

SUPPORTING SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS

**Are We Ready? Examining Teachers' Experiences Supporting the  
Transition of Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students  
to the Canadian Elementary Classroom**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The Syrian refugee crisis has prompted more than 39 000 refugees to make Canada their home, many of them children who have become a significant part of our classroom populations (Government of Canada, 2017). This study aimed to explore the question “How are teachers supporting the transition of Syrian refugee students into the elementary classroom?” Given the emergent nature of this topic, little literature exists on the pedagogies that best support these students, though educators might learn from the negative experiences that past refugee student groups had within the Canadian education system in order to guide their teaching (Yau, 1995; Young and Chan 2014). Using semi-structured interviews based on qualitative research protocols, this study found that the ability to support newly-arrived Syrian refugee students was affected by (1) the different experiences that Syrian refugee students have had, (2) teacher ability to build positive student-teacher relationships, (3) teacher knowledge of English language learner (ELL) pedagogy, and (4) how prepared teachers feel to support incoming Syrian refugee students. In order to address the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, educational stakeholders will have to re-evaluate the financial and practical resources, such as training workshops, made available to teachers welcoming Syrian refugee students to their classrooms.

**Key Words:** Syrian refugee students, ELL pedagogy, elementary classroom, relationship building, teacher readiness, supporting refugee students, newly-arrived Syrian refugee students

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.0 Introduction to the Chapter**

As of March 20th, 2016, 26,202 Syrian refugees had arrived in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016). According to Save the Children Canada (n.d.), the Syrian refugee crisis has displaced more than 5 million children. With these two figures in mind, it should come as no surprise that there is a growing demand for Canadian educators to have the necessary skills and resources required to respond to the specific needs of these incoming students. Unlike their Canadian peers, many of these refugee students will have faced war, death, loss, and other emotional and physical tragedies that will affect their experience in the Canadian classroom (Brown, 2016; Young & Chan, 2014; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Lustig, Kia-Keating, & Knight, 2004; Salopek, 2015; Sherlock, 2015; Windle & Miller, 2010). To this end, creating classroom communities that are safe and welcoming is an important step in ensuring that these students will have a positive resettlement experience, and that they will be socially and academically successful in the Canadian school system. Given that the majority of these students have arrived over the past year (Government of Canada, 2016) this is an emergent topic within the field of education, and one that we must tackle head-on if we are to ensure that our educators are well-equipped to help these incoming students succeed. In order to explore this topic, this chapter will focus on introducing the problem in greater depth, and go into detail about the questions that guided my research, and my own positionality as an inquirer into the matter.

### **1.1 Research Problem**

While the Syrian refugee crisis, which began in 2011 (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2015), is one new to our society, Canada has seen similar situations in the past. Indeed, as a country, we have welcomed refugee students from places such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Uganda, Chile, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Fujian, and more (Bangarth, 2015). This history has allowed for many researchers to study the experience of refugee students in Canadian classrooms, and their findings have been grim (Yau, 1995; Young and Chan 2014; Lowman, 2016). As educators, our past actions failed to ensure that all refugee students were given their best possible chance for success; indeed, in some cases, educators even hindered the process of resettlement for previous refugee students by creating environments that were hostile and unwelcoming (Yau, 1995). The Syrian refugee crisis is providing educators in Canada with the unique opportunity to do better. Though current research (Ministry of Education, 2009), outlines

theoretical strategies by which educators might support such students, the question of the practical application of these suggestions specific to supporting newly-arrived Syrian refugee students remains unanswered. In order to create learning environments that support the transition of Syrian refugee students to our classrooms, educators need to learn from past mistakes so as to become adept at supporting these newly arrived students in such a way that they are offered the same opportunity for success as their Canada-born peers. Should we not address these concerns now, it is likely that these students might experience social isolation and academic difficulties (Cummins & Early, 2015). This could result in a higher dropout rate for these students further on in their academic career, leaving our school system as one that cannot support the needs of diverse learners.

### **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

In order to help incoming Syrian refugee students experience positive growth in Canada, it is vital for educators to understand how to effectively create classroom environments that help refugee students experience success. The aim of this study was to provide insight on effective pedagogies that teachers are using in order to support the creation of safe and accessible classrooms for refugee students. Once these pedagogies were identified, it is my hope that they might then be replicated across the board in order to promote equitable access to learning for all, and to foster an environment of support and inclusion for students who might otherwise be marginalized.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

For the purpose of my study, I interviewed teachers who have worked with Syrian refugee students in their classrooms. My goal was to answer the question: How can educators support the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to the Ontario elementary classroom?

In order to further explore this question, I looked at a number of sub-questions which I used to guide the major topics of discussion within my MTRP. These questions are:

1. What are the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in the Ontario classroom?
2. What are teachers' experiences working with refugee students, and how can other educators learn from these experiences in order to inform future practice?
3. How can teachers become more prepared to support newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in the elementary classroom?

### **1.4 Researcher Background**

As a Masters of Teaching student, I came to this research study with an academic background, but one which was tempered by time spent as a classroom teacher. Furthermore, my teaching experiences include two years abroad. This experience was a large reason for my decision to pursue this research. As a former international teacher, I am aware that classroom strategies, especially those used to build community, are not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, and that consideration for other cultures, different ways of understanding, and language barriers are just some of the things that need to be taken into account when trying to create an accessible and safe learning environment for all. As a former international student, I have benefited from the diverse teaching methods used by experienced and empathetic teachers, and wanted to explore how these strategies are being used in elementary classrooms in Ontario. As a hard-of-hearing student who was formerly bullied, and as a person who grew up in a blended family, I also have a personal interest in creating classrooms that are accessible to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, age, religion, ability, etc. This background is one which I was able to unpack as I pursued my study, and one which I continued to reflect on in order to bring further insight to the research, while at the same time preventing my bias from influencing the outcome of the data analysis too greatly.

### **1.5 Preview of the MTRP**

To complete this study, I followed qualitative research protocols in order to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Over the next four chapters, I present and discuss the results of this investigation. First, I review more in-depth the literature surrounding the previous experiences of refugee and newly-arrived students in Canada, as well as the best-practice pedagogy researchers identify as necessary to building elementary classrooms that support the acculturation of such students. Following this, I outline the methodology of my study, and the semi-structured interview process I used to acquire the data here mentioned. In the final chapters of this study, I describe the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, and the main themes identified during analysis and coding. Finally, I discuss the impacts these insights garnered have on the educational field. More specifically, I address what bearing these insights have on teachers welcoming newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to their classrooms, and whether the research identifies ways in which these teachers can create learning environments that more successfully support the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students into their classroom communities.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.0 Introduction to the Chapter**

In 2015, Canada pledged to welcome 25, 000 Syrian refugees to the country by the end of 2016 (Liberal Party, 2016). As of January 2017, there were 39, 671 Syrian refugees living in the country (Government of Canada, 2017), making the topic of Syrian refugee students an important theme in today's society. Given the emergent nature of this topic, little literature exists on the systems specifically needed to support newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in Canadian elementary classrooms. Nor is there research on how such systems might lead to academic excellence, English language acquisitions, and social integration for these students. This literature review therefore focuses on the past and present experiences of other refugee students in Canada in order to better understand the experiences Syrian refugee students might have in Canadian classrooms, and to learn what pedagogical practices might best support these students. Having experienced life as a teacher in a foreign country, it was my belief that language support, relationship building, and fostering a safe learning environment would be a key aspect to ensuring classroom success for all immigrant students. I therefore examined methods of teaching that encompass these features of classroom learning, and explored which practices were best suited to deliver this type of pedagogy to ensure better integration into the Canadian classroom for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students.

### **2.1 Definition of a Refugee**

In 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were more than 200, 000 refugees in Canada (UNHCR, 2016). Add to this the more than 39, 000 Syrian refugees that resettled in Canada over the past two years and the additional 18, 000 Syrian refugee applications still waiting to be processed by the Canadian government (Government of Canada, 2017), it becomes evident that the refugee population is a significant part of Canada's social fabric. Given that the Canadian government further reported that there were more Syrian refugee children resettled in Canada than they had anticipated (Glowacki, 2016), there is a distinct need for educators to understand who these students are, and how they are positioned within mainstream Canadian society. According to the Canadian Council for Refugees (n.d.), a refugee is any person "who is forced to flee from persecution" (p.1). It is important to note that there is a difference between refugees and immigrants, the latter being those who have made the choice to resettle in a new country (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.).

## 2.2 Syrian Refugee Crisis

Before we explore the status of Syrian refugees as students in Canada, it's important to understand why they are becoming part of our classrooms. In March 2011, forces opposing Syria's then-President Bashar al-Assad took to the streets of Deraa to protest his rule (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2015). Since then, Syria's civilians have suffered through six years of conflict which has seen the deaths of over 250 000 people (Rodgers, et al., 2015; Amnesty International, 2015), and the internal displacement of 6,500,000 more (UNHCR, 2016). Given that the tactics used by both sides include "civilian suffering as a means of war" (Rodgers, et al., 2015, War crimes section, para. 1), it came as no surprise that World Vision has labelled the resulting mass migration and annihilation of peoples "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today" (Omer, 2015, par.2). Though other countries have joined the conflict in hopes of bringing it to a swift end – countries like Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and more – fighting continues to take place, growing more dangerous as tensions surrounding the exodus of refugees from Syria into neighbouring countries rises (Rodgers, et al., 2015; Salopek, 2015). Countries that are now playing host to 95% of Syria's refugees, 4.7 million to be exact, include Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt (Amnesty International, 2015).

More recently, Canada and the United States have opened their borders to admit refugees, with Canada relying on the blended visa program to bring refugees over (Brown, 2016). To add to this growing migration of people, there are currently an additional 1, 993 applications that have been finalized and 17, 912 applications still in process for Syrian refugees to resettle in Canada (Government of Canada, 2017). Amid the growing tensions of anti-refugee groups attacking Syrians in Lebanon (Rodgers, et al.), displaced Syrians are, according to refugee Mariam Akash, "always living on the edge of life...always nervous...always afraid" (as cited in Rodgers, et al., 2015, War crimes section). Given this climate of fear, it seemed likely that the number of refugee families with children coming to Canada would only continue to rise, which means that our social support systems – including the schools, principals, and educators that make up our educational institutions – would have to adjust accordingly and be well-prepared to meet the very unique and varying challenges that these families, and their children, bring with them.

### **2.3 History of Refugee and Immigrant Students in Canada**

The case of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in Canada is an emergent field of study, so we must look to the experiences of past and present refugee and immigrant student groups in order to better understand the current situation. Though it might have been beneficial to explore the state of these previous and present student groups in more depth, it was sufficient for the sake of this literature review to acknowledge the overarching challenges they faced, and continue to face, in the hope that it would help us better overcome the obstacles Syrian students might grapple with during resettlement.

#### **2.3.1 Challenges faced by refugee student groups.**

Over the years, Canada has hosted a variety of refugee families and their children. These groups include, but are certainly not limited to refugees from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Uganda, Chile, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, and Fujian (Bangarth, 2015). When examining the research done on the subject of challenges faced by these refugee students, we must remember that each situation is unique and that the challenges facing each group has varied greatly not just from group to group, but from child to child as well. To this end, the trauma experienced by incoming students to Canada cannot be limited to a single list, but I highlight a few important ones here to give the reader a sense of the difficulties that refugee students have encountered in the past so that we might better understand what experiences and bioecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) Syrian students might be bringing to their learning environment in the present.

According to researchers Young and Chan (2014), and Yu (2012), individual experiences of refugee students who have already navigated the Canadian education system were affected by a variety of factors, including age at forced migration, gender, country of origin, culture, religion, and socio-economic status. These factors were in turn impacted by the more serious experiences of witnessing murders or mass killings; committing their own acts of interpersonal violence; being the victims of neglect, or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse before or during their migration (Lustig, Kia-Keating, & Knight, 2004; Young & Chan, 2014); experiencing the loss of loved ones, including siblings and parents (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Young & Chan, 2014); poor living conditions in refugee camps; mental health issues (Fazel & Stein, 2002); feelings of insecurity or anxiety during the resettlement process (Young & Chan, 2014); secondary trauma stemming from feelings of isolation in the host country (Fazel & Stein, 2002); and post-traumatic

stress disorder (Sherlock, 2015; Windle & Miller, 2010; Young & Chan, 2014). This, of course, is not a comprehensive list of the stressors that affected refugee students' abilities to integrate into the Canadian classroom, but it does give us insight into the unique situation of refugee students, and reinforces the necessity of having specific strategies in place to help make the integration process into Canadian classrooms easier for incoming Syrian students.

### **2.3.2 Experiences of refugee and immigrant students in Canadian classrooms.**

In addition to welcoming refugee students, Canada also has a contemporary history of welcoming immigrant families and their children to our society and educational system. We have not, however, always been successful in implementing teaching strategies that might have enabled these students to successfully transition to the Canadian classroom. Indeed, studies as recent as 2012 found that teachers were ill-prepared to meet the needs of their refugee students, at times being found to have difficulty even determining who the refugee students in their classrooms were (Alisic, Bus, Dulack, Pennings, & Splinter, 2012). Similarly, current immigrant parents report feeling that their children are not respected in schools due to the child's inability to speak English at the same level as their peers, and that students who are not supported by teachers who understand them are at a disadvantage and experience "a loss of education" (Gagné, 2012, p.35). Parents have further reported that cultural differences between Canada and their home countries have created a situation in which transition to Canada's classrooms is difficult for their children, especially when teachers cannot support their children's language learning needs (Gagné, 2012). From these recent experiences of refugee and newly-arrived parents and their children, it is clear that a gap still exists between theory and practice when it comes to educators' abilities to support refugee students in the Canadian classroom.

One factor that has led to this fault in our education system is a basic lack of teacher training (Brewer & McCabe, 2014; Windle & Miller, 2010), and the fact that teachers have not always had an adequate understanding of their students' needs (Yu, 2012; Yau, 1996). Studies with the above-mentioned groups of refugee students revealed that they also experienced racism at the hands of their teachers (Brewer & McCabe, 2014), and that teachers were unable to recognize that "their [own] beliefs about good childrearing practices [were] culturally bound and that there may be other, equally good ways" (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzai, 2007, pg.24) to instruct and raise children.

Above all, refugee and immigrant students did and do not experience successful integration into the Canadian classroom due to weak student-teacher relationships. According to one study, refugee students found their mainstream teachers to be “distant, indifferent, reserved, and uninterested” (Yau, 1996, p.12), while immigrant parents reported feeling that Canadian teachers were not taking the time to learn their students’ backgrounds in order to better support their needs (Gagné, 2012). It is highly likely that teachers’ attitudes toward refugee students, and a lack of awareness of appropriate pedagogy that would support newly-arrived students, led to student isolation and marginalization from peers, something which has been found to result from poor inclusion practices (Brewer & McCabe, 2014; Hyman, Vu, & Beiser, 2000). With consideration to this research, it was therefore clear that teachers in our classrooms had to better understand refugee students if they were to move away from these negative experiences of the past and ensure successful inclusion into the Canadian education system for incoming Syrian children.

#### **2.4 Challenges Facing Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students in Canada**

In 2012, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) projected a significant increase of the number of refugee children immigrating to Canada over the coming decades (CIC, 2012). In light of this, it is now, more than ever, important to ensure that educators not only reflect the growing diversity of our schools, but also have the professional and personal skills needed to set these students up for successful inclusion in elementary classrooms. In order to become more well-rounded educators who are capable of inclusive teaching practices, we must first understand the individual needs of our students so that we might better help them overcome any challenges they might face.

In addition to confronting some, if not all, of the challenges experienced by other student refugee groups in Canada, Syrian refugee students bring with them a set of difficulties unique to their situation. One such challenge is the continued experience of violence at the hands of refugee hosts. This type of mid-flight trauma was evident in one of the Lebanese refugee camps, where “an anti-Syrian mob attacked refugees and smashed their cars” (Salopek, 2015, para.9). This attack suggests that the violence facing Syrian children does not end once they leave the borders of their home country, something which educators in Canada need to keep in mind when designing curriculum for these students. The trauma they face is recent, fresh, and ongoing; it is something these students are still overcoming, and something teachers need to factor into their

program planning when developing methods of supporting the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students their classrooms. In order for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to experience successful inclusion in Canadian classrooms, educators need to create an environment where these students, in their final place of refuge, can feel free from fear of continued persecution and trauma at the hands of refuge hosts.

Another challenge particular to Syrian refugee students is the interruption in their education. Given that the conflict in Syria has been going on for more than five years (Brown, 2016; Salopek, 2015), many Syrian refugee students have been out of school for the same length of time. Though receiving informal education is possible in certain refugee camps (Salopek, 2015), the personal experience of one Syrian refugee family new to Canada best demonstrates the realities of this school situation. In a recent article by the Toronto Star, journalist Louise Brown (2016) explored the resettlement process of 10 year-old Ibrahim Sultan. Prior to arriving in Canada, Sultan's educational experiences included witnessing old schools being bombed, and not being in a regular classroom for more than three years (Brown, 2016). For refugee students such as Sultan to succeed socially and academically, they need to feel included in classrooms, which means being with like-students and people who understand them (Yau, 1996). In this instance, this meant students of the same age-bracket and teachers who had the skills required to support their unique needs. Indeed, placing refugee students in age-inappropriate grades can lead to further isolation (Yau, 1996), so it is important that this risk for isolation be eliminated while still ensuring that these refugee students are provided with the tools they need to catch up to the grade level of their classmates. These needs will further be exacerbated by the fact that many incoming refugee students are also English language learners, which means they need language support in addition to the social emotional support important to their transition to Canada.

Based on the lived experiences of previous immigrant and refugee student groups in Canada, and the ongoing integration of Ibrahim Sultan into his elementary classroom, it is evident that educators must be well-equipped to accommodate the special needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. Educators must be prepared to meet these needs in a way that promotes equitable access to learning for all students, and that fosters an environment of support and inclusion for students who might otherwise be marginalized. With this in mind, we must ask ourselves whether there are specific teaching strategies that are better suited to supporting the

transition of Syrian children to the Canadian classroom, and how teachers without these strategies in their repertoire might learn them so as to better meet the needs of this increasing population. This is just one of the many questions that educators might now be facing as they welcome newly-arrived Syrian refugee students into their classrooms. It is one which we must all be aware of if we are to put into practice pedagogy that will move away from the negative school experiences of past refugee students in Canada, and toward a future where transition to a new classroom is a positive experience for incoming Syrian students throughout the Canadian school system.

## **2.5 Supporting the Transition of Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students to the Canadian Classroom**

As the Syrian refugee student population in Canada continues to grow, educators will need to adapt their teaching strategies to respond to the specific needs of this new learner demographic. Without subject-specific literature on how best to support these new students, I explored existing literature that details how best to encourage learning for other refugee student groups in the Canadian classroom. This exploration yielded three recommended strategies that teachers might employ to facilitate learning and integration for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. These include addressing language needs, building positive relationships, and creating a safe learning environment.

### **2.5.1 Syrian refugee students as English language learners.**

In a study done by Andrew Duffy (2003), research found that while 76% of urban elementary schools in Ontario had English Language Learners (ELL) in their student population, only 26% of these schools had English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. The recent influx of Syrian refugee students, who present as newly-arrived students in need of ELL support, will likely only serve to increase the divide between these percentages. Duffy (2003) further explains that ESL and ELL resources and programming are underfunded by the Ministry of Education. Given that the Ministry of Education (2009) requires refugee students to “follow the prescribed curriculum of the Ministry of Education, and...perform at the same standards of their English-speaking peers” (p.11), this seems ill-founded. Indeed, if ELL student populations continue to rise, then it presents as logical that more support, not less, should be the standard by which Ministries of Education allocate funding for student support.

The need for more student support is made evident by researchers Cummins and Early (2015), who explain that English language learners such as Syrian refugee students are always on a “catch-up” trajectory. Simply put, students developing their English language skills will continually be attempting to catch a moving target due to the fact that native English speakers are also continuously developing their own English skills. Not only does this trajectory place English language learners at an academic disadvantage in comparison with native-English speakers, this “catch-up” trajectory also serves to increase the risk for socioemotional struggles for ELL students (Cummins and Early, 2015). For newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, ELLs who brings with them a unique set of socioemotional needs, it is imperative that proper language supports are in place to assist them not only in attaining the ministry-mandated goal herein described, but in achieving successful social inclusion into Canada’s education system.

Cummins and Early (2015) further explain that ELL support can help reduce anxiety around integration, narrative-sharing, and classroom participation. For students who are, according to Harrison Lowman (2016), experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder to one degree or another, reducing anxiety and finding opportunities for safe and meaningful classroom participation should be a priority for all educators. Indeed, supporting newly-arrived Syrian refugee students as ELLs could empower them to be successful in the long run, both academically and socially. As Cummins and Early (2016) elaborate, ELL-specific strategies are designed to facilitate relationship growth between peers that enables ELLs to become part of the classroom community and feel validated in their learning experience. For students who have faced years of interrupted schooling, such strategies promote interaction for socioemotional development, something which both Cummins and Early (2016) and the Ministry of Education (2009) deem important for the successful transition of refugee students to the second language classroom. This being said however, no literature yet exists on how ELL teaching strategies might specifically benefit Syrian refugee students, and is something that this study aimed to explore. Given the unique circumstances of Syrian refugee student experiences, it is important to remember that strategies used to support ELLs in the past may not translate into current practice, which is why learning from teachers currently working with newly-arrived Syrian refugee students is essential to the development of pedagogy that will best support the inclusion and integration of these students into Canada’s classrooms.

### **2.5.2 Building relationships and understanding student backgrounds.**

Just as Cummins and Early (2015) explained that supporting refugee students as English language learners can facilitate social growth by building positive peer relationships, I believed from my own experiences that the key to creating successful inclusion strategies for individual classrooms and students is understanding our students and facilitating positive student-teacher relationships. One of the reasons that previous refugee student groups did not experience successful inclusion into Canadian classrooms likely stemmed from their teachers not having enough understanding of students' out-of-school lives (Moll, Amanti, et al., 1992).

This informs us that, as educators, we need to ensure that we are not solely focusing on teaching the curriculum. Indeed, researchers Janus and Duku (2007) have determined how refugee students navigate the classroom – in terms of their behavioural and cooperative skills – is more important than their curricular readiness. To ensure this navigation happens, educators must come to know and understand their students beyond the classroom walls. As Yau (1996) puts it, “before [one] can really appreciate the school needs of refugee students, it is important to have some knowledge of the past and present circumstances these students have gone through outside of school” (p.11). For teachers who have never gone through forced migration, this process of understanding might be difficult to put into practice, something which the Ministry of Education attempts to circumnavigate with their document “Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools” (2009).

The Ministry of Education (2009) asserts that “teacher awareness and understanding of the backgrounds and needs of children...with refugee experience, as well as the individual strengths and cultural differences of these students, are important factors in student progress and success” (p.3). In the case of teacher awareness and Syrian refugee students, an educator's ability to understand the background of the students in question might create the space necessary for prior education and funds of knowledge to be discovered. This is especially meaningful in the case of supporting newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. This is because celebrating culturally-bound skills and knowledge gained from experience has the potential to reinforce the value these students bring to the classroom in spite of their interrupted schooling. As the Ministry of Education further posits, refugee students “bring with them strengths, abilities, and qualities to share” (2009, p.3), something which educators should strive to make room for in the elementary classroom.

Moll et al. (1992) further assert that recognising the funds of knowledge of refugee students is an essential pedagogical tool for inclusion that makes acculturation and acceptance easier; celebrating other culturally-bound skills and abilities provides the opportunity for students already in the classroom to share in their new classmates' learning. This helps to bridge cultural gaps and promote positive peer relationships as well as student-teacher ones. With consideration to this research - even though the Ministry of Education (2009) and researchers such as Moll et al. (1992), Janus and Duku (2007), and Yau (1996) provide theory-based strategies that might support the acculturation and transition of refugee students – the the practical application of these strategies as they relate to the teaching of Syrian refugee students has not yet been researched. In light of this, learning which pedagogies prove practically useful when designing programming for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students is important if teachers are to create learning environments that set these students on a path for success.

### **2.5.3 Creating a safe learning environment for refugee students.**

Prior to addressing the needs of refugee student as ELLs, and building positive relationships through which such students might be better supported to succeed academically, educators should first ensure that the classroom environment is one which promotes safe learning. According to Sampson and Gifford (2010), “during the early period of resettlement...[refugee] youth seek out and value places that promote healing and recovery” (p.116). Given that students spend a large portion of their day at school, Canadian classrooms should aim to provide learning environments that support this kind of healing and recovery for incoming Syrian refugee students. Indeed, Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) note that “the school environment is critical for refugee students to feel safe, welcome, and supported” (p.39) and that “the school environment is a primary place for refugee youth to develop a sense of belonging” (p.40). It is therefore likely that should Syrian refugee students find this type of environment at school, they might be more likely to experience a successful transition to the Canadian social fabric, and be more academically successful overall. As already mentioned, successful transition into Canadian social systems is hindered by the language barrier which exists between Canadian classroom instruction and newly-arrived Syrian refugee students (Cummins and Early, 2015). Engaging in activities and pedagogy that promote a safe learning environment might help break down the barriers that Syrian refugee students face, and enable them to more quickly and easily transition into their new classroom communities.

## **2.6 Conclusion to the Chapter**

In this chapter, I have explored the challenges that previous newly-arrived and refugee students faced, and continue to face in Canadian classrooms, and how these might be avoided for incoming Syrian refugee students. Given the emergent nature of this research topic, there is still much to be learned about how current educators can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of Syrian refugee students without having prior experience in this area. Within this framework, research was undertaken to ascertain the pedagogies used by educators currently teaching newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. This was done in an attempt to highlight best practice pedagogy for all elementary teachers hoping to support the growing Syrian student population in Canada. The following chapter outlines the methodology by which such teachers were interviewed, and the findings from these interviews that might be used as guideposts moving forward.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

### **3.0 Introduction to the Chapter**

To successfully complete this study, there were certain research procedures I had to follow in order to ensure that data collection, analysis, and interpretation were cohesive, legitimate, and accessible. In this chapter, I will review the research approaches, procedures, and instruments used to collect data from participants during the informal interview process. Following this, I will explain more in-depth the biographies of the participants, and the criteria and sampling procedures used to select said participants. This chapter will then include a discussion on the methods of data analysis, and the ethical review procedures taken into consideration during the process of this study. Given the nature of this study, it is important to provide an overview of the limitations of the methodology in order to highlight ways in which further research on the topic might be warranted. With that being said, however, the informal method of data collection also lent strength to this study, which I will also speak to in this chapter. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the decisions I made regarding the methodologies and procedures of this study, and will provide the reader with an outline of what to expect in the chapter that follows.

### **3.1 Research Approach and Procedures**

To better explore the nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, I conducted my study using a qualitative research design. I consequently reviewed the literature on the topic of newly-arrived and refugee students, and the degree to which they successfully transitioned to Canadian schools, and used this information to situate the data I collected from semi-structured interviews with Ontario-based elementary school teachers.

By definition, a qualitative research problem “requires exploration and understanding” (Creswell, 2002, p.9). Given that the Syrian refugee crisis is an emergent theme in today’s society, an inquiry-based mind, and the ability to comprehend ways of knowing beyond that which we have already encountered, was necessary in order to understand the ideal learning environments for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. The explorative nature of qualitative research questions further allowed for this understanding and inquiry to take place (Creswell, 2002). Taken into consideration along with the fact that qualitative research and the informal interview process lends itself to discovering participants’ lived experiences, the informal interview process allowed for by qualitative research design provided more opportunity for

participants to share their stories, opinions, and experiences. This, in turn, provided richer and more detailed data from which larger themes and implications were drawn.

Furthermore, the descriptive quality of the research design lent itself well to a multi-case study (Boudah, 2011). This was important for the purposes of this paper as I was trying to capture a clear understanding of the reality experienced by teachers working with Syrian refugee students in Canadian elementary school classrooms, which I explored by conducting interviews with multiple participants. These interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for new ideas and unstructured questions to become part of the fabric of the discussion. This emergent design of the qualitative working plan provided a legitimate base for creating open-ended, exploratory research questions that elicited the most in-depth responses and data collection possible (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). This kind of rich detail was important for a study such as this that does not currently have any research-based literature related to it.

### **3.2 Instruments of Data Collection**

In light of the research parameters set up by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) for the purpose of the Masters of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP), the sole instrument of data collection for this study was interviews conducted with educators in the field. Though there are many forms of interviews that can be used for qualitative research studies (Boudah, 2011; Creswell, 2002), I relied on semi-structured interviews (also referred to by Boudah (2011) as standardized, open-ended interviews) for data collection. Boudah (2011) explains that these types of interviews are designed using a standard set of questions that is asked to each participant. Each participant had the opportunity to provide an answer based on their lived experience. Not only did this provide me with more variety and detail from which to draw conclusions during the data analysis process, it also led me into areas and ideas that I had not thought to explore, but which enhanced the insights derived from this study. The list of questions (Appendix B) for these interviews were divided into five sections. I began by asking the participant questions about their teaching background, and moved into deeper inquiry about their understanding of strategies that support newly-arrived students, their experiences working with Syrian refugee students, and any advice they had for educators welcoming these students into their classrooms in the future.

### **3.3 Participants**

Key to the interview process in qualitative research design is the participants. In this section, I will review the sampling criteria and sampling procedures used to select participants. Also included in this section are the participant biographies, which are important to understanding the data collected from each.

#### **3.3.1 Sampling criteria.**

In order to conduct these interviews, I looked for participants who met certain criteria. These criteria included experience teaching newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, and experience using transition-supporting techniques in an educational setting.

*Experience teaching newly-arrived Syrian refugee students.* For the purposes of determining which teaching strategies best support Syrian refugee students in the classroom, I needed to speak with participants who have had direct experience working with these students. Teachers cannot provide insight into the classroom experience of Syrian refugee students if they have not had the opportunity to work with them.

*Experience using transition-supporting techniques in an educational setting.* Through this study, I hoped to identify which pedagogies create safe and accessible environments for Syrian refugee students. Teachers who have had experience using similar classroom strategies in other contexts were likely better suited to implementing the same strategies into classrooms with Syrian refugee students. For this reason, I looked for participants who have more experience in this area as I believed they might be better equipped to not only help inform this study, but ultimately to offer advice to other educators in the field.

#### **3.3.2 Sampling procedures.**

In order to conduct these research interviews, I recruited participants through a number of channels, and used appropriate methods. According to Boudah (2011), case sampling in qualitative research should be purposeful and strategic. I therefore did not rely on random case sampling to recruit participants, as it would have been inappropriate to the scope of this study. Instead, I relied on critical case sampling and convenience case sampling in order to identify participants that might best be able to provide rich data for the research problem presented.

When choosing sampling procedures, researchers have to remember that there is a relationship between the sample technique, and the research question (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011). Indeed, the educational nature of my research question, and my background as a teacher

candidate, lent itself well to the method of convenience sampling. As a teacher candidate, I had a network of educational professionals with whom I was able to connect in order to find participants for my study. When approaching participants through this third-party network, I provided the third party with my name and contact information, as well as an overview of my research. This enabled the potential participant to contact me at will and, with no obligation or pressure to participate in the study.

In addition to relying on the professional network I cultivated during my time as a Masters of Teaching student, I also contacted principals of schools where I knew Syrian refugee students were in attendance. Whether these principals chose to forward my study overview and contact information to the teacher of the students-in-question was left to the discretion of the principal. It was also up to the discretion of the teacher as to whether or not they contacted me in order to participate in the study.

The final way in which I reached out to potential participants was by relying on critical case sampling. In this context, I contacted “the person who can illustrate the phenomenon” best (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011, p.96). In this case, I felt that organizations that are affiliated with the resettlement process of Syrian refugee families would provide the best contacts. Many of these organizations have teacher-volunteers in a unique position to offer insight into the strategies best suited to creating successful inclusion for these students. Indeed, many of these organizations operate in a recreational, outside-of-the-traditional-classroom setting, and may as such, have offered a more natural and holistic insight into the needs of these students.

### **3.3.3 Participant biographies.**

The sampling criteria yielded two participants within the Ontario education system, Michelle and Robert, who were willing to participate in this study. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the participants’ professional and personal backgrounds in order to provide context for the answers and insights elicited during the course of this research project.

#### ***Michelle***

At the time of the study, Michelle was a first year teacher with seven years of experience teaching elementary aged students outside of a formal school context. Prior to working with newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, Michelle had worked with ELLs while still a teacher candidate; the ELLs that Michelle previously worked with were high level students and did not require much support. Michelle’s experience working with Syrian refugee students was not only

her first time teaching newly-arrived students, but her first time teaching students with a low level of English language skills. Michelle is a teacher dedicated to creating an open, safe and inclusive classroom environment for her students and is a proponent of teachers knowing their students beyond the walls of the classroom. She believes that when teachers take the time to understand their students' individual needs, a safe learning environment in which positive relationship growth can occur is created.

### ***Robert***

At the time of the interview, Robert was a teacher of sixteen years, with extensive experience teaching English language acquisition and Core French to a wide range of age levels in the primary and junior divisions. Robert spent the first nine years of his teaching career at an inner-city school with a heavy ELL student population whose families came from lower socioeconomic brackets. Robert relied on a teaching strategy called AIM - a kinesthetic language-acquisition pedagogy - in his classroom, and has travelled internationally to support other educators in delivering this programming. Robert taught a class of eight newly-arrived Syrian refugee students for several months; currently, he was teaching a more diverse student group that included some Syrian refugee students. Robert used AIM with his Syrian refugee students as well as his native-English speakers. He found that AIM supported his ability to teach in classrooms where students had a variety of language acquisition skills, and believed that the goal of educators should be to teach to the individual in order to ensure student success.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

When undergoing the data analysis process for any study, Asner-Self and Schreiber (2011) explain that “a researcher must code anything that is meaningful or even potentially meaningful” (p.280). With this in mind, I coded the resultant data in order to find common themes, divergences, and null data. In other words, I looked for themes provided by the participants that were the same, and areas in which their answers differed. Null data, or data that is not present, was also important to consider because it provided information on what teachers are not doing in their classrooms. When considered alongside the pedagogy that is in use, it created a fuller, more holistic understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

In addition to coding for data that is and is not present, it was also important for me to be reflexive both during the data collection and data analysis processes. According to Austin and Sutton (2015), being reflexive is “a way of providing context and understanding for readers”

(p.228). Being reflexive allows researchers to be more aware of their biases, and to better articulate their positionality in regards to the research problem and participant-generated information. When researchers acknowledge these biases in the data analysis process, it makes the lens through which the data is analyzed and shared with readers more transparent, and thus renders the study accessible for a wider range of readers.

Given the emergent nature of this topic, and the fact that little literature exists to support the lived experiences of my participants, following the data analysis process was especially important in order to ensure accurate coding and that the most relevant observations were taken from the interview process. In so doing, I was able to extract pertinent experiences that might inform the practice of current and future educators supporting newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. I was simultaneously aware of the fact that every student case is different and that the pedagogies found successful, or unsuccessful, by my participants might not necessarily be perceived in the same way by other educators in the field.

### **3.5 Ethical Review Procedures**

Research that relies on case studies demands that inquirers be “sensitive to participants, [and] actively collaborate with them (rather than studying them), and respect the dignity of each individual who offers data for research” (Cresswell, 2002, p.49). To this end, ensuring that data collection and analysis was transparent and legitimate equated to following ethical review procedures throughout the process. Such ethical procedures allowed the participant to review their answers, and to verify that the information collected and transcribed was accurate. This in turn supported a quality research design for the study as a whole.

Cresswell (2002) asserts that educational qualitative research is designed around “an impassioned concern for the inequity and needs” (p. 49) of certain groups of people. As such, there was the possibility that my research questions might have posed a small level of discomfort for the participants. To minimize this risk associated with the interview format of the research, the questions were sent to the participants ahead of time so that they were better prepared to answer them. Furthermore, in addition to providing them with a letter of consent to be signed, the participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any point prior to publication, minimizing any feelings that they were locked into the study and the answers they provided. In addition to this reassurance, all participants were given a pseudonym, and all names of places, schools, or people were removed or changed when I transcribed the interview for the

data analysis process. Finally, all interviews were kept on a password-protected laptop, and the data erased following the publication of the research paper. It is my hope, and belief, that these ethical procedures helped the participants feel secure with their participation in the study, and lead to an authentic and safe interview and data collection experience.

### **3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

Given the emergent nature of this study's problem, the techniques that Canadian teachers use to successfully support the transition of Syrian refugee students is, by default, a new, ongoing, and emergent process itself. Therefore, a qualitative research design, which is often exploratory and is used when little is known about a given subject (Johnson & Christensen, 2000), was the most appropriate form of research for this study.

Furthermore, there were aspects of the case study and semi-structured interview method of this particular qualitative design that ensured such above-mentioned exploration and natural investigation were able to take place. One such factor was the pool of participants. While having a larger pool of participants would be more ideal for creating broader, more widespread theories and conclusions about which techniques best create support for Syrian refugee students, focusing my research on two studies allowed more room for the participants to share their lived experiences in detail, and for me to gather richer data. The type of interview conducted with these participants also removed some of the bias associated with qualitative research design. This is due to the fact that the structure allows for more standardization across the board, as opposed to other qualitative interview approaches that might be based purely on situational/observational conversations, or conversations revolving around broader themes, and non-specific questions (Boudah, 2011).

While these are some of the positive traits associated with a qualitative research design, the ethical parameters surrounding this research paper also placed limitations on the study that narrowed the scope of the insight determined. Indeed, the tight parameters of my research made it impossible to conduct observations of students, or to observe teachers in the classroom setting. To a certain extent, this undermined the strength of the exploration of the study because while qualitative studies generally allow for documents, interviews, and observations to be used as sources of data (Merriam, 2002), mine only allowed for one form of data to be collected. When interviews are used as the only instrument of data collection, there is also the risk that less experienced researchers, such as myself, will create interview questions that lend themselves to

“bias, decreased participant willingness to respond, or [that might] predetermine outcomes” (Boudah, 2011, p.138).

Had the opportunity to use a wider variety of data collection instruments been provided, I believe that a more detailed and complete understanding of the extent to which existing pedagogies support or prevent the successful acculturation of Syrian refugee students to the Canadian classroom would have been achieved. It would be interesting to further pursue this study in an environment that allows for observation of the practical implementation of participant ideas; this would allow me to corroborate the spoken experience of the participant, and to complete a more thorough inquiry into the research problem.

### **3.7 Conclusion to the Chapter**

This chapter described the methodology that I used in my study, including participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and my reflections during and after the data collection process. In the following chapter, I will discuss the data that I collected in order to report the themes that emerged.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **4.0 Introduction to the Chapter**

In previous chapters, I discussed the context of the study, prior research and my research methodology. In this chapter, I present the findings from data collected over the course of three months with two elementary educators in the Canadian school system. The study aimed to examine how educators support newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in their classrooms. From these interviews, I identified four main themes:

- 1) Recognizing the specific needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in order to develop appropriate support strategies,
- 2) The importance of building positive student-teacher relationships to understand and meet the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students,
- 3) Using English language learner (ELL) pedagogy to support the emotional and academic growth of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students,
- 4) Barriers that limit the successful transition of Syrian refugee students to the Canadian classroom.

Additionally, these themes have sub-themes which help examine the findings in more detail. I begin each section with a discussion of these themes and sub-themes, present the data, and elaborate on the significance of this data in relation to the existing literature on the subject. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the findings so that it can be used as a foundation from which I can make recommendations for next steps.

### **4.1 Recognizing the Specific Needs of Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students in Order to Develop Appropriate Support Strategies**

The participants in my study reported that in order to determine pedagogies appropriate to supporting newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, teachers should first learn what the specific needs of this student population are. In this section, I begin with a discussion about what the teachers in my study perceived to be the needs of these students, based on their pre- and post-arrival experience in Canada. The educators interviewed noted that student experience seemed to influence how they adjusted to life in their new classrooms. Literature for this study failed to document the lived experiences of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, making teacher observation important to the process of determining pedagogical support.

#### **4.1.1 Differing experiences of Syrian refugee students prior to their arrival in Canada.**

When asked how educators can meet the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, participants discussed the impact that prior experiences had on student needs. The participants explained that gender differences, living situations, and academic backgrounds influenced the presented needs of these students, and affected how the participants were able to respond in kind.

Robert, one of my participants, believed that gender differences affected the in-flight experience of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. Robert explained that while his male students had been to school in refugee camps, and were allowed outside the home to socialize, his female student “had to stay home and help her mother with her younger sister, and with the food and such.” Robert felt that this experience affected his female student’s ability to engage in classroom activities, and that she required more support from her teachers than her male counterparts as a result. When developing support strategies for these students, Robert had to navigate the gender differences that impacted their upbringing and informed their current experience in the Canadian classroom. Prior research supports this idea that gender impacts individual experiences of refugee students (Young & Chan, 2014; Yu, 2012), and that teachers need to respond to these experiences appropriately. Robert similarly felt that the gendered experience of the Syrian refugee students in his classroom impacted the degree of support they needed to transition to his classroom, and that teachers should be aware of gender differences so as to develop pedagogy appropriate to addressing this need.

In addition to the gender differences that influenced the perceived needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, my participants reported that different living situations prior to arrival in Canada affected their students’ academic and socioemotional needs. Michelle, my other participant, explained that while one of the Syrian refugee students in her class had lived in an apartment in Jordan for three years prior to coming to Canada, others in the class had spent time in multiple refugee camps outside of Syria before their arrival. Michelle noted that the student who had lived in the apartment appeared to react less to socioemotional triggers, such as loud noises and large groups, than the students who had lived in refugee camps. For his part, Robert explained that all five of the Syrian refugee students in his class had lived in refugee camps. He observed that as a result, the boys in his class appeared to have developed “street smarts” and a

persistent attitude of being “in survival mode.” Robert consequently felt that he sometimes had to work harder to place his male students at ease and to avoid power dynamics in his relationship with them.

Robert and Michelle also explained that the Syrian refugee students in their classrooms had varying academic backgrounds that impacted their readiness to participate in classroom learning. In addition to Robert explaining that the male students in his class had received more schooling than their female counterpart, Michelle further noted that there was a large education gap that existed between the Syrian refugee students in her classroom. Some Syrian refugee students in Michelle’s class had not had any schooling for four years, while others had experienced interrupted and informal schooling throughout the conflict, while yet another student had a mother who was a teacher and had thus been consistently homeschooled during the crisis. This resulted in a variety of needs that stretched the academic-readiness continuum, and reinforced for Michelle the importance of knowing her Syrian refugee students’ individual experiences in order to support their needs.

Michelle and Robert’s classroom experiences revealed that existing government policies on supporting refugee students are not entirely correct when they state that all refugee students have experienced interrupted education, and should be supported accordingly (Immigrant Services of British Columbia, 2007). Indeed, the data reinforces the notion that newly-arrived Syrian refugee students present with a variety of needs which educators in the Canadian school system should take into consideration when creating strategies to best support them. As Michelle put it, “you want to get to know your students on an individual basis in order to best support their individual needs, as we already do for other students in our classrooms,” an idea that is present in many other research studies and reports (Ministry of Ontario, 2013; Reeves, 2002; Schmoker, 2004; Stiggins, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Subban, 2006; Theroux, 2004; Tomlinson & Edison, 2003; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003).

#### **4.1.2 Challenges faced by Syrian refugee students upon arrival in Canada.**

When asked about challenges facing newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in Canadian classrooms, Michelle also spoke about the socioemotional factors related to hygiene, health, and school readiness that impacted their involvement in the classroom community. For Robert, it was the language barrier that primarily created obstacles for the successful integration of Syrian refugee students in his classroom and school.

Michelle noted that the Syrian refugee students in her classroom “were [not] even in a place to learn academically.” She elaborated on this to explain that certain Syrian refugee students did not come to school with properly fitting or weather-appropriate clothing, that others had severe health and nutrition problems, and that yet others had difficulty navigating the new school routines. These barriers to inclusion are reflected in the Ministry of Education (2009) guidelines on how to support refugee students, and, as Michelle and the Ministry explained, served to contribute to a sense of exclusion from Canadian peers and prolonged the trauma of their refugee experience. Without additional support, certain teachers in Michelle’s school were unable to meet these socioemotional needs of the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in a manner that empowered them to become part of the classroom community. While Canada has documents that support teachers in their efforts to welcome Syrian refugee students (Ministry of Education, 2009; Ministry of Ontario, 2013; National Center for PTSD, 2009; British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, 2007; Cole, 1995; Brewer & McCabe, 2014), Michelle’s experience with these students indicates that there is a discrepancy between the information provided and its practical use.

In Robert’s classroom, language barriers presented the main challenge for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to become part of their new peer group. Robert reported that the Syrian refugee students were “very quiet” and that “they [didn’t] take risks because they [didn’t] have the language to do so.” As a result, Robert explained, the Syrian refugee students interacted only with each other both in class and at recess. Robert further acknowledged the language barrier as that which prevented Syrian refugee students from bonding with classmates. He explained that this was because these students were pulled out of mainstream classes quite often and were not given the chance to interact and learn with their peers. In agreement with researchers Cummins and Early (2015), Robert felt that increased social interaction with peers other than their fellow Syrian refugees would be a positive thing, and that this would come as a natural progression of learning English. As Robert stated, “once [Syrian refugee students] get more English, they’ll probably make more friends.”

#### **4.2 The Importance of Building Positive Student-Teacher Relationships to Understand and Meet the Needs of Syrian Refugee Students**

Both Michelle and Robert stated that an important component of developing a sense of belonging in the classroom community for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students is relationship-

building. In this section, I discuss my participants' experiences with creating positive student-teacher relationships in the classroom, and how doing so enabled them to address the various physical and emotional needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in order to facilitate academic growth and success.

When asked about her relationship with the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in her classroom, Michelle described the necessity of making these students feel safe and welcomed in order to better address their physical and emotional needs. Michelle explained that the Syrian refugee students with whom she developed a positive relationship were more engaged in class activities, and were more comfortable sharing their stories with her. The importance of this story-sharing is supported by prior research, which states that positive student-teacher relationships can support refugee students to work through issues of trauma and violence that may be affecting them in the classroom (The National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Michelle observed this effect in her classroom. She reported that the refugee students in her classroom were more well-behaved when she was teaching them, but that after her departure from the school they began to act aggressively toward peers and teachers. Michelle believed this to be a result of post-traumatic stress, and their experience of being refugees. Michelle determined that the positive relationship she had cultivated with her students enabled them to trust her with their trauma; she explained that they did not build this kind of relationship with their new teacher and, as such, did not share their stories with her. Michelle's experiences and observations are supported by research that reports that students who do not build these relationships with their teachers are less likely to engage in learning, share their narratives, or develop socioemotional skills (Rimm-Kauffman & Sandilos, 2016) necessary to supporting their transition to new environments.

Robert explained the academic growth he witnessed as a result of cultivating a positive relationship with the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in his classroom. Robert's philosophy is that students "have to trust [him], believe [him], and see [him] as the leader." To achieve this, Robert shared that he used a combination of "firm but fair expectations", student-driven activities, and mutual respect. All of these, as the teacher explained, helped him foster strong relationships with the Syrian refugee students under his tutelage. Robert reported that, as a result, the refugee students trusted him and rarely presented him with discipline issues, which he felt improved their chances of experiencing academic growth. Researchers support Robert's

observations by explaining that “teachers who ha[ve] high quality relationships with their students ha[ve] fewer discipline problems” (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Robert noted that these elements combined led to the Syrian refugee students in his class to be more engaged with their learning and to experience academic milestones in regards to language acquisition. In particular, one of Robert’s Syrian refugee students was observed teaching the lessons learned in Robert’s class to his younger siblings. Robert noted that without the positive relationship he had cultivated with this student, the skills to teach this lesson would likely have taken the student longer to acquire. My participant’s focus on developing positive student-teacher relationships supported him in creating a classroom environment in which Syrian refugee students were able to engage with the material in a way that was conducive to success.

#### **4.3 Using English Language Learner (ELL) Pedagogy to Support the Emotional and Academic Growth of Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students**

Michelle and Robert discussed the importance of recognising the emotional and academic needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, and that these needs could be addressed by implementing English language learner (ELL) pedagogies into the classroom. My participants explained that relying on ELL pedagogies benefited both the Syrian refugee students in their classrooms, and those students who were not refugees.

When asked which pedagogies best supported newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, Michelle described using non-verbal partner activities and praise as a way to increase student comfort and facilitate understanding. Michelle explained that she conducted mirroring activities with her class in which she partnered Syrian refugee students with native-English speakers. These activities, as my participant noted, provided Syrian refugee students the opportunity to not only connect emotionally with their Canadian peers, but to experience academic affirmation in their new classroom without having to know English. Michelle explained that after these types of activities, Syrian refugee students appeared to be more comfortable interacting with their Canadian peers, and engaged more in the learning. Michelle’s strategies are supported by ELL researchers Cummins and Early (2015), who suggest that by helping ELL students to feel validated in their learning experience, these students are more likely to immerse themselves in social interaction and thus be more academically successful.

Robert explained that he used a language acquisition strategy called AIM, a kinesthetic-focused language acquisition pedagogy, in order to support newly-arrived Syrian refugee

students. Robert noted that through AIM, the Syrian refugee students in his class appeared happier, displayed more enthusiasm about being at school, and developed language skills that supported them in other subject areas. Robert remarked that using the AIM technique allowed him to “teach through the heart before the brain.” In this manner, Robert was able to help his students learn emotionally before they learned cognitively, something which Robert and ELL support documents (Cummins & Early, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2009) emphasize is necessary for the academic and social development of students who are not proficient in the target language. Using AIM further allowed the students, as Robert explained, the opportunity to speak together. This was especially important given that none of the Syrian refugee students in his class spoke the same dialect. Robert explained that using this language acquisition pedagogy ensured that no student was isolated, which prior research indicates is an important part of ensuring that a second language cannot only be learned, but sustained (Cummins & Early, 2015). Both Robert and Michelle relied on ELL support strategies to help newly-arrived Syrian refugees in their classroom become part of the learning community.

#### **4.4 Barriers That Limit the Successful Transition of Newly-Arrived Syrian Refugee Students to the Canadian Classroom**

Even though Michelle and Robert appeared to be successful in helping newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to adjust to life in a new country and classroom, they also named a number of barriers that might prevent the successful transition of Syrian refugee students to Canadian elementary classrooms. These barriers included teacher and administrative assumptions surrounding Syrian refugee students, and systemic challenges that included a lack of teacher readiness. This section discusses these barriers in more detail.

##### **4.4.1 Assumptions made by teachers and administration that impacted the transition of Syrian refugee students.**

When asked why Syrian refugee students might not experience successful transition to a Canadian classroom, Michelle explained that Syrian refugee students placed in classes where teachers made assumptions about them, and in which teachers did not engage in conversation about students’ needs, appeared less able to experience a successful transition. Michelle revealed that she had made assumptions of her own about the Syrian refugee students she taught before meeting them, and that this created “a deficit thinking in [her] mind” that negatively impacted her perception of their abilities to adapt academically and socially. Michelle was able to

recognize this barrier she had created, and adjusted her thinking accordingly. She was then able to celebrate the knowledge and experiences that the Syrian refugee students brought with them as positive additions to the classroom learning environment. When her thinking changed, as my participant explained, it created space in her classroom for the Syrian refugee students to bring new learning to the classroom, thus facilitating community growth.

Michelle reported that there were also instances of assumptions made by administration that were detrimental to the successful integration of Syrian refugee students into the school community. Michelle explained that all six of the newly-arrived grade four Syrian refugee students were placed in the same classroom. This was done under the assumption, as the teacher noted, that these students would feel more comfortable if placed in the same learning environment. Michelle reported that these students were actually very different. They came from different religions, social classes, and cultures, and spoke different languages and dialects. As a result of these differences, as my participant observed, the administration's assumptions and actions "ended up isolating some of the [Syrian refugee students] even more." Michelle noted that one of the Syrian refugee students came from a lower social class than the others, and was thus ostracized from her fellow Syrians, and isolated from her Canadian peers with whom she had not yet bonded. This impacted the student's ability to feel comfortable integrating into her new classroom environment. Prior research supports the detrimental effect that such assumptions of communal identity can have on refugee students (Cummins & Early, 2015), as the students in Michelle's grade four class experienced.

While Robert tailored his language instruction to meet the needs of the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in his class, he revealed that other teachers refused to differentiate their instruction. Robert determined that this impacted the Syrian refugee students' chances of experiencing academic success within the context of the Ontario curriculum. Researchers Cummins and Early (2015) explain that differentiating instruction to accommodate for language learners' needs actually supports their socioemotional development in new classrooms. While this might be the case, Robert mentioned that educators in his school assumed that having Syrian refugee students in their classrooms would "slow them down as teachers", and would create too many difficulties in regards to classroom management, instruction, and community cohesion. For his part, Robert revealed that having Syrian refugee students in his classroom, and differentiating instruction to meet their needs, actually created a strong sense of community. He explained that

this allowed all students to share in the experience of new learning and fostered opportunities for positive academic growth for all.

#### **4.4.2 Systemic challenges, including lack of teacher readiness, that affected the ability of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to transition to Canadian classrooms.**

Prompted to elaborate on specific challenges impacting the ability of Syrian refugee students to transition to the Canadian classroom, Michelle explained that there were problems at multiple levels of the education system. These levels include the Ministry of Education, principals, and teachers. Furthermore, insufficient communication, inefficient resource distribution, and a lack of teacher readiness all contributed to an environment, as Michelle described, that was not prepared to meet the needs of Syrian refugee students.

Michelle noted that as a result of insufficient communication with the Ministry of Education, she and other teachers in her school did not receive adequate notice that they would be welcoming Syrian refugee students to their classrooms. In one instance, Michelle explained that she received notice of the arrival of such a student “at seven thirty a.m. the day-of., and school started at eight thirty.” Not only did this not provide Michelle with enough time to design and implement supports for this student in her classroom, but the translator responsible for situating the Syrian refugee student provided Michelle with very little information about the student’s academic and social needs. As my participant elaborated, “it was ‘hello, this is your student, this is the classroom, goodbye’.” Without this essential communication of student-related information, Michelle felt that she and her fellow educators were not supported by the Ministry of Education, or their translators, to provide newly-arrived Syrian refugee students with a positive transition experience.

Michelle also explained that insufficient resources, including a lack of support teachers and funding, created feelings of stress on the part of educators and principals alike. The teacher assigned to support the Syrian refugee students in the school, as Michelle elaborated, was also acting as the ELL teacher and the French teacher. According to my participant, being responsible for three portfolios “stretched this teacher very thin,” and as such she was unable to provide the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students with the additional support they needed. In addition to this, Michelle’s school had difficulty securing funding to hire additional support teachers. In order to secure funding, the school, as my participant explained, had to have a minimum of twenty-three Syrian refugee students in their population. This quota was difficult for the school

to maintain due to certain of these students being transferred from Michelle's school to schools with Literacy Enrichment Academic Programs (LEAP). Michelle noted that her principal went so far as to drive to these LEAP schools to bring students back to my participant's school in order to meet the quota for funding. While prior research does note that additional support teachers are necessary to supporting refugee students because "they can provide classroom teachers with teaching strategies, behaviour management supports, and assistance with adaptation and modification of materials (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.11)", in this situation, the needs of the school were placed above the individual needs of the Syrian refugee students, undermining the support that such teachers might provide.

In both Michelle and Robert's schools, my participants explained that there was a feeling among educators that a lack of teacher readiness and inexperience also contributed to an inability to support newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. Robert noted that he often heard teachers ask, "how do we teach these kids?" For her part, Michelle observed teachers asking student-teachers in their classrooms to take the Syrian refugee students out of the classroom to do a separate activity because "the teacher said she 'just couldn't deal with it'." Robert and Michelle attributed these feelings of teachers not being prepared to support Syrian refugee students to a lack of professional development opportunities. The Ministry of Education (2009) notes that "it is important for school staff to be presented with professional development and in-service opportunities geared toward understanding and addressing the unique needs of immigrants from refugee backgrounds" (p.11), yet teachers at Michelle's and Robert's schools were not presented with these opportunities. As Michelle elaborated, this resulted in situations in which teachers were "not prepared, not at all prepared" to meet the needs of Syrian refugee students.

