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# Being Involved in Uninvolved Contexts:

## Refugee Parent Involvement in Children's Education

By Fadi Ennab

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Education**

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All the opinions and views expressed within are the sole responsibility of the author.

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**About the Author**

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# Introduction

The involvement of parents from refugee backgrounds in their children's education is crucial for academic success and community development, including civic participation and empowerment. When parent involvement is supported by school communities and inspired by the knowledge and experiences of newcomer communities, "it can mobilize transformative local resources and become powerful tools of school reform and family and community engagement" (Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis 2012: 86). Yet, as research shows, schools often struggle in promoting the involvement of newcomer parents, especially in settings where there are language, cultural, and/or socioeconomic challenges separating the school system and its staff from the communities and families they serve (OECD 2015; Glogowski and Ferreira 2015). This is not surprising, especially in Manitoba, given the "overwhelming pressure on existing infrastructure and services" (MacKinnon et al. 2006: 4; Thomas 2015). While parents from refugee backgrounds are not a homogenous group, they face unique, multiple, and intersecting challenges that can negatively impact their involvement in their children's education to the point of potentially being uninvolved (Weine 2008; McBrien

2011; Georgis et al. 2014). With limited parental involvement and supports, it is harder for parents to ensure the success of their children, academically and socially.

Increasing numbers of newcomers live in Canada, and the province of Manitoba is leading this trend. Canada receives 250,000 newcomers per year. Fewer than 20,000 are refugees (about 8 percent of all newcomers). In spite of some ebb and flow, the number of refugees living in Manitoba has increased over the years. Between 2000 and 2010, Manitoba accepted 11,215 refugees at a rate of about 1,100 a year, or roughly 10 percent of all immigrants, with most settling in Winnipeg. Most of the refugees are from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Adekunle et al. 2015). According to Manitoba Labour and Immigration (2015: 3), in 2014 Manitoba "received the highest number of refugees in its history and the highest number of refugees per capita in Canada". This trend was maintained in 2016 with the federal government's Syrian refugee program. In the past five years, Manitoba public schools have welcomed "over 23,000 new students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 who are learning English as an additional language [EAL]" (Newcomer Education Coalition of Manitoba 2015: 9). Given

the increasing number of newcomers refugees it is important to ensure that are involved in their children's education.

Families from refugee backgrounds are often marginalized by an educational system that does not recognize their unique social needs and does not provide culturally sensitive supports due to limited funding and over reliance on Eurocentric approaches. Research on refugee families in Manitoba shows that students can feel isolated and excluded in their schools as a result of perceptions of racism from teachers and students. Refugee students face higher drop-out rates and are being disproportionately streamlined into lower level educations or jobs (Kanu 2008; Dykshoorn 2009). There are also common misunderstandings between parents and school staff and ineffective educational involvement practices that continue to be relied on, such as focusing on school involvement while ignoring home involvement (Kanu 2008). This gap is exacerbated by the lack of research on refugees, including parent involvement in children's education. In an attempt to address the gap, this community-based qualitative research focuses on the involvement experiences of refugee parents and the challenges they face in being involved in their children's education. By understanding the unique needs of refugee parents and the contexts in which they live, this research study seeks to provide ways to meaningfully and effectively promote parent involvement.

### Why Focus on Refugee Parental Involvement in Children's Education?

There is a large body of academic research demonstrating a strong relationship between parent involvement in children's education, student academic success, and community empowerment. Having refugee parents involved in their children's education acts as a protective factor against cumulative risks and can help ensure their success (Weine 2008). By having involved parents students

can have more support and social capital. Parent involvement can "build self-esteem, raise skills, open pathways and in some cases lead directly to employment for parents" (Muller 2009: 22). Teachers also benefit by having parents involved because they can work together with families, which tends to reduce misunderstandings on shared expectations. Parent involvement is also seen as part of a broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity for disenfranchised populations by enhancing relationships and resource sharing among community members (López 2001; Auerbach 2007). Given the rate of return on educational spending, it is important to support parent involvement because there is a strong public-policy argument for government investment in parent involvement (Muller 2009). Parent involvement benefits all students across cultures, backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses. Not supporting parent involvement for groups at risk of marginalization, such as refugee families, can undermine other supports provided to them (People for Education 2009). For these reasons, it is important to promote and maintain involvement in education, especially among refugee families.

In spite of the increasing amount of research documenting the improved outcomes for refugee students when their parents are involved in their education, it is difficult to find research specifically focused on the involvement of refugee parents in Manitoba. Existing research is focused on the experiences of African refugees, primarily from Somalia, in Alberta (Shimoni et al 2003; Este and Tachble 2009; Georgis et al. 2014) and on immigrants in Ontario (Ippolito and Schecter 2010; Wong 2015; Glogowski and Ferreira 2015; Khanlou et al. 2015) and Montreal (Beauregard et al. 2014). Research by Kanu (2008) and Stewart (2012) briefly mention parent involvement as part of their discussion on refugee students. Kanu's (2008: 928) research on African refugee students in Manitoba schools found that "cultural differences in expectations of parental in-

volvement in their children's schooling" as one of the main challenges parents often cited as negatively affecting their student's academic success, in addition to economic pressures, acculturation and adaptation challenges, and limited English language proficiency. Stewart (2012) also noted that school leaders should collaborate with parents and community groups by providing welcoming information, providing translation, and encouraging parents to participate in schools by addressing barriers, such as language, work schedules, and child care, which often limit their involvement.

Qualitative research exploring parental involvement in children's education in Canada (Shimoni et al. 2003: 565; see Kanu 2008; Este and Tachble 2009), the United States (see Hos 2016; Tadesse 2014; Roxas and Roy 2013; Rah et al 2009; McBrien 2011; Weine 2008), and Australia (see Sainsbury and Renzaho 2011) show that newcomer families, especially refugees, often face more challenges being involved than white middle-class parents. Refugee parents often face social, psychological, and economic challenges being involved in their children's education, so that more school-community collaboration is required to support them. In spite of these barriers, refugee parents were "not at risk from disengaging from their children" (Shimoni et al. 2003: 565). All refugee parents, including those in Manitoba, say that they want their children to have a better life in their new country, but they may have difficulties translating these hopes into involvement that is effective in their new social contexts. Even though refugee parents were not often participating as expected of them by school staff, they expressed a genuine interest in their children's education (López 2001; Kanu 2008; Este and Tachble 2009).

### Policy on Parent Involvement

Parental involvement in children's education is regarded as a common school-reform effort to

improve student success in Canada, the USA, and Australia. As noted by McBrien (2011) all three countries' departments of education have web pages specifically designed to help parents understand and become involved with their children's formal education. Suggestions often include: valuing education, attending school meetings, creating home environments conducive to learning, and volunteering at school.

