influential service in their resettlement, and therefore plays a determining factor in their integration and well-being (Matthews, 2008; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). Education provides a means to rebuild their lives and future in the new country, and to develop citizenship within their host society (Mosselson, 2006; Woods, 2009).

With the increasing influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from diverse countries as a result of armed conflict, paying attention to educational experiences of these students in the Global North is of growing significance. Children and youth coming from conflict-affected countries have often unique schooling needs given lost years of schooling, past experiences of conflict-related trauma, as well as having to adapt to a new culture, language and education system (Woods, 2009). The question of how nation-states' education systems can best support war-affected young people's education deserves attention. Schools can be considered as a primary location of care (Measham et al., 2014) playing an "invaluable role in integrating [immigrant children] into host society networks" (Morantz, Rousseau, & HeyMann, 2012, p.89). Focusing on young people's lived experiences can shed light on ways of improving education's role in resettlement.

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This article describes an exploratory qualitative study involving 22 war-affected youth's experience and response to schooling in Quebec, Canada. We begin by examining international and national educational provisions with respect to refugees, followed by reviewing the literature on educational issues for refugee children and youth.

Literature review

International education provisions

Like many countries, Canada has ratified international agreements that provide for the rights of war-affected children. These include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNICEF, 2012). Additionally, Canada has signed the Optional Protocol of the UNCRC concerning the involvement of children in armed conflict, which states that, "Parties shall, when necessary, accord to such persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration" (UNHCR, 2009). For children and youth who immigrate to the Global North, this means ensuring an environment and services that meet their needs in a way that promotes their long-term physical and psychological healing.

Education rights, as one of the most widely accepted of all human rights provisions (Swadener, Lundy, Blanchet-Cohen, & Habashi, 2013) reflect the fact that children cannot benefit from their other rights unless they have benefitted from education. Therefore states must make provision for an education that enables the rights holder to engage and to participate fully in society and thereby enjoy the most basic of civil and political rights. A case in point is the growing evidence on how provision of education is a predictor of social cohesion for young people (Lundy, 2006). Conflict-sensitive education can provide children with the knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe. The multifaceted nature of education as a right means that it cannot properly be described as a simple right "to" education – similar to the right to an adequate standard of living or to healthcare – but rather as rights to, in and through education. In other words, the educational right implies that states must consider the education process, the experiences, and the values being promoted within.

Article 29 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) puts forward a holistic model of education, encompassing the development of the child's personality and preparation for life in a free society in a "spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples." The Article postulates that education must help develop children's respect for their parents and culture as well as respect for the country in which they are living, the country from which they originate, and for cultures and communities different from their own. Underpinning the child rights discourse is a consideration that the social aims of education are as significant as academic goals.

Inadequacies in the education system

Researchers have suggested that these rights are not upheld for many immigrant and refugee youth within host countries of the Global North. In Britain, for instance, there has tended to be an "invisibility" of asylum-seeking and refugee children within educational policy, with a "hostile" model prevailing whereby education individualizes and problematizes refugee children as "weak" and "vulnerable" (Pinson & Arnot, 2010, p. 247). Similarly, an analysis of the legal, organizational, and pedagogical responses in Sweden toward newly arrived students indicates that the educational system is based upon a deficit model in which "a disproportionate focus has been given to these difficulties, resulting in a system that misses positive opportunities to build on newly arrived students' pre-existing capacities" (Nilsson & Bunar, 2015, p. 400). This results in a significant educational achievement gap between students who migrate during their school years versus those who were born in Sweden. The research shows that moving away from a deficit-approach requires considering pre-migratory experiences as well as children's own agency.

In Australia, researchers also critique refugee education for its lack of appropriate support to refugee students (Sidhu, Taylor, & Christie, 2011). Policies that specifically target refugee students have been absent, and the system has been described as "piecemeal and dominated by psychological approaches that overemphasize pre-displacement conditions of trauma" (Matthews, 2008, p. 32). The focus on individual considerations is limiting because it disregards broader societal issues of inequality and marginalization that refugee children experience post-migration.

In Canada, social services and education arenas for refugee youth have been deemed highly inadequate, given "patchwork, sidelining and marginalization" (Ngo, 2009, p. 96). Such limitations and inadequacies have been acknowledged at formal levels of government. For example, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights noted: "migrant children [across Canada] face a number of obstacles to settlement and integration...too often slipping through the cracks in service provision" (Crowe, 2006, p.12).

A recent review of public policies and action plans related to immigrant and refugee youth in the province of Quebec, Canada highlights a focus on post-migratory experiences, more specifically on French language acquisition and integration to Quebec culture (Fraser, Denov, Guzder, Bond, & Bilotta, 2016). The 2014 action plan of the Ministry of Education describes the lower rates of finishing high school among first and second-generation immigrants as compared to their Quebec-born counterparts. The action plan makes allusion to pre-migratory experiences as one of the many factors that contribute to immigrants' vulnerability: "particular attention must be given to students who have had more difficult migratory experiences (...) and those who belong to families with lower socio-economic status." However, the document does not expand on how these experiences might impact a student's ability to learn and integrate into society, and what needs to be done to address such challenges. This brief overview, while in no way exhaustive, highlights the ways in which education policies and practices have tended to overlook pre-migratory experiences in the lives of refugee youth.

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