"Teachers, Flip Your Practices on Their Heads!" Refugee Students' Insights into How School Practices and Culture Must Change to Increase Their Sense of School Belonging

Montero, M. Kristiina; Ibrahim, Hany; Loomis, Colleen; Newmaster, Sharon

"Teachers, Flip Your Practices on Their Heads!" Refugee Students' Insights into How School Practices and Culture Must Change to Increase Their Sense of School Belonging

M. Kristiina Montero, Hany Ibrahim, Colleen Loomis, and Sharon Newmaster

Wilfrid Laurier University

Informed by the literature of school belonging, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism, this article explores the perspectives of government assisted refugees attending a secondary school in Ontario, Canada. Using qualitative research methods, the purpose of the study was to understand factors that influence refugee students' sense of school belonging. In addition, the researchers asked refugee students how educators can better address their socioemotional needs in the public education system. Findings suggest that refugee students' sense of school belonging might be improved by validating their first language skills in the context of school, fostering a more equitable disciplinary school climate, and supporting and sustaining opportunities for refugee student leadership in the school. Based on these findings, three recommendations are made for practice.

Key words: sense of school belonging; refugee students; students with limited prior education; students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFEs); critical multicultural education.

For many young people living in refugee camps, “America” is utopia—it is a land where “everyone eats as much food as they want,...[a]nyone …can get any job they want,... the place where all your dreams come true” (Lomong, 2002, p. 59). These young people often enter the public education system in their resettlement countries with hope and determination. They seek better opportunities for themselves and their families in a land without war, persecution, and suffering. School is initially seen as the place where these youth can begin to achieve their dreams. What is disconcerting is that public education systems in North America are largely failing refugee students, particularly those who enter the system in adolescence. Adolescent refugee students are at greater risk of dropping out of school than mainstream students and even other English language learners who do not have refugee life experiences (Gunderson, 2007).

Informed by the literature of school belonging (Finn, 1989; Goodenow & Grady, 1993), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), and critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010), this article explores the perspectives of adolescent refugee youth enrolled in a secondary school that has specific programming to support students who have experienced significant gaps in their formal education. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand factors that influence refugee students’ sense of school belonging and to hear their insights about what educators can do to foster a welcoming school community for them. Inquiring into and analyzing students’ stories will help educators *really* listen to what they have to say (Author, 2012). The findings of the study challenge educators to critique the social and socioemotional inequities as perceived by the refugee students and provide actions to improve them. In order to respond to the concerns raised by the young people involved in this study, educators will need to question those often unquestioned instructional and school cultural practices and flip elements of school culture, practices, and rules on their head.

Refugee Students in Canadian Educational Contexts

Political, social, and economic struggles have forcibly displaced millions of people worldwide. As individuals and families wait for opportunities to return home under improved conditions or to immigrate to a host country, many end up in internal or external refugee camps or some other form of exile for years, sometimes for generations. Canada is one of the top five resettlement countries of forcibly displaced people in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010). These individuals in transit enter Canada as government sponsored refugees, privately sponsored refugees, or refugee claimants. Members of the latter group are not guaranteed permanent residency in Canada; they are only afforded the right to live in Canada until their claim can be presented in court and adjudicated.

In 2008-2009, Canada admitted 22,846 as Permanent Residents, with the majority coming from Africa and the Middle East (47%), Asia and Pacific (29%), and South and Central America (16%). Of these individuals, 19 per cent were child refugees (under the age of 15) and another 6.7 per cent were between the ages of 15 to 24 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). In addition, 36,851 refugees entered Canada in 2008 as refugee claimants. The statistics are significant because all of these refugee children and youth, aged 4 to 21, are entitled to receive a quality public education. However, administrators and teachers are largely underprepared to adequately address the various needs of refugee students, particularly those who immigrate in their adolescent years, have significant gaps in their formal education, and have limited literacy abilities in their first language (Bigelow, 2010; Stewart, 2010).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees states that a “more cohesive, systematic approach to working with refugee children and their families” needs to be adopted (as cited in Waniganayake, 2001, p. 289). This statement is true of all social systems refugees come

in contact with, from government agencies to local schools and school boards. Unlike other institutions, however, the school system is uniquely able to address the educational, socioemotional, and psychosocial needs of refugee children. Teachers are in a position to "play a major role in helping" refugee children "carve a brighter future" (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008, p. 21). To say that refugee children and youth's well-being depends on the successes and failures of the school experience is no exaggeration. School practices and policies can promote health, well-being, and healing from trauma or they can promote failure, isolation, frustration, and further sociocultural traumatization. Whereas consequences of negative education experiences ultimately become pervasive social problems such as illiteracy or non-functional literacy, crime, and unemployment, positive education experiences fulfill the hopes for better opportunities many refugees have while also contributing to a stronger society.