In Manitoba, the provincial government, the Winnipeg School Division (WSD), and the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC), recognize the importance of parent involvement. In 2012, the Manitoba provincial government introduced legislation to strengthen parental involvement in the education system and recognized MAPC as the official representative of parent councils in Manitoba, whose mission statement indicates that it "is dedicated to supporting, promoting, and enhancing meaningful involvement of parents and caregivers within school communities" (MAPC 2014). Introducing this legislation then Education Minister Nancy Allan said that it "would support and promote meaningful involvement and participation of parents in education" (Manitoba Government 2012). The WSD also recognizes that "strong parent involvement creates stronger school communities and the best educational experience for children" (Winnipeg School Division 2016). In spite of the recognized value of parent involvement, most of the focus is often on school-based activities from a mainstream approach that does not consider the unique needs of refugees (see Manitoba Education 2005). Similarly, Wong (2015) argues that in Ontario, the School Administrator's Guide to Parent Engagement, which is produced by three Ontario Principals' Councils, ignores the unique needs of newcomer parents. Given the gap in policy on refugee parent involvement it is important to understand parent involvement in a more inclusive way that focuses on the experiences of refugee parents inside and outside the schools.

## Reconceptualizing Parent Involvement

Traditionally parent involvement focused on school participation and student academic performance which often privileges already advantaged parents, such as white middle-class parents, who face fewer barriers to doing well on these measures compared to refugees parents. This also ignores other forms of invisible or hidden involvement of refugee parents at home. Some newcomer parents do not assume that involvement in children's education is closely related to their direct interaction with the school officials and teachers. Since refugee parents are less likely to be involved in their children's schools than white middle-class parents, some educators label their involvement as inadequate, assuming that refugee families do not value education. At times they might even consider the parents to be a barrier to their children's education rather than an asset (Pasic 2014; Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis 2012). In quickly categorizing parents this way, educators engage in practices that are counterproductive to their efforts, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy reinforcing power inequities between them and families (Voltz et al. 2010). In doing so the "myth of uninvolved" refugee parents is perpetuated (Auerbach 2007: 252). Instead of understanding the needs of refugee families and incorporating parents' life experiences and knowledge, parent roles, and family desires into the school communities as valuable educational contributions, traditional conceptions of parent involvement have ignored or misrepresented those needs as parent deficits.

More critical conceptions of parent involvement try to include the experiences of oppressed and marginalised groups, such as refugees, from a more empowering perspective. Paulo Freire's (1970/2003: 69) work on critical pedagogy defines involvement as "not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement" which aims at transforming social relations by allowing marginalized groups to be empowered, liberated from oppression. Freire

(1970/2003) also tried to show how involvement in education must be seen not as an event, but as a continuous process needing support and attention. Following similar insights, critical research shows that parent involvement is socially structured, culturally mediated, and psychosocially enacted according to individual resources and relationships within families. This means parent involvement must consider: "status variables, structural factors, and parents' lived experience along with process variables and individual psychosocial resources", including affect-values and sense of belonging (Auerbach 2007: 254). In addition to school participation and academic supports, we need to consider parent involvement outside of the formal school environment. For example, parents encourage their children to study by sharing their migration experiences with them. López (2001: 433) described how low-income families of colour "translated the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school" to their children. López suggested that the transmission of sociocultural values be recognized as legitimate parent involvement and that schools build on such ways in which parents are already involved. In addition to promoting educational attainment as a means to social mobility and independence, refugee parents teach their children responsibility through values of extended kin networks, respect for elders, and mutual cooperation. They also instill cultural pride and "didactic style" of learning and teach their children about their family struggles (Sainsbury and Renzaho 2011). From these perspectives, parent involvement is understood as relational, responsive to the needs and encompassing of the strengths of the families (Suizzo 2015; Georgis et al. 2014). Note that the terms "parental involvement" and "parental engagement" are often used interchangeably and both have a long history in the field of education (Glogowski and Ferreira 2015). This study uses a definition of parent involvement that is more empowering to refugees by including their voices and experiences.

# Methods

## Research Approach

Developed through a participatory action research (PAR) approach, we used qualitative methods to better understand the experiences of refugee parents in Winnipeg's inner city. A PAR approach is often understood as a research approach that involves the active participation of community voices in all phases of research for the purpose of producing helpful results to make positive changes (Nelson et al. 1998). In using this approach, one is better able to understand the experiences of refugee parents in the contexts they live in and be able to address these issues more inclusively.

To implement a participatory action research approach community involvement is essential. For this reason, the Newcomer Education Coalition (NEC), a group consisting of various stakeholders from the community, newcomer organizations, and the Manitoba government, was instrumental in shaping the research design and the questions asked. In addition, a community researcher living in the inner city and who represents some of the racial-linguistic newcomer community in this study was hired to lead the research. This was helpful to gain trust of families and for communicating with some who spoke only Arabic. The community researcher worked under the

supervision of Dr. Shauna MacKinnon, University of Winnipeg and co-investigator of the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA). The MRA is committed to PAR approaches as well as building the capacity of student and community researchers.

## Research Procedures

Three specific research questions guided the investigation of this study:

1. How do refugee parents perceive and feel about their involvement in their children's education?
2. What are the barriers to refugee parental involvement?
3. What helps to address these barriers and promote parental involvement?

Most parents were recruited through the help of four newcomer organizations who are affiliated with the Newcomer Education Coalition. These organizations are: the Newcomers Employment and Education Development Services (NEEDS), the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM), the Peaceful Village, and the Community Economic Development Association (CEDA). Staff from each of these organizations

invited refugee families who already relied on their support in the past and had some level of trust already established. Each organization provided a quiet room to conduct the interviews. Only four parents were recruited informally from the West Broadway neighbourhood and these interviews were conducted at two family homes. Focus groups with school staff took place at meeting rooms in two different inner city schools. Participants were selected using a snowball sampling by the Newcomer Service Coordinator who works for the WSD and who is also a member of the Newcomer Education Coalition. Student participants for the focus group were also selected using a snowball sampling. The community researcher approached youth and some of their parents at a public space in the inner city where it is common to play soccer during the summer. Interviews were conducted between February and August 2016.

Written consent was obtained from participants on the day of their interview. For most of the students, who were under 18 years old, consent was obtained from their parents in addition to their assent to participate. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Each participant, except school staff, was given an honorarium for their participation in the interview. Parents were given \$25 cash and students were given \$15 gift cards and, if needed, bus tickets for transportation.

### Data Collection

Multiple methods were used including individual interviews with parents and their children, focus groups with school staff and students, and surveys with school staff.

### Individual Interviews

Primary data was collected from 23 in-depth, semi-structured parent interviews. In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted with three parents, and seven of their children. Families were selected using a criterion sampling strategy.

First, families had to have arrived to Canada as refugees. Second, families had to have at least one child in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD). These criteria were used to set the framework of this case study, refugee parents who have children in the WSD. Interview questions were divided into four main parts: 1) Background information relating to the participant's migration and educational experiences before living in Winnipeg; 2) Involvement in education, which involved topics around parent perceptions of their involvement in children's education and of their role as parents, barriers and facilitators to parental involvement, expectations, and values held by parents towards their children; 3) Home and community interactions, and; 4) School interactions. Parents also completed a questionnaire assessing their demographic information, such as age, gender, family structure, educational level, and socioeconomic status. Students who participated in the individual interviews were asked similar questions to those their parents were asked. Just over half of the interviews were conducted in English, the remaining were in other languages: six in Arabic, two in Arabic/English, and three in Somali, Amharic, and Kinyarwanda.

### Focus Groups with School Staff

In order to make more meaningful interpretation of the parents' narratives, focus groups were also conducted with school staff and students. The focus group interview is a qualitative research technique mainly used to obtain information about the feelings and opinions of a small group of participants relating to a given problem, experience, or other phenomenon (Williams 2010). Participants in the focus group were asked five main questions regarding their perceptions of the involvement of refugee parents in their children's education, the progress of refugee children at their schools, and ways that they practice and recommend to promote parental involvement. Two focus groups were conducted including a



total of 16 school staff; the first focus group included 10 staff and the second included six staff. School staff who participated worked in a variety of positions, including: five Intercultural Support Workers, three EAL Teachers, three Principals, two Vice Principals, and the remaining three worked in different support/counselling positions. The school staff worked in 14 different schools with high numbers of newcomers in the Winnipeg School Divisions. Some of the staff worked in more than one school.

### **Focus Group with Students**

In addition to the focus group with school staff, a focus group with seven refugee students was conducted. Questions for students were similar to those asked to staff, but were focused more on their own experiences and perceptions. Almost all of the students arrived in Canada within the last three years. Most were from the Middle East, mainly Syria and Iraq, except for one adult who was from Somalia, Africa. Students were registered in three different schools. Most of them were in grade 10 and a few were in higher grades. They were between 15 to 19 years old. Each of them said that they had between six and eight other siblings in their home.

### **Surveys**

To support the qualitative information gathered by the interviews, surveys, including closed and open-ended questions, were completed by some school staff in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD). Surveys and consent forms were first sent to school principals asking them to share them

with their staff to participate, if they wished. In total, 25 surveys, from seven different schools, were filled and submitted back through email and in-person. Most staff (18 out of 25) worked as teachers, the remaining were support workers or school administrators. 15 of the staff worked for less than 10 years in their schools, while the remaining worked for over 10 years. The surveys asked seven multiple choice questions and a few brief answer-questions on how staff viewed parent involvement and student progress, school supports, and any additional comments related to refugee families.

### **Data Analysis**

The community researcher audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed all the information obtained from participants in the research study. To analyze the findings an inductive approach was used in which study findings emerge from the information and through the researcher's interactions with the information. This approach avoids predetermined theoretical assumptions about the data.

### **Ethics Review Process**

Ethics approval for this study was sought and approved from the University of Winnipeg's Human and Research Ethics Board. In order to conduct research with students and staff in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD) approval was also sought and obtained from the WSD's Research Advisory Committee.

# Findings and Discussion: Refugee Parent Voices and Experiences

## Parent Demographics

At the time of the interviews, all parents indicated that within Canada they have lived only in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Similar to immigration trends, most parents were from Africa, Middle East, and South Asia. By country of birth, seven parents were born in Somalia, four parents were born in each of the following countries: Syria, Congo, and Bhutan, and the remaining were born in Ethiopia, Iraq, and Nigeria. The 23 participants interviewed came from 21 unique families with a total of 90 children. Through the demographic forms completed by parents the following data was obtained:

- *Year of arrival:* 65 percent of parents arrived to Winnipeg within the last five years. The remaining parents arrived just over five years. The overwhelming majority of the parents did not move directly to Canada from their countries of birth.
- *Income:* Almost all refugee families in the study had low incomes and were living on welfare or the support of their private sponsor in their first year: 57 percent made less than \$20,000, and most of the remaining made \$20,000–\$40,000.
- *Number of children:* On average each parent had four children. Some parents had as many as seven children, while others had only a few children. Most of the students do not work while going to school, and they participate in after school and summer programs.
- *Residency status:* 83 percent of parents had a permanent resident status (not Canadian citizens). About equal halves of the sample were either government sponsored or privately sponsored refugees.
- *Parental education:* 65 percent of parents did not have a high school diploma (four parents from Somalia and Congo had never been to school) and the remaining parents had completed high school. None of the participants had a post-secondary education.
- *Employment status:* 75 percent of parents were unemployed and most had not gone for job training or an educational program in Canada.
- *Gender:* Around half of the parents identified themselves as females and the other half as males.

- *Age:* 70 percent of parents were between the age of 25 and 44, the remaining were over 45 years old.
- *Marital status:* 75 percent of parents were married, the remaining were either separated or widowed.
- *English level:* 87 percent of parents noted they spoke either 'basic' or 'an intermediate level' of English, only a few said they had an 'advanced' level of English. Almost all parents said they attended or are attending English language training in Winnipeg.
- *French level:* 78 percent of parents said they did not know any French.

### Parent Perceptions

Consistent with the literature (Kanu 2008; Este and Tachble 2009), most parents in this study felt that their involvement in their children's education was "good" even though their interactions with the schools could be limited. Most parents felt that a strong involvement often meant having a good "relationship and understanding" with their children at home, being "attentive" to the need of the family, "following-up [with children] in spite of time demands", "talking like a friend", providing the "right space" for studying, offering practical skills, and sharing experience as a "daily practice". Very few parents defined involvement in terms of school participation and interactions with staff. Only three parents tried to be involved by being active in their children's schools through volunteering or attending a program. This indicates a limited active involvement in the schools, which many of the school staff confirmed in this study.

Interviews with students and school staff added more nuances to the parents' perceptions. The students in the study had similar perception to that of their parents. Most students said that even though their parents do not know how to help academically with doing homework, they are concerned about their education and en-

courage them to go without missing school. Unlike refugee families, who often focused on the home when asked about involvement in education, most school staff focused on school participation and relations. Most survey responses from school staff described parent involvement as "adequate" or "needing improvement".

### Values Guiding Educational Involvement

Almost all refugee families, parents, and students in the study attached a high value on involvement in their children's education because they saw it as a means to ensure that their children internalize a positive value for education. As one parent emphasized, "involvement in education is the best thing to solve problems. If you know your child and how is he adapting at school by asking the teacher" (Somali Father, participant number (hereafter "PN") 21). In fact, a few parents said that their very reason for being in Canada was for a better education for their children: "To be honest, if it wasn't for my children's education I wouldn't have come here [to Canada]" (Syrian Mother, PN 2). Both parents and students felt that education was very important for gaining rewarding employment and a future, including a chance at being "a president [or a]... millionaire" (Somali Father, PN 18). Education was also seen to have a universal value for "everyone and everything", especially for refugees to adjust and understand the rules of their new societies. It is "the most important thing in life for me and my daughter", because it offers independence (Ethiopian Mother, PN 23). This study shows that refugee parents placed a high value on being involved in their children's education and these values often facilitated their involvement in their children's education.

### Meanings of Parenthood

Research on the educational involvement of refugee fathers in Alberta attributed three main

roles to parenthood: role model, provider, and protector (Este and Tachble 2009). In addition, this study found another role associated to parenthood, the sacrificer, which was a common theme among a few mothers. Perhaps Este and Tachble (2009) did not find this because their study excluded mothers. The fathers in their sample were also more educated and more likely to be employed than fathers in this study.

### **Role Model**

Parents offered suggestions, advice, and encouragement to guide their children. They also offered cultural and moral guidance, which was seen as more effective in guiding behavior than physical discipline. A few parents explain the importance of role modeling in the following ways:

The first school for the children is home. We have to teach and support them every day (Bhutanese Father, PN 17).

I feel they should follow our habits and traditions. I don't want them to go out of the way. Canadian life is not like ours. They don't have halal [allowed] and haram [forbidden]. I have to guide them (Syrian Mother, PN 3).

You have to remind your children of their culture so they don't lose it. It is hard to catch up with the culture of the people here in Canada, and hard to hold your culture back home [Somalia] (Somali Father, PN 21).

### **Provider**

There were some gender differences in how fathers and mothers perceived their roles. Fathers often saw themselves as providers responsible for providing help and support, including money, food, and school supplies. On the other hand, mothers were more likely to say that they help with 'everything at home', including house chores, such as food preparation and cleaning, and managing home relations or being attentive to the needs of the family. The way parents perceived their roles

often contradicted with their lives now in Canada. Fathers who used to spend more time working out of the home before coming to Canada were now unemployed and like some of the mothers were lamenting about "doing nothing sitting at home" (Syrian Father, PN 1). This made some fathers more involved at home than they were in the past, as some mother explained, "Now [after arriving in Canada] my husband helps a little, he changed, but over there [in Syria] he wouldn't because he would come home really tired from work" (Syrian Mother, PN 2).

### **Protector**

Some parents assumed the role of the protector in the family. Most refugee families lived in poorer inner city areas that tended to be experienced and perceived as riskier at night, filled with "police cars and siren" and "gangs and drunk people". Sometimes parents were concerned and wanted to take care of their children, especially their daughters, and make them feel "safe and healthy". For example, one parent mentioned that she became "over protective" of her daughter because she experienced a racist incident in the community – a man questioned her daughter's choice to wear the Hijab and called her a "terrorist" (Somali Mother, PN 8).

### **Sacrificer**

Recent research on refugee children recognizes the invisible strategies that parents use to support their children, such as using "gift-and-sacrifice" motivational narratives (Graham et al. 2016). A few mothers in this study noted that their role, like their own mothers, involves "sacrificing" themselves for their children:

There is no mother like me who care about her children with everything... The mother has to sacrifice for her children. I don't care about myself, if I learn or not. I care about my children to learn... My children's future is my future (Syrian Mother, PN 2).

A mother is supposed to be everything for her children, their mother, father, and brother in their life... You feel that the mother is exceptional; you always have her on the side of your mind (Syrian Mother, PN 4).

This sense of sacrifice is what made five out of seven students in the focus group interview express an exceptional image of their mothers, emphasizing that an “Arab mother is better than a Canadian mother”. When asked about why they feel this way, the students explained that an Arab mother cares about her children no matter how old they are, and because she doesn’t do things such as “use drugs” or “allow her children to date before marriage” (Student Focus Group). In other cases, some single parents also expressed sacrificial qualities when they took on both the roles of the father and mother. As one father expressed: “I have two roles: I have to play the role of the mom [because she has a mental disability] as well as the father” (Bhutanese Father, PN 13).

### Sharing Migration Experiences

Newcomer parents often make constant comparisons between their past life and their children’s lives now in Canada in order to express for their children their “duality of consciousness” (Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis 2012: 84; Suizzo et al. 2015). Students with greater awareness of their parents’ sacrifices for their education reported greater school effort and higher valuing of education. In a similar way, some parents in this study felt that it is important to share their experiences with their children as a way to motivate and inspire them to go to school and succeed in life. Parents used personal and social examples from their migration experiences to show their children how much they struggle in the past and the present for them to be able to have the privilege of accessing a good education. Parents wanted their children to be conscious of

their lives before and after arriving in order to model good behavior and values. As some parents explained:

Look at my condition, I didn’t study or learn. I want them to learn and give them what was not given to me. I want them to be from the best people (Syrian mother, PN 2).

Now my children have a luxury life compared to mine. So I tell them sometimes why are you careless?... if you are highly qualified you can be flexible everywhere... sometimes I regret and blame myself that I should have studied more (Bhutanese father, PN 13).

I tell my children an old Arabic proverb, ‘Time and [sea] waves don’t wait for anybody’ (Somali Father, PN 18).

### Barriers to Involvement

In order to understand refugee parental involvement from a more inclusive perspective, it is necessary to examine the barriers that impede involvement. Consistent with the literature on refugee families in Manitoba (Kanu 2008: 923; Magro and Ghorayshi 2011), the findings of this study suggest “multiple, complex, and interrelated factors interact” to create and maintain barriers (perceived and actual) to parent involvement. These barriers were grouped into three broad categories: psychosocial barriers, parental education and language barriers, and lack of school supports.

### Psychosocial Barriers

In this study, participants discussed several psychological and social challenges that impact parent involvement in education. These include past migration experience, lack of family supports, acculturation stress, internalized racism, family challenges, lack of social supports, and lack of affordable and quality housing.

### **Past Migration Experiences**

Research on refugees show that chronic stress or traumatic events that occur before, during, and after flight from one's homeland along with the rapid physical and psychological effects on one's sense of identity and belonging can impact parent involvement in children's education (McBrien 2011). Sometimes stressful pre-migration experience can also result in post-traumatic behaviors, such as lack of trust of others (Tadessa 2014). All the refugee parents in the study fled their homes due to violence in their countries of origin. The violence took many forms including war, civil conflict, ethnic persecutions, and poor social and economic conditions. Parents were often stressed by the conditions they experienced in their source countries. As a mother recalls her life in Syria before she had to leave, "My children used to hide under the blanket to try to not hear the bullets... they were terrorized by the constant shelling and the massive destruction... We lost family, friends, close ones, and those we know" (Syrian Mother, PN 2). Unfortunately, many parents also noted difficult conditions in the neighboring countries they first fled to. In these countries, many experienced psycho-social stresses including racism, temporary residency status (often with no to little social entitlements), poor housing, restrictions to legal employment, and difficulties accessing quality and affordable education. A few parents had lived in camps for an extended period of time, as long as two decades. Some parents were also dealing with medical concerns or disabilities in their families at the time of their arrival.