#### **4.5 Conclusion to the Chapter**

In summary, the analysis process revealed four significant themes that reveal the extent to which Canadian teachers are able to support the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to elementary classrooms. These themes include (1) the different experiences that Syrian refugee students have had, (2) a focus on relationship building to support the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, (3) the importance of implementing ELL pedagogy in classes with Syrian refugee students, and (4) teacher readiness.

Perhaps most important to determining teacher response is the fact that newly-arrived Syrian refugee students have been through experiences that inform their specific needs as students. The

ability of refugee students to transition to new Canadian classrooms is impacted by a variety of different factors (Young & Chan, 2014; Yu, 2012). In the context of this study, my participants reported that these factors for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students were gender differences, living situations, academic backgrounds, socioemotional needs related to health and school readiness, and language barriers. In order to deliver pedagogy that supported the transition of these students to their classrooms, my participants had to recognize and know their students as individuals, and respond to each of their specific needs in turn.

My participants reported that building positive student-teacher relationships with the Syrian refugee students in their classrooms helped the emotional and academic growth of these students. Gagné (2012) explains that educators who do not understand their students place them at a disadvantage, and that this is especially true for newly-arrived students. The participants in my study were able to circumvent this disadvantage by building trust, fostering mutual respect and listening to their students' stories. In so doing, the Syrian refugee students in their classrooms progressed academically, presented fewer discipline problems and appeared more comfortable engaging in the classroom community.

This study also revealed that implementing ELL pedagogies helped Syrian refugee students in my participants' classrooms to develop socially and academically. My participants felt that relying on pedagogy that emphasized non-verbal activities and promoted learning that targeted emotional stability before cognitive growth enabled them to facilitate a more successful transition to their classrooms for Syrian refugee students. Indeed, the ELL pedagogy allowed the newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to develop ties with their Canadian peers, and to feel more confident about the learning process overall.

Finally, even though my participants were able to design curriculum and pedagogy that supported the needs of the Syrian refugee students in their classes, they also identified significant barriers that continue to limit the support that various educational stakeholders can provide for these students. A lack of communication between the Ministry of Education and schools, insufficient teacher development opportunities, and inefficient resource distribution lead to a significant lack of teacher readiness. In order to provide more holistic and effective support for incoming Syrian refugee students, this study revealed that more preparation, more resources, and more training is needed to provide educators with the tools they need to adequately meet the needs of this student population. The following chapter discusses the implications of these

findings in order to provide context for future research on the subject, and to make recommendations that might enable educators in Canadian elementary classrooms to feel supported and prepared to meet the unique needs of the Syrian refugee students that continue to arrive in our schools.

## **Chapter 5: Implications**

### **5.0 Introduction to the Chapter**

In this chapter, I expand on the research question, “How can educators support the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to the Ontario elementary classroom?”, which I have explored over the past two years. The research for this inquiry has included a literature review, and an analysis of two interviews conducted with elementary educators working with Syrian refugee students. In this chapter, I present a summary of the key findings related to this research, and offer insight into the implications these findings might have on various stakeholders within the educational community. Within this context, I further suggest recommendations based on the implications that my research has on stakeholders within the education community, and conclude this chapter with final thoughts on the importance of my research question to the ever-diversifying populations of Canada’s school communities (Government of Canada, 2017).

### **5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance**

With regards to meeting the needs of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students, the analysis of interviews conducted revealed findings that both hinder and support the process of transitioning these students to the Ontario classroom. These findings include suggested pedagogies that support Syrian refugee students, and barriers that my participants’ believed to limit teachers’ abilities to offer this support.

The first finding relates to the theme of teacher understanding, and supports the notion that teachers who recognize the backgrounds of Syrian refugee students in their class can better identify and respond to their presented needs. Educators who take the time to know their students are abler to design pedagogy suitable to supporting their transition to the Ontario classroom. In line with current research on how to support refugee students (Young & Chan, 2014; Yu, 2012), my participants agreed that the unique experiences of this student population both prior to and upon their arrival in Canada had an impact on the type of classroom supports they needed. Therefore, moving beyond group generalizations to understanding Syrian refugee students as individuals with specific needs could enable elementary educators to implement pedagogies for these students that better supports a successful transition to their new classroom environments.

In addition to understanding the unique experience of each Syrian refugee student, my participants reported the positive impact that strong student-teacher relationships had on fostering the emotional and academic growth of these students. Indeed, my participants’ abilities

to understand their students supported the development of these beneficial student-teacher relationships. These observations reinforce how important it is for educators to have the know-how to build successful relationships with their students, ones that are based on trust and mutual respect. With these supportive relationships, Syrian refugee students are likely to experience a successful transition to Ontario classrooms, moving us away from a history of refugee students failing to integrate into Canadian classrooms due to poor student-teacher relationships (Yau, 1996).

My participants also noted that implementing English language learner (ELL) pedagogies provided them with the tools necessary to know their Syrian refugee students, to build positive relationships with them, and to ultimately provide a learning experience that supported their social and academic development. The teachers reported that focusing on strategies that targeted emotional stability before cognitive growth facilitated an easier transition experience for both the Syrian refugee students, and for their teachers. As a result of these experiences, my participants felt that schools should stress the importance of delivering ELL pedagogy so as to make welcoming the growing number of Syrian refugee students to our classrooms (Government of Canada, 2017) an easier process for all.

Finally, my participants noted that while they were able to implement pedagogies that supported the transition of Syrian refugee students, barriers still exist that continue to limit the support that teachers and other stakeholders can provide to this student population. These barriers include a lack of communication between the Ministry of Education and schools, a lack of teacher development opportunities, ineffective resource distribution, and a lack of ESL-teachers to support these students. These barriers resulted in teachers feeling unprepared to support Syrian refugee students, and led my participants to believe that successful and effective transitions for these students would be difficult for individual teachers to achieve without these barriers first being addressed.

These findings are significant as they highlight the importance of teacher readiness when it comes to supporting the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students. Without further support for teachers, it is unlikely that Syrian refugee students will benefit from the strategies needed to help facilitate a successful transition for them to the Ontario elementary classroom.

## **5.2 Implications**

The implications of these findings are relevant to a variety of stakeholders in the education community. These implications relate to the ability of teachers to offer effective support strategies to Syrian refugee students, and to the role that various stakeholders have in creating this support. What follows is a discussion of these implications, and their relevance to the education community, and to myself as a beginning teacher.

### **5.2.1 Implications for the broader educational community.**

The implications of this study relate to teachers who have refugee students in their classrooms, and to the school boards and Ministries of Education that provide these teachers with resources and support on this topic. This study found that addressing the linguistic and socioemotional needs of Syrian refugee students will help them make the transition to the Ontario classroom. In the course of the study, however, my participants noted that many teachers did not know what these pedagogies entail, and as such were unable to offer the kind of support to Syrian refugee students that might have supported their socioemotional growth and the development of their English language skills. Even though the Ministry of Education (2009) produced a document that outlines strategies educators can use to help newly-arrived and refugee students succeed in Ontario classrooms, my participants did not know about this document and revealed that other staff in their school did not follow any of the pedagogies outlined within it. This study therefore highlighted the fact that teachers are not equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to support the unique population of Syrian refugee students in Ontario.

This study further revealed that inefficient resource distribution resulted in my participants' schools being unable to hire specialists, such as additional ESL teachers, to support Syrian refugee students. As a result of this distribution strategy, schools who do not receive additional funding have to find different ways to support this unique student population, without always knowing what these different ways are. Indeed, my participants noted that without additional resources to hire translators or ESL-specialists, the onus of supporting this group of students as ELLs fell to their classroom teachers, who are not ESL-teacher qualified. This created situations of undue teacher stress, exacerbated by Ministries of Education failing to provide teachers with adequate notice of the arrival of Syrian refugee students to their classrooms. Without sufficient time to lay the groundwork for these students, my participants noted that teachers in their schools struggled to address the needs of all students, refugee and non-refugee alike. These experiences

highlight the fact that Ministries of Education need to provide better financial and practical support to the teachers in their school boards in order to improve teacher wellbeing and to be better able to respond to student needs.

As a result of inefficient resource distribution and a general lack of teacher readiness, incorporating the pedagogies identified by my participants as those beneficial to supporting the transition of Syrian refugee students remained elusive to teachers in my participants' schools. Without the supports specific to meet their needs, incoming Syrian refugee students might not experience a successful transition to Ontario classrooms, which could result in higher dropout rates for these students further on in their academic career (Duffy, 2003). With this in mind, teachers, school boards, and Ministries of Education should work together to ensure that where ESL teachers cannot be secured, general educators have the tools they need in order to offer appropriate and effective support to Syrian refugee students. This would ensure that these students are not being placed at a disadvantage within our education system, which is especially important given the fact that these students are a rapidly growing portion of our student population (Government of Canada, 2017).