Immigrant students, generally speaking, show lower rates of integration and high school completion when compared to non-immigrants (Author, 2010). Those who are English language learners (ELLs) and take English as a second language (ESL) courses in high school have higher dropout rates than non-immigrant students (Radwanski, 1987; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). Refugee students have the highest dropout or disappearance rate altogether (Gunderson, 2007). Adolescent refugee youth are most at risk of social marginalization and school attrition (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996), particularly if they demonstrate signs of disengagement and perform poorly academically (Gunderson, 2007).

Intensive supports are necessary in order to close the huge gaps in learning that are common to refugee children and youth. In addition, these supports must help students deal with psychosocial and socioemotional needs that are part of the flight stage of the resettlement process and early experiences of trauma. Education is a profound way to begin exploring and addressing

the needs of refugee children and youth and their families. Schools stabilize the lives of refugee children and youth, provide opportunities for safe encounters and learning, and teach literacy, which is fundamental to all issues of settlement (Matthews, 2008). Schools are the primary setting for young people to learn about life in the host country and "can be viewed as a major source of security for students when teachers are willing and well-trained to detect refugee students' needs" (McBrien, 2005).

Numerous factors have been explored to explain what might contribute to refugee students' high attrition rates. These factors include limited professional training and support provided to teachers to meet the academic, psychosocial, and socioemotional needs of refugee students (Bigelow, 2010; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Author et al., 2009; Stewart, 2010), unaddressed emotional and psychological problems that may impede success in all aspects of their lives, including schooling (Beiser, 1999, 2009; Ehntholt, Smith, & Yule, 2005; Lin, Suvemoto, & Kiang, 2009; Matthews, 2008; Rousseau, Drapeau, & Corin, 1996; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; Waniganayake, 2001), and poor sense of school belonging (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). The latter is the focus of this article because case studies indicate that a student's poor sense of school belonging is a direct cause of dropping out of high school (Fine, 1991).

A sense of school belonging is an important element in any educational program, but particularly for students at risk of academic failure (Ma, 2003). School belonging, which can be defined as "a student's level of attachment (personal investment in the school), commitment (compliance with school rules and expectations), involvement (engagement with school academics and extracurricular activities), and belief in [one's] school (faith in its values and its significance)," has been connected to postive academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Generally speaking, schools do not explicitly foster students'

socioemotional needs, such as those encompassed by a sense of school belonging, because it is assumed that such needs are met outside of the school within the context of family and/or extended community (Sánchez, Colón, & Esparza, 2005). However, for reasons such as loss of family, smaller immigrant numbers spread geographically, or lack of community connections, refugee students may have limited access to outside networks that promote a sense of belonging in society (Stewart, 2010).

In her review of the literature on school belongingness and community, Osterman (2000) found that the organizational practices of schools largely undermine students' experience of membership in a supportive community. It is critical that a school's organizational practices help foster positive spaces for refugee students to interact with mainstream, English-speaking students. While refugee students may be affiliated with a particular ethnic, religious, and/or cultural community within and/or outside of the school, they may not feel a sense of membership with the general mainstream population of students. Schools must consider refugee students' sense of school belonging because the relationships developed in schools assist refugee youth as they adjust to their lives in the host country, especially during the early period of resettlement (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008; Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2009; Wilkinson, 2002).

Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) found that when refugee youth had a greater sense of school belonging they had lower incidences of depression and higher degrees of self-efficacy, irrespective of past exposure to trauma. While it can be argued that most adolescents experience challenges trying to negotiate a sense of school belonging, refugee students' challenges are exacerbated because they must confront sources of cultural, racial, religious, socio-economic and/or linguistic discrimination (García Coll & Magnuson, 1997). Because schools and the

relationships that develop within are important social systems for refugee youth (Bigelow, 2010; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Stewart, 2010), it is logical for school personnel (e.g., administrators, language and content area teachers, educational assistants) to consider ways to develop refugee students' sense of school belonging as a way to begin addressing their myriad socioemotional and academic needs.