### **Family Separation**

Being separated from people they love and relations that connect them to their land and culture is a common theme among refugee families. Feelings of mourning, longing, or guilt related to loved-ones can limit emotional capital of parents to interact with their children (Rousseau et al. 2001). In this study, many parents noted

that they miss their family members and friends in their source countries. Three refugee mothers indicated that they are separated from at least one of their children who did not accompany them to Canada. This was emotionally draining for many of the parents as they always thought of their loved ones. A single mother explained her feelings about missing one of her children: "I am tired from this situation, and 24 hours I cry. I am separated from my family and I want my son to come here, he is young and he has asthma. I would like him to come with his father [to Canada]. Even my eyes I don't see from them because I cry lots" (Iraqi Mother, PN 12). Sometimes families separated after arriving in Winnipeg. In one case a father moved out of the house because of divorce one year after arriving in Canada: "It is hard for us to have our parents separate... If we want something from my dad we have to walk all the way to him and ask him something. Before it was easier because they are together so we ask them what we need" (Children of a Somali Father, PN 21). Sometimes separation made parents experience a rupture in their time and space and a desperate desire to go 'back home' even though the notion of home is unstable. "We thought we will go back to our country, Bhutan, [but] we stayed in Nepal 19 years... [We] lived in a camp. My body was in the camp, but my mind was with my parents and siblings in Bhutan. I am forgetting now" (Bhutanese Father, PN 13).

### **Acculturation Stress**

Acculturation refers to the social and psychological changes that take place in interactions between individuals of different cultures. For refugees acculturation can be stressful, sometimes resulting in cultural shock, especially for those who are from a racial or linguistic group that cherishes values different from white middle-class Canadian families (Kanu 2008; Dykshoorn 2009). These findings are also echoed in this study. Some parents and students have never seen "white people or foreigners", "white snow

and trees without leaves”, “disgusting food” or even a structured city or school in their “forest”. Some did not expect to find it hard to access “easy things” like the food they grew up liking and accustomed to. Some students expressed that on arrival they “hated” their life and wanted their parents to take them back immediately. Families often engaged themselves in comparing their lives before and after Canada. As one participant expressed his feelings, “Until 5 or 6 months [after I arrived] my mind was not working perfectly. The school somewhere and everything [is] different. It is too hard...” (Bhutanese Father, PN 17). While sometimes the stress of acculturation was experienced as intense extreme stress (e.g. cultural shock), in other times it was more implicit and gradual, especially with some parents who expressed internalized racism.

### **Internalized Racism**

Research shows that oppression, especially when it is pervasive in society, can also become internalized, the hidden injury of oppression that is often ignored or minimized (David 2014). When oppression is internalized, it can lead to intra-group fragmentation and conflict because it prevents group members from connecting with one another. Oppressed group members may begin to discriminate against one another and choose to emulate and identify with oppressors in order to create a more positive identity for themselves. This is not surprising, because in contexts in which oppressed groups are forced to be consistently and systematically devalued and dehumanized, the oppressor becomes the model of acceptable humanity (Friere 1970 cited in David 2014). One form of internalized oppression, is internalized racism, holding discriminatory attitudes towards one’s own ethnic group. Ethnic self-hatred can lead to negative health outcomes and embarrassment about one’s family, particularly those who are less acculturated or with less social capital (networks, skills, and resources) (David 2014). Some parents in this study expressed sentiments

of internalized racism. For example, two refugee fathers put the blame on other parents, like them, when it comes to parental disengagement in education and challenging behavior in children. As a few fathers noted:

Some immigrants who come here even though they get rent paid and are allowed to study end up being drunk [and uninvolved in their children’s education], why should the government bring them? Maybe it is better if they died in Africa? (Somali Father, PN 18).

What make my children challenging is those refugee parents who give their children open freedom and who don’t know what they are doing... My children are affected by those because they are their friends and came from the same place and now they go to the same school (Somali Father, PN 21).

Internalized racism was also common among other mothers and ethnic groups. For example, one participant felt positively attached to her neighbours who were from a different country of origin than her, but had negative feelings toward neighbours from her own country of origin who she perceived as “all cunning” which made her prefer social isolation over proximity (Iraqi Mother, PN 12). In a similar manner, another parent expressed negative sentiments of teachers from her own ethnic background saying they are disrespectful to families in comparison to Canadian-born teachers (Syrian Mother, PN 4). Internalizing racism towards their own ethnic backgrounds can limit parent interactions with school staff and with members of their own community who can be a much needed source of support and empowerment.

### **Perceived Loss of Parental Authority**

Similar to previous research findings (Brewer and McCabe 2014; Este and Tachble 2009; Kanu 2008), some refugee parents in this study felt that the re-settlement process jeopardized their position

in the family. These feelings were often a source of constant emotional stress. The loss of control was sometimes associated with their children's school performance and/ or adulthood. It was also associated with the "role reversal" between parents and children, when the latter helps the former in dealing with issues such as interpretation and navigating between systems. This tends to happen more and more as the children acculturate and learn the language faster than their parents. Sometimes this puts the children in an inappropriate position that can be stressful on them. More than half of the parents in the study relied on their older children to help the younger children with homework and other duties in the home, such as household chores and child care. Sometimes the children acted as interpreters and translators for their parents as they communicated with school staff and others around them. Some students also helped their parents learn English and do their homework. These family relations can undermine parental involvement in their children's education. Parents felt that they were either losing or had already lost control over their defiant children who were perceived to be exerting more independence as a result of living in Canada:

When I talk to my son, he tells me: "What can you do? Nothing! Even police cannot catch me because I am under 18. What do you say?" I say you are crazy... We are told [by the children] this is Canada and we can do what we want... This made me very, very angry, I was crazy about that" (Congolese father, PN 6).

Here they have freedom and have more power to do what they want. That is a problem sometimes with dealing with children. When I say stop it they have to listen, but here they ask questions, why I should listen to you? (Bhutanese father, PN 17).

When I tell their parents to talk to their children, they will say here it is Canada we can't

talk with them, let them do what they like they will know themselves and then come back after (Somali father, PN 21).

Most students in the focus group said that they "spend a lot of time out of the home" and that they were "shy" to approach at least one of their parents, usually the father. As one student explained, "We can't talk about everything. Sometimes if you tell them something they will not allow you so I won't" (Student Focus Group). In a few cases, parents were resentful and intimidated because local child welfare authorities interfered in their involvement with their children (see also Este and Tachble 2009). As a parent and some school staff mentioned:

One day my son called that office [Child and Family Services - CFS]... After that my wife had to go to some office for parents to go learn how to be with kids, that is something very funny. We don't have a choice. We go for a month every Wednesday and then they give us a certificate, but the boy was wrong not us... (Congolese Father, PN 6).