### **5.2.2 Implications for my professional practice.**

As a beginning teacher, the findings of this study inform my future practice by providing me with tools that will help me to be an effective educator who supports students as individuals with specific needs. My research demonstrated that ELL pedagogies support the socioemotional growth of newly-arrived and refugee students. I believe, however, that incorporating these strategies into classrooms will benefit not only ELL students, but non-ELL students as well. This is because ELL pedagogy supports the unique identities that students bring to the learning environment, and encourages the celebration of multiple ways of knowing that can help create inclusive classroom communities (Cummins & Early, 2015). As such, I am committed to practicing these pedagogies in my own classroom. My research further demonstrated that a lack of teacher readiness resulted in Syrian refugee students' needs remaining unmet. This prompts me to be an educator who will continuously seek out professional development opportunities in order to support the diversity of needs present in Ontario classrooms.

Finally, given that more equitable funding strategies are unlikely to be incorporated into our education system, ensuring that all teachers and staff are prepared to meet the needs of students without this funding is something I feel that the educational community should work toward

together. Consequently, I aim to support other educators in their commitment to developing new ways of supporting newly-arrived students without having to rely on funding that might not come. These broad and narrow implications of my research findings enable me to make recommendations for a variety of educational stakeholders on this topic. It is my hope that these recommendations will ensure more effective and holistic support for newly-arrived Syrian refugee students in Ontario elementary classrooms.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The recommendations generated by this study include addressing the educational community as a whole, and at the individual level. This includes addressing areas of improvement for various stakeholders, including Ministries of Education, school staff, and pre-service teacher programs. These recommendations are as follows:

1. *The value of incorporating ELL strategies into homeroom classrooms should be emphasized in pre-service teacher programs.* My participants reported a lack of ELL-specific teachers available to support Syrian refugee students, and as a result they were expected to support this student population as ELLs. Given that general educators are now expected to implement ELL pedagogies in their classrooms to support Syrian refugee students, pre-service teacher programs might better prepare educators to support the diversifying nature of our student population by focusing on providing more in-depth ELL training that includes hands-on experience with practicing-teacher feedback.
2. *School boards and Ministries of Education should revise the way in which funding and resources are distributed in order to offer more support to all schools welcoming Syrian refugee students.* Schools who do not meet the quota of Syrian refugee students in order to receive additional funding are still expected to provide the same amount of support to these students. As my participants noted, these kinds of expectations created situations in which school needs were placed above student ones, and resulted in teachers being unable to address the needs of Syrian refugee students. To circumvent this, a more equitable and sustainable model of resource distribution should be implemented to ensure that all schools welcoming Syrian refugee students receive at least initial support to aid these students with their transition to Ontario classrooms.
3. *Ministries of Education and school boards should establish better communication with schools in order to provide appropriate and sufficient notice to teachers who will be*

*welcoming Syrian refugee students to their classrooms.* A key proponent of teachers feeling prepared to support incoming Syrian refugee students was related to the amount of time they had to undertake said preparation. As Michelle, one of my participants, explained, lack of communication led to missed opportunities for positive student-teacher relationship growth, and created ineffective learning environments for Syrian refugee students. To support both these students and their teachers, adequate communication ought to be established in order to provide teachers with enough time to prepare appropriate pedagogies and lay the foundation for incoming students.

4. *Schools should provide professional development opportunities to teachers wishing to expand their understanding of the Syrian refugee crisis, and of how best to support learners with this background.* Where additional funding cannot be secured for individual schools, school boards and Ministries of Education should provide workshops to teachers on how best to support Syrian refugee students so that teachers, in these underfunded schools, feel prepared to support this student population.
5. *Schools should ensure that teachers have access to, and understand, literature that supports their ability to offer appropriate pedagogies to Syrian refugee students.* Where additional funding and professional development opportunities cannot be secured, schools should make their general education teachers aware of support documents, like that created by the Ministry of Education (2009), that can improve their teaching. Knowing the research-based strategies that have helped current refugee students to succeed in Ontario classrooms might provide educators welcoming Syrian refugee students with the tools and confidence needed to provide this student population with effective support.

#### **5.4 Areas for Further Research**

Based on my research findings, I propose two important areas for change with regards to supporting the transition of Syrian refugee students to the Canadian classroom: 1) provide additional professional development opportunities to teachers in order to give them the tools they need to support these students; and 2) improve educational stakeholder communication in order to support teacher readiness. These recommendations lend themselves to exploring pertinent areas for further research into the topic. In order to provide teachers with additional professional development opportunities, it would first be useful to examine whether such opportunities would

be well-received by educators in the field. Researchers might form inquiry groups (Simon & Kalan, 2016) in order to understand educator views on existing professional development opportunities, their thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of these current opportunities, and the ways in which educators might prefer to engage with such opportunities for professional development.

Given that educators already have many responsibilities, enforcing mandatory professional development might create areas of tension in which educators receiving the training would not be as receptive to the information being shared. With this in mind, it might be useful for researchers to do further, more wide-reaching qualitative and case-based research into what educators' experiences have been with Syrian refugee students. In so doing, teachers might reveal the specific areas for support and improvement with which they would like support, thus enabling stakeholders to develop learning opportunities appropriate to the desires and needs of practicing educators.

Over the course of my study, a lack of communication between ministries and schools was identified as a barrier to teacher readiness, and certain questions have been raised within the context of this finding. I wonder, what are the current communication systems between stakeholders? Why are these systems not effective, and how can they be adapted to improve teacher readiness? Why do some educators seek out additional learning in the form of professional development opportunities, and not others? What empowers specific educators, such as the participants in my study, to differentiate to the specific needs of diverse student populations? Is there a better method by which incoming Syrian refugee students might be supported in their transition to the Canadian classroom?

When developing further research, the most fundamental question might be how educators and researchers can gauge the success of the transition of Syrian refugee students to the Canadian classroom, and what Syrian refugee students feel needs to be addressed in order for educators to support their learning. Every student's experience is unique; as such, there is not one encompassing pedagogy that will best support the transition of Syrian refugee students to their new education environment. That being said, however, having the opportunity to engage with these students directly as research participants, through arts-based research as suggested by Cummins and Early (2015), might provide educators with a deeper understanding of their

experiences as students in the Canadian school system, and on how they think Canadian teachers can best support their needs.

### **5.5 Concluding Comments**

The goal of this research study was to understand how educators might support the transition of newly-arrived Syrian refugee students to the Canadian elementary classroom. The emergent nature of this topic, and the growing population of Syrian refugee students in Canada (Government of Canada, 2017), makes this research important to the educators who will be welcoming this student population into their learning communities. Over the course of this study, I found that teacher readiness and a lack of resources in this area affected the ability of teachers to offer Syrian refugee students the support they need to transition to Ontario school systems, and to be set up for socioemotional and academic success within it.

Without ensuring that teachers are prepared to meet the needs of these students, our school system runs the risk of putting a growing portion of our population at risk for academic failure. While the scope of this study was too narrow to offer a single solution to the question, it did provide insight into how educators might move toward developing and implementing effective pedagogies that build on past research in order to support the experience of Syrian refugee students. To this end, the findings of this research are significant to a wide variety of stakeholders; from the Ministries of Education who design the supports for incoming refugee students, to the teachers who implement the pedagogies to ensure student success, and most especially to the Syrian refugee students who continue to arrive to Canada, and for whom our education system and teachers need to be well prepared to support in order to make their transition a successful one.

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**Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent**

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on Syrian refugee students, and the practices teachers use to build inclusion for these students in their classrooms. I am interested in interviewing teachers who currently teach Syrian refugee students, and think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. Please be assured that should you decide to participate, you will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Furthermore, any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be the research coordinator Angela MacDonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question(s) during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Clark  
[kat.clark@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:kat.clark@mail.utoronto.ca)

Research Coordinator's Name: Angela MacDonald

Contact Info:

Email: [angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca](mailto:angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca)

Telephone: 416.978.2011

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kathryn Clark and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions**

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. As we have discussed, this research study aims to learn more about the strategies teachers are using to support Syrian refugee students in their classrooms. The purpose of this study is to find the best ways to build a safe learning environment for these students. This interview will last 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your teaching experiences, and on the teaching strategies you have used in your classroom this year.

Before we begin, I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and that you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Background Information**

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. How long have you been teaching this grade?
3. Have you taken any professional development courses since becoming certified?
4. Do you have previous experience working with refugee or newly-arrived students?

### **Classroom Community & Teacher Practice**

1. Can you describe the community of your classroom (diversity, socioeconomic status, gender make-up, etc.) now?
  - If they have used community-building strategies: what was your experience of using these strategies? Can you tell me about your classroom community before and after?
2. How long have you been working with Syrian refugee students?
3. Are the needs and expectations of Syrian refugee students different from the other students in your class? If so, how?
4. From your work with Syrian refugee students, can you tell me what your experience has been in regards to these students' participation in the classroom? With their interaction with peers?
5. Can you tell me about your experiences with supporting Syrian refugee students in your classroom? What strategies have proven to be the most effective at supporting their needs as learners and individuals?
6. What kind of resources do you use in your classroom to teach refugee students?
7. From your work as a teacher, have you noticed a difference in the level of engagement in class between refugee students and Canada-born students?
  - (If yes) Why do you think this difference of engagement exists?
8. What are your greatest challenges when working with Syrian refugee students? Your greatest joys?
9. Does your school support your work with Syrian refugee students? How?

### **Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs**

1. From your work as a teacher, can you tell me what community means to you?
2. What about community-building strategies? Strategies that support acculturation?
3. What is your opinion of using/practicing community-building strategies in the classroom?

**Supports and Challenges**

1. Can you tell me about your experiences teaching the students in your classroom?
2. Are there any external resources that have been helpful to you in teaching the students in your class?

**Next Steps**

1. Do you have any advice for other teachers welcoming Syrian refugee students into their classrooms in the future?

Thank you again for taking the time to do this interview, and for helping me with the study.