

## SPECIFIC NEEDS IN LITERACY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN GERMANY AND CANADA

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### WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

**OBJECTIVE:** This study examines challenges faced by Syrian refugee children in Canadian and German schools in adapting to new learning environments. It also looks at how schools in both countries are meeting the specific needs of refugee children to acquire literacy and second language skills.

**RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION:** For refugee children, language and literacy skills are heavily shaped by the learning environment of schools and families in their host country and by previous experiences in their home country.

**PRACTICAL GOAL:** This study offers insight into the current situation, supports, and special needs of refugee children and their families for language and literacy acquisition and integration into their hosts societies.

**PRIMARY AUDIENCE:** Educators, policy makers, service providers, and the public.

### HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

In the pilot study from 2017-2018, 20 Syrian children (aged 6-15) and their parents (n=13) participated. These participants were from five families in Toronto, Canada and three families in Munich, Germany. A mixed-method design was used, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and older children (age 9-15) and quantitative language and literacy tests (Arabic and English/ German) were given to all children.

In the follow-up study from 2018-2019, the same three families were observed in Germany. In Canada, one family from the pilot study dropped out and an additional child from another family was included. In total, 8 children from 4 families were observed in Canada. The follow-up study employed the same mixed-method design; in addition, teachers and principals of the participants were also interviewed.



## CALL TO ACTION

### In Germany:

- At mass accommodation centers, where many refugee families reside, children lack space to do their homework. Refugees who have approvals for residence need assistance finding affordable housing as quickly as possible.
- Children need one-to-one homework support, especially with German and math.
- Teaching materials should be rewritten to accommodate the learning needs of refugee children. For example, developing simplified versions of current teaching materials.

### In Canada:

- More English language-learning supports are needed to facilitate refugee children's academic success.

### In Both Countries:

- Schools are encouraged to use interpreter services regularly. If this is not feasible, schools could recruit parents of similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to act as cultural brokers.
- Teachers require professional development regarding cultural diversity; the learning conditions for first and second language, including the transfer of knowledge/ skill from one language to the other; and trauma-informed approaches to sensitize them to the potential impact of the refugee experience on children's learning and wellbeing.
- Teachers should encourage refugee students to use both their home language and the majority language on school assignments and tasks. This can help students feel more motivated to engage with their schoolwork.
- Schools are encouraged to provide students with opportunities to further develop language and literacy skills in their first language. This is especially important for students who did not have extensive schooling before arriving in the host country.
- Refugee children should be instructed in small groups whenever possible.

## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- Overall, majority language learning and literacy acquisition presented a significant challenge for refugees. Children's performance on the English and German measures revealed significant gaps in proficiency relative to native speakers. Parents reported that lack of majority language proficiency was an impediment to involvement in their children's schooling. Educators reported having no professional development specific to refugee children.
- In Canada, parents enforced the use of Arabic at home to maintain a common language and preserve cultural identity. While children would comply with their parents, they preferred to use English with siblings. In Germany, parents favoured Arabic but allowed the use of German at home due to its impact on their children's education and future. Older children often acted as language brokers between parents and younger siblings.



[View Project Webpage](#)

## 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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