Some parents are so intimidated [in dealing with CFS] because they don't have the knowledge... [to] be empowered... or they don't evolve as fast as their child... Sometimes that is where the kid falls at the crack because parents are not that much involved as they should be other than maybe going when the school calls... I've seen many parents feel helpless, disappointed, and regret their decision of coming here because they seem to be getting away from their child emotionally (Staff Focus Group).

Refugee students have overwhelmed parents or have been placed in temporary foster care (Survey Response)

In addition to experiences with CFS, three parents mentioned that their family had to deal with police on one or more occasion. Two parents also indicated that one of their children no longer live



with them because they were “impolite”. These parents expressed very limited involvement in their children’s education.

### **Lack of Social Support**

Refugee families often lack the supports needed to navigate the stresses they experience, which can result in “time-poverty”, the lack of ‘free time’ that parents can dedicate to their children’s educational needs and concerns (Williams and Sanchez 2011: 55). Some parents in this study had more than one job or worked evening shifts, and sometimes the students themselves were working to support the family. As the experience of one father shows:

I work double shift. One company doesn’t give double shift, so I go to one place 8 hours and then to another company for another 8 hours. In every 7 days I do 3 days double shift, continuously... This affects how much I am at home and my wife would help at home (Bhutanese Father, PN 19).

I have no idea [what happens inside the home with my children]... most of the time my wife is with the kids because I have to work (Bhutanese Father, PN 17).

Parents were often busy with “going to school to learn English”, “establishing themselves”, “raising younger children at home”, “long hours of work”, “finding a job”, and “sandwiched” by “financial pressures” to support their families, at home and abroad, and paying back “transportation loans” to the government. Too much pressure on parents can sometimes make them reactive to their children or ignore them in order to cope. As one mother explains, “Sometimes I feel like I want to explode! I will yell in a loud voice at my children so they get scared and listen” (Syrian Mother, PN 4). Being pushed for time often impacted the quality and quantity of their involvement in their children’s education and life in general.

### **Single Parenting**

The stresses of daily life was felt especially by single parents and those who were struggling to negotiate employment outside of the home and involvement in their children’s education. Five refugee parents, mostly mothers, said that they live alone with their children, either because of being widowed or separated from their partners, often before arriving to Canada. Some single parents, who were employed full-time, explain their struggles with involvement in the following ways:

Now I start work [as a cleaner/janitor] at 4pm till midnight. When I go home they are sleeping. That is why we see each other in the weekend more. It is hard during the week... I am almost working for 4 years by myself. It is very hard for them too (Single Ethiopian Mother, PN 9).

I have all the responsibilities like groceries and everything. [Sometimes] I ask them [my children] to do something [for me] they say no. I tried to get a license but I failed the computer test about 10 times... I don’t have a husband to take us around. I have other friends who don’t call me because they know I don’t have a car... I don’t know English I can’t work here (Iraqi Mother, PN 12).

### **Housing: ‘The Problem With the Home is the Home’**

Housing vulnerability and negative neighbourhood characteristics in the inner city, such as poverty and crime, which is more common in the inner city, affect the re-settlement experiences of refugee families (Carter and Osborne 2009; Shier et al. 2016). It is very difficult to find an affordable and good home near a school for most refugee families due to their larger size. Almost half of the parents interviewed in this study noted challenges with their housing conditions, especially on arrival. Living in poor and often crowded homes was not always conducive for positive parent involvement. One single mother said that her building has bed bugs and

pesticides are sprayed on a monthly basis and she was tired from packing and unpacking her furniture and belongings. Sometimes her nights were interrupted by youth playing with the fire alarm at night. She also noted that the smell of drugs, often smoked by youth, is common in her building. This mother felt, as a non-Syrian refugee, that she was not as fortunate with housing and supports from the government. However, interviews with Syrian families in this study show that they are not necessarily more privileged than other newcomers in their housing experiences. As some explained:

Our current home is small. We have 2 bedrooms and we are a family of 7... We also don't have a washing machine or a dryer. I fight sometimes with my husband and my children. I tell them sometimes to throw books away to have more space at home (Syrian Mother, PN 2).

Like their parents, when two siblings in the same house were interviewed they said that “the problem with the home is the home”, they explained saying that their home is small, crowded, and “filled with cockroaches” (Children of Syrian Mother, PN 2).

#### Parental Education and Language Barriers

Research on refugee parental involvement shows that lack of proficiency in the English language coupled with low levels of education and lack of self-confidence are often barriers to communication between parents and teachers (Tadesse 2014; Georgis et al. 2014). The most cited issue among participants in this study was relating to language barriers, especially on arrival, and not being able to help children academically because of lack of education. As two parents and a student each explained:

It is difficult for old dogs to learn new tricks. It is difficult to change habit, the way we speak.

The first time [when I arrived in Winnipeg] I felt

as if I am drowning in the water!” (Bhutanese Father, PN 13).

I am better than many refugees who come here without knowledge or going to school because many of them don't speak English. They are in a difficult situation. They don't know what their children is learning or doing... at and after school (Somali Father, PN 21).

My father barely knows the [alphabet] letters, he can't help me. I am helping him. My parents go to English school and they come home with their own homework and I have to help them (Student Focus Group).

Not being able to communicate caused families to feel stressed and isolated, especially when there were material and emotional issues requiring attention and support from outside of the home. It also limited parent interactions with the schools. Most parents did not talk with staff at school unless there was an issue concerning one of their children when a translator was available, or when they are invited to attend a parent meeting. These experiences are not surprising, given that most parents did not complete high school, and four parents, from Congo and Somalia, have never been to a school. For example, one mother said she couldn't learn because both her parents died after she was born and she “didn't have chance to study” (Congolese Mother, PN 7). Another mother said that “We lived in forest this is why I don't have any education” (Somali Mother, PN 8). To help their children academically, most parents relied on after school programs and on their older children to help their younger siblings.

#### Lack of School Supports

Consistent with the literature (Kanu 2008), we found that schools often struggle to address the needs of refugee families due to fiscal concerns and the lack of appropriate supports. School supports were grouped into three categories: lack

of appropriate and timely communication between school staff and parents, the lack of time and support for teachers to involve themselves with refugee families, and lack of diverse teachers and culturally inclusive training.

### **Lack of Communication**

Research shows that providing “caring, respectful, and culturally sensitive communication can foster refugee parent-teacher relationships” (Tadessa 2014: 304). However, most parents and 14 school staff in the study noted that communication is often a barrier between them and refugee parents who often speak little to no English. Parents said that their schools often send documents or automated-phone messages in English only and they struggle to understand them. They often relied on limited informal networks to help them translate and complete appropriate forms. School staff interviewed noted that even if documents are translated, some parents are unable to read in any language. The struggle to communicate also sometimes made it difficult to fully understand and deal with their children’s behavior issues.

### **Lack of Support for Teachers**

School staff indicated that their schools are limited in offering supports such as translators and support workers. Some felt that instead of receiving more supports to better deal with an increasing number of refugee families, they are receiving fewer supports as a result of limited funding available to schools. One school staff said in a survey that “the EAL [English as Additional Language] support teacher that was provided by the province was helpful, but the position has been cancelled”. One teacher hesitantly explained in a focus group that she believes it to be too “controversial” to ask for more support for EAL teachers:

Seriously, if we need to build these things like relationships with our parents, we need to have

support. Like in my class... I have 23 kids who don’t speak English and no support in class.

Even when the parent comes to talk to me I can’t talk to that parent, because I have other kids and I am in elementary school where I am supposed to be dismissing kids home safely (Staff Focus Group).

Other staff, especially school administrators, agreed with this experience noting that most staff are under-supported because it is the fiscal “reality of all of our classrooms”, even though they recognized that “engagement is dependent on one-to-one contact to a large extent”. This finding is similar to recent research on parental involvement, which shows that the “beliefs that teachers and administrators held about effective ways to keep parents informed and engaged were not put into practice” (Brewer and McCabe 2014:16).

### **Lack of Diverse Staff and Culturally Sensitive Training**

Similar to existing research (Brewer and McCabe 2014; Tadessa 2014; Dykshoorn 2009; Kanu 2008), we found that there can be a mismatch between parent and teacher expectations and that a teacher’s performance can be hindered by limited or lack of knowledge and exposure to parents from refugee backgrounds. Many participants, especially school staff, in this study felt that more diverse teachers and culturally sensitive training are needed to avoid misunderstandings and to better ensure positive outcomes. Some parents expressed a different cultural understanding of interacting with teachers and disciplining children. For example as one parent explains, “Back home [in Bhutan]... It was with a stick with more discipline. And we should not speak eye to eye. It is not respectful. We are scared. Teachers who were from the ruling class would physically beat us... [and] gave us more homework” (Bhutanese Father, PN 13). In this case, avoiding eye contact can be misunderstood by a school staff as disre-

spectful. Some school staff pointed out that parents' cultures were sometimes a barrier to being involved because some "were scared to speak to school administration" or because they held views that were either patriarchal or incorrect. A few teachers and support workers pointed out that some staff around them can be "so narrow minded and so prejudice" against some students of colour. This can cause issues between families and staff to be "blown out of proportion". As one teacher and a parent each explained:

I have an EAL classroom and my kids are all different from the rest [mostly newcomers]... it bothers me so much why is it that everybody [school staff] is putting all their efforts into getting my class into a straight line, while other classes the teachers don't even know where all their students are (Staff Focus Group).

My daughter [who was grade 10 at the time] cried because of a teacher. The teacher yelled

at her in front of other kids... She failed and didn't go back to the same school... There were many complaints about teacher being racist and there were other comments like that from all the other coloured kids. She would pick and yell at them... I heard now that the teacher got fired (Somali Mother, PN 8).

Parents also said that they felt judged sometimes by their children's teacher. For example, one mother said that she was treated as a "poor refugee" by her school teacher, even though she was not poor before fleeing the war in her country (Ethiopian Mother, PN 9).

As has been heard through the voices of parents, students, and staff, there are multiple and intersecting challenges that refugee families have to navigate in being involved in their children's education, inside and outside of the school system. Given these challenges, supports need to be offered within a holistic framework that is responsive to the needs of refugee families.

# Recommendations

Our analysis of the data gathered leads us to three main recommendations that we believe can promote more meaningful and effective parental involvement in refugee families. First, educators must consider the experiences of parents and expand their understanding of ‘involvement’ to avoid the mislabeling of parents as ‘uninvolved’. Second, educators must improve their efforts to make schools more accessible and inclusive. Third, all stakeholders involved, including the Winnipeg School Division, community organizations, and all levels of government, need to provide more academic and social supports to families by offering quality after-school programs and providing opportunities to empower and improve the skills of parents.

## Consider Parent Experiences to Avoid Misunderstandings

This study shows that refugee parents believe that they are involved in their children’s education and place a high value on involvement. They make great efforts to involve themselves using their lived experiences, in spite of the challenges they face before, during, and after migrating. For this reason it is important to consider different cultural

understandings and how parenting practices are structurally constructed and embedded in social context and experience. Assuming that refugee parents are not as involved in or concerned with their children’s education, simply because of school participation, ignores the stresses they face in the contexts that they live in. These assumptions are rooted in deficit thinking and discourse on at-risk-ness (see Auerbach 2007; López 2001). Even if parents do not necessarily advocate for themselves in other realms of civic participation, they can “become active, motivated agents of empowerment and change when fighting to improve their children’s education and their opportunities in life” (Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis 2012: 85).

Recent research also shows that traditional barriers facing parents such as language, can act as “catalysts”, this means that although they can limit involvement, they can also facilitate involvement (Brewer and McCabe 2014). Similarly in this study while most parents identified several barriers to involvement, some of them desired and became more involved to counter the effects of the barrier. For example, while lack of diverse teachers was a barrier to involvement for some parents, it was also a motivator for others. As one parent explains:

He [the teacher] was struggling to make them [the students] understand what he was teaching... I invited myself and the teacher was very happy to see me. He was saying to me that I am a model. He invited me and welcomed me. He invited me the second time... so I volunteered there (Somali Father, PN 21).

While this parent may have been more active in his involvement than most other parents because he was comfortable speaking English and had completed high school, this example also highlights the need to avoid labelling parents by barriers or vice versa.

### More Accessible and Inclusive Schools

In order to promote more meaningful and effective parent involvement among refugee families the Winnipeg School Division need to make spaces and relations in their schools more inclusive and empowering. This can be done by:

- *The Winnipeg School Division needs to change the manner in which students are assessed for grade placement.* Many families and some school staff in this study cited grade placement of students, based on age alone and not their academic level, as a key challenge for students. Most students in this study, especially the older boys, had interrupted schooling and struggled academically in their schools, especially on arrival because they were often placed into regular classrooms with limited supports. Parents felt that their children struggled to obtain all the credits necessary to graduate from school before they turn 21. One parent explained the impact of grade placement on his older son: “It is the most horrible and unsatisfied learning... They have got a big bulldozer behind them. They have to run to save themselves otherwise they will be pushed and buried” (Somali Father, PN 21). Some students in this study

experienced a downward grade mobility (e.g. going from grade 12 to 11). In the absence of intensive academic and social supports for their children, parents wanted the schools to place students in grades that reflected more their educational level, in addition to their age and English level.

- *More timely and appropriate translation and interpretation services to help parents communicate with the school.* Communication can be enhanced by making information available to parents in their home language, encouraging parent-teacher relations, and inviting parents to participate in special activities. Professionals should try empowering parents with structural information about the main elements of the educational curriculum with minimal reliance on written technical language, because some refugees struggle to read and write in any language. This will help parents know the ‘language of the school’ and the expectations related to school readiness and success, so that inconsistencies can be reduced or avoided (Weine 2008; Sainsbury and Renzaho 2011; Brewer and McCabe 2014).
- *Increase diversity among school staff.* It is important to have well-trained school staff from similar backgrounds as their refugee communities to help parents be more comfortable in approaching the school for assistance and for involvement opportunities. This can be also be done by training and hiring refugee parents in schools (Brewer and McCabe 2014; Tadessa 2014).
- *Provide wrap-around and culturally sensitive supports through the use of cultural brokers.* Georgis et al. (2014) show how a three-year Transition Supports Program, at an inner-city high school with a dense newcomer population in Alberta, was

successful in providing parental support and improving parent involvement along with relations between families, their schools and their communities. In addition to offering linguistic and academic support to students, the program supported families by providing cultural brokers who provided in-school brokering services and out-of-school wraparound family support. The authors concluded that this is a successful model to effectively and meaningfully support refugee parents because cultural brokers fostered a sense of belonging while addressing some of the socio-cultural barriers associated with the resettlement process.

- *Offer more culturally sensitive training for school staff to help them better understand parent needs and include their experiences in the schools.* School staff in the Winnipeg School Division need to perceive their role as supporters and advocates for families. In order for them to do so, school staff especially those with more privilege and less awareness and interactions with refugee families, would benefit from training on cultural competency and safety. School staff will also need to be supported by their schools to avoid burnout or compassion fatigue.
- *Provide “flexible” supports to enhance participation.* This can involve educators or support workers meeting with parents on weekends or at their homes. It can also be done by offering child care during parent meetings or translation services outside of school situations (see Brewer and McCabe 2014; Magro and Ghorayshi 2011). Since refugee parents have English classes and sometimes employment during the day, allowing them to meet with the school at alternative times or without notice can promote more interactions, even though arranging for interpretation services on short notice is a challenge.

- *Promote more collaboration between community organizations and schools.* School staff, in this study, suggested it would be beneficial to receive assessment information regarding their families from community organizations or programs to better understand their needs. Keeping in mind that the responsibility for this involve different levels of governments, the Winnipeg School Division can try to better ensure it is doing its part in advocating for more collaboration and in building relationships with community organizations.
- *Develop a “protocol” to guide practices related to refugee involvement within school divisions.* School staff identified the need for a guide that would provide a reference and best practice tool to ensure consistency, not a “one-size-fits-all” model since refugees are not a homogeneous group. The consensus among school staff in the focus groups was that some general information on refugee parental involvement, grade placement, and best practices can be shared within the school division. For this guide to be effective it needs to be implemented by the Winnipeg School Division in ways that is consistent and accountable.

#### Advocate and Offer More Supports

Many parents in this study felt that in order to promote more involvement in education, families like them could use more supports and networking opportunities. This can be done in three main ways:

- *Increase access to after school programs.* To be able to help their children with homework, most of the parents in the study had their children enrolled in after-school programming, which included supports with homework and extracurricular

activities. This gave a sense of relief for parents because they felt the programs can help improve student outcomes. As one parent explained: “After school programs are very helpful. For instance, I am working and I am a refugee and I don’t have anybody to help here. Back home you can get somebody to help you like your brother, nieces or nephews. Here there is no body...” (Congolese Mother, PN 10). For this reason, the Winnipeg School Division and community organization can offer more after-school programming to support refugee families.

- *Improve the quality of after school programs.* Some parents had recommendations to improve after school programs. A few suggested increasing the quantity and quality of mentors, this can be done by hiring more people from the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds as the children or by allowing parents to volunteer and get to know the program and what their children are doing. Some parents felt that less ‘free play’ should be offered, and more focus should be on core academic subjects since some of their children lack the necessary foundation to catch up in class.
- *Help parents help themselves through community supports and opportunities.* Research shows that one of the best ways to support refugee parents is to provide intensive support for them to learn English and to offer strategies for enhancing their chances for suitable employment. Connections to employers

can be promoted by the schools and community organizations. In addition, we need to include refugee parents in programming that is specifically focused on their challenges while offering child care to ease their access (Shimoni et al. 2003; Este and Tachble 2009). Parents in this study felt that more programming can be offered for children under the age of 12 and for the parents themselves, who are often excluded. Parents wanted more and better English language training programs and cultural programs that help them understand rules and general information, including on disciplining children. Parents also felt that more financial supports can be provided to help ease pressure on families in order to cover the cost of expenses, including paying rent, supporting families overseas, and repaying transportation loans granted to them by the government. Finally, one parent felt that refugee communities need to be more unified and equality needs to be established throughout society to effectively promote parent involvement. This means supports need to be offered to refugee parents at the local, municipal and federal levels; not from a neoliberal, self-help approach, but from an empowering perspective. Refugee parents often face barriers to being involved in their children’s education and all stakeholders at the school, community and government levels need to advocate with and for them in social contexts that often excludes their experiences and desires.



# Conclusion

The overarching goal throughout this research study was to examine the process of refugee parent involvement in their children's education in Winnipeg's inner city. Following a community-based research approach, the study's primary focus was on refugee parents' experiences, practices, and contexts. By including parent voices, a more inclusive understanding of parent involvement was offered. These voices were validated with the literature review and the information gathered from school staff and the children of refugee parents.

It is evident that newcomer parents from refugee backgrounds face multiple and intersecting barriers to being involved in their children's education. Parents often faced a range of psychosocial challenges as a result of their migration to Winnipeg. These challenges were compounded with education and language barriers and the lack of school supports. Even though parents struggled with helping their children academically and were not actively involved in the schools, they still felt very involved in their children's education and life in general. However, at times, it seemed that their children were struggling in school and at home in spite of the parents' efforts and desires.

Refugee parents may differ in how they view themselves as parents, but they all agree that parent involvement in children's education is important for social and academic success. However, their perception of involvement was often broader than the perception school staff had, which was limited to school-based involvement. Parents often focused on informal means of involvement, such as following-up on children at home, providing support and guidance, and by sharing their migration experiences and motivational narratives of sacrifice with their children. Involvement for the families was a source of meaning that sustained their feelings of belonging and a source of protection that provided a safety net for their children during stressful times. For this reason, in the few cases when refugee parents struggled with being involved in their children's education, especially for single mothers employed-full time, there was significant acculturation stress noted.

Until structures and relations of violence that generate displacement are addressed by transnational powers, including the Canadian state, refugees will continue to migrate to Manitoba. It is imperative that supports for refugee families offered by the schools, the community, and

governments are increased, in quantity and quality, and are continued beyond their arrival. Supporting refugee parental involvement meaningfully and effectively requires educators and policymakers to consider the context of their experiences so that they can be better supported and empowered as parents and individual members of the community.

In addition to improving the social opportunities and personal skills of parents, all stakeholders must try to involve them in ways that is based on their experiences. Failing to do this will keep refugee families in assimilative and precarious contexts that continue to create and maintain the power inequities and inequalities they experience.

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