

Supporting Refugee Students in a Smaller Center in Canada: Achievements and Challenges

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Research Objectives and Questions

This paper comprehensively examines the educational needs of refugee students at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary grade levels in St. John's, NL, as well as how their needs have been addressed.

Research questions:

- 1) What are the **special learning needs** required by refugee students?
- 2) What is the **effectiveness of the existing interventions** offered to refugee students in primary and secondary schools in NL?

Literature Review

• Successful Practices in the Educational Support Programs for Refugee Students

- ❖ language + content Instruction (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012) **mainstreaming to** regular classrooms
- ❖ refugee students (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012) **interacting with** mainstream peers

• Effective Ongoing Support in the Mainstream Classes for Refugee Students

- ❖ tutoring (Naidoo, 2013)
- ❖ self-initiated co-teaching between ESL teachers and classroom teachers (Percy & Martin-Beltran, 2012)

Methodology

Research design: A multisite case study

Sites: One elementary school (School A)
one middle school (School B)
& one high school (School C)

Data collection methods & Participants:

- **One-on-one semi-structured interviews** (22 refugee students & 11 educators)
- **A focus group** (5 refugee students, 12 educators, & 7 community supporting staff)
- **A discussion meeting** (5 educators)

Results

Needs for Language Support

- It is imperative to meet the language needs of refugee students because a reasonable proficiency in English is a **prerequisite** for their educational success.
- At the elementary grade level: **Language was a hindrance to effective teaching from classroom teachers**
"She (one classroom teacher) is trying to include them (newly-arrived refugee children), but these children don't know what she is talking about. This is teachers' nature that when you feel like a child is not getting what he is supposed to be getting, and that's the frustration for you." – one administrator
- At the intermediate grade level: **Refugee students struggled with the usage of academic words and phrases**
- At the secondary grade level: **Refugee students articulated less language difficulties**

Needs for Filling the Educational Gaps

- The academic bridging program (LEARN) is an **essential** program for refugee students.
"The earlier the intervention, the better." – one educator
- Educators argued against the absence of the LEARN program in primary schools
"The reason that we have kids in the LEARN at junior high is that they haven't done that in grade 6 or grade 4." – one educator
- K-3 refugee students would benefit more from learning with their peers in regular classrooms for their language and literacy development

(In)effectiveness of Current Support Programs

1. ESL program
 2. LEARN program
- Itinerant ESL program: **Insufficient instructional time**
 - ❖ **2 hours** in a seven-day cycle for each student
"So you get 2 hours, and how many weeks in a school year? 24, so basically you have 2 days in a whole year with me. How much can you teach them in three days?" – one ESL teacher
 - ❖ Only **two full-time** ESL teachers stationed at one high school
 - **Hiring** of ESL teachers
 - ❖ No mention of certificates such as Master's in TESL or TESL Canada Certification
"Can you just walk into a French job if you don't have qualification in French? Everybody can walk into an ESL job." – one ESL teacher
 - LEARN achievements
 - ✓ **Successful integration into mainstream classes**
 - ✓ **Lower attrition rates**
 - ✓ **Higher graduation rates**
 - LEARN dilemma of centralization and expansion
 - ❖ Full-day LEARN is available at School B & C exclusively: **understaffed & transportation burdens**
 - ❖ Half-day LEARN is available at three middle schools: eased the transportation difficulties but **less beneficial** than full-day program

Discussion

- **Leadership** in school especially the **principals' strong advocates** for their refugee students are vital to the implementation of the support programs.
- Either the **quality support programs should be expanded** to other schools so that refugee students would be able to attend their zoned school or **additional transportation services should be provided** if the support programs continue to be centralized in a handful of schools.

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