Policy Brief

Supporting refugee students in Canada: Building on what we have learned in the past 20 years.

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BACKGROUND

In 2015, Canada began efforts to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, a number that was soon exceeded as private and government sponsorship levels increased in response to the mass exodus of Syrians fleeing ongoing conflict. Between January 2015 and July 2017, over 84,000 refugees were resettled to Canada. This refugee population included 43% of school-age (17 years old and under) youth, arriving to communities and schools across Canada (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2017). The current educational system is ill-equipped to facilitate this transition and combat the socio-psychological challenges refugee students face as they enter Canadian schools (Gagné et al., 2012; Kovacevic, 2016). To understand refugee students’ education, social integration, and wellbeing in publicly-funded education systems in Canada, we conducted a scoping review of recent Canadian refugee education literature and policy.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a scoping review (Levac, Colquhoun, & O’Brien, 2010) to assess the extent and range of literature that exists regarding refugee students in Canada. We searched ERIC, The University of Toronto Library based blend search tool, and Google Scholar using the terms “teaching,” “strategies,” “refugee,” “students,” “Canada,” and “school.” The initially yielded literature was irrelevant to refugee student education, and we mutually decided to run a new search, changing the term “refugee” to the term “migrant.” After completing the scoping review of literature, we reviewed Canadian education policies using the search terms identical to the literature review terms, and then refined them as needed.

FINDINGS AND KEY MESSAGES

- Refugee students experience socio-psychological challenges in Canadian schools.
- Teachers, resettlement officers, and policy makers often lack cross-cultural competencies, a social justice focus, and transformative leadership skills when working with refugee students.
- The wellbeing of a child is an important focus in practice and policy.
- There is a gap in the Canadian education policy.
- Asset-based approaches improve Canadian education systems.
- Provinces that provide an asset-based approach, and distinguish between immigrants and refugees, have more relevant policies and guides for educators.
- National and transnational policy exchange benefits Canada.
- Future research is needed to develop a holistic approach to refugee students’ education, resettlement, and wellbeing.
SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW AND IMPROVED POLICY IN EDUCATION

- Mobilize educational policies and resources across provinces and territories. Provinces lacking educational policies about refugee students can benefit from exchanging resources with provinces who have more information and research.

- Transnational policy exchange can strengthen Canadian education systems.

- Provide training and professional development opportunities for teachers, and other stakeholders in education.

- Create and support resettlement programs for refugee families within and outside schools.

- Support existing and develop new cross-sector partnerships.

- Create safe spaces in schools where refugee children can express their concerns and feelings and discuss shared experiences. Cross-cultural transformative leadership is a powerful approach to refugee students’ education, social integration, and wellbeing.

- Streamline the refugee teachers’ recertification process and mobilize their pedagogies.

- Seek and mobilize knowledge about refugee students’ resettlement and its impact on refugee students’ social, psychological, and academic wellbeing.

- Fund research about the strategies teachers, policy makers, refugee families, and communities can utilize to ease the refugee student transition to Canadian schools.

This policy brief presents the research findings and subsequent policy suggestions that arose from the scoping review of Canadian refugee education literature and policy. We see several applications for this research in the areas of education and resettlement services and argue for a cross-sector and Pan-Canadian approach in implementing policies and advancing educational practices for refugee students and their families. We also see further areas in need of research, such as exploring the yielded literature in greater depth and analyzing sources from other sectors such as citizenship and resettlement agencies. The full report for this project can be accessed from https://espminetwork.com/new-report-supporting-refugee-students-in-canada-building-on-what-we-have-learned-in-the-past-20-years/.

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REFERENCES