Participants

While in exile, many child and youth refugees have not had opportunities to attend school on a regular basis or may have had no schooling opportunities whatsoever. Therefore, due to limited opportunities to develop age-appropriate language and literacy skills, these students have significant gaps in their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). In Canada, students who meet these criteria are identified as *students with limited prior schooling;* in the U.S. they are commonly referred to as students of limited or interrupted formal education or SLIFEs (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). In Ontario, when English language learners (ELLs) are identified as having significant gaps in their formal education they are eligible to receive additional language and literacy support in the form of sheltered English literacy development (ELD) courses. At the secondary school level, there are five credit-bearing ELD levels that are defined by language and literacy ability, not age. The courses tend to be multi-age with students ranging from 14 to 20 years old. (Specific information about the secondary ESL and ELD curriculum used in Ontario can be accessed at: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/esl912currb.pdf). Students normally progress through the suite of ELD courses along with a complement of content area classes that take into consideration their English language and literacy needs. Placement in these programs does not normally consider students' socioemotional or psychosocial needs.

Student participant recruitment criteria for the study included the following: (a) student must have arrived in Canada no earlier than 2006 or within the preceding five years of the study; (b) student must have entered Canada after the age of 10 as part of the government assisted refugee program; (c) student must be 16 years of age or older and; (d) student must be enrolled in an English literacy development course. Because none of the researchers had skills in the students' first and/or community languages, all interviews had to be conducted in English, therefore, participants had to have conversational or basic interpersonal communicative skills, which under normal circumstances takes approximately two to three years to develop (Cummins, 1979, 1994). Furthermore, students under age 16 were excluded from this particular study because of numerous logistical challenges securing translators to help obtain informed consent from minors; students aged 16 and older could provide their own consent.

The school board's learning consultant helped identify potential participants, who were then informed about the purpose of the study before volunteering to participate. Six students aged 16-20 enrolled in English literacy development courses participated in the study. They originated from Palestine, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Colombia. Three of the students experienced refugee camp life, one had not, and two of them did not explicitly identify whether or not they had refugee camp experience. They all, however, were assessed as having experienced significant gaps in their formal education and first language literacy development when they were admitted to Canada through the government assisted refugee program.

All participants were in ELD courses at levels B or C. Students in level B and C classes are able to communicate somewhat fluently in English language social contexts. The courses aim to help build the students' academic as well as interpersonal communicative language and literacy skills. Such skills are intended to give students the necessary tools to be successful in

English as a second language classes and in mainstream content area classes. These mid-level ELD courses work to help students move from producing simple forms of writing about familiar and school related topics to writing more contextualized pieces as they use and develop their knowledge of English grammatical structures, expand their vocabulary, and develop fundamental study skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Level A, D, or E students were not represented in this study: level A students did not have sufficient English communication skills to participate; no level D students volunteered for the study and; at the time of the study a level E class was not offered.

Methods

For this study, data were collected using ethnographic methods. Specifically, each participant took part in semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix A for interview guide), participated in a focus group interview, and was observed in the context of his or her ELD classes. Through the interviews, information was extracted about the adolescents' experiences as students in a secondary ELD program, their academic and non-academic successes and challenges, and their involvement in school-based programs and/or activities. Constant-comparative methods of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999) were used first in a case analysis, which then progressed to a cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002). Codes and emerging themes were generated from the data and managed using NVivo9 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2007). The study was approved by the university's research ethics board and all participants granted their informed consent. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

This article reports how six refugee youth, aged 16-20, enrolled in an English literacy development program experienced their classroom and school based learning contexts. The

insights highlight three areas of school culture and instruction that could be improved in order for these students to feel accepted, respected, and supported within the school community, thus contributing to their overall sense of school belonging. The findings of this study challenge administrators and teachers to flip current school practices on their heads—to question what has "always been done" and strive to change school practices to address the social and academic inequities that face many refugee adolescents who find themselves in Canada's English-speaking secondary schools. Analyