

Refugee Youth and Interrupted Schooling: Economic and Social Implications

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WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

OVERVIEW: This study looked at the schooling experiences of 25 refugee youth living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, aged 16 to 26 years old, who have experienced interrupted schooling.

OBJECTIVE: To highlight the complex challenges faced by refugee youth who have experienced interrupted schooling and understand the cultural and linguistic resources and agency youth use to navigate, interact, and occupy cultural and educational spaces.

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION: Refugees are increasingly settling in mid-sized cities, such as Halifax. Refugee youth are at a high risk of experiencing interrupted schooling, defined as not being able to attend school for a period that can vary from a few months to years due to war, civil unrest, migration, or financial pressures. Interrupted schooling is a significant challenge for refugee youth's integration and academic success.

HOW THE DATA WERE OBTAINED

The research team conducted one-on-one interviews with 25 refugee youth (22 female and 3 male) who migrated to Canada as government-assisted refugees (GARs) and currently reside in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Youth were 16 to 26 years old and came from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Experiences of interrupted schooling ranged from two months to never having the opportunity to attend school. Participants had been in Canada from 15 days to 10 years.

A theoretical framework of transnationalism and transnational identities was applied to participants' narratives. A transnational perspective acknowledges the processes migrants engage in to create social fields linking their countries of origin and their countries of settlement and how these fields structure everyday practices.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Language

- › Language barriers prevented youth from being able to access school, post-secondary education, work, and social spaces.
- › English as an additional language (EAL) programs are not always accessible or adequate at settlement agencies and schools.

Friendships

- › Friendships helped youth develop a sense of belonging and trust and create a community where they could get support.
- › Peers helped youth increase their confidence in learning English.

Gender

- › Women and girls may face additional challenges due to cultural expectations, such as housework and parental responsibility, and pregnancy.

Aspirations & Resilience

- › Participants expressed high aspirations for higher education and careers, such as becoming doctors, nurses, and engineers.
- › Youth demonstrated resilience through their persistence in schools and social contexts.

School Experiences

- › Some participants felt that their previous educational experiences were ignored or undervalued meaning that they were not sufficiently challenged or able to advance in certain subjects, such as math.
- › Youth felt they were not reflected in the school curriculum, which was overly focused on European history and culture.
- › Teachers were described as friendly, helpful and patient, yet they sometimes failed to consider the resilience and strength of refugee youth.
- › Refugee youth who have experienced trauma require acknowledgement and support from teachers and experts.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- › Policymakers and settlement agencies need to consider gender differences to ensure wider access to education and skill-building opportunities for independence and employment among newly settled refugees.
- › School curriculum needs to be diversified, with both the physical and virtual space and services becoming more culturally supportive and responsive to diverse cultures.
- › Academic and financial support can benefit students who have low levels of family support and many family obligations. Combined with welcoming spaces for youth to socialize with peers, these supports can help youth persist to higher education.
- › Free and accessible EAL programs must be offered in formal (within the education system, e.g., tutoring and formal classes) and non-formal settings (e.g., community organizations and public library programs).
- › Teachers require support to address the needs of refugee youth (e.g., professional development in EAL, counselling, trauma-informed approaches) and more access to school support staff.
- › Bachelor of Education programs should include a requirement on working with refugee youth focused on building understanding of their complex needs and challenges, as well as their resilience, agency, and assets.

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ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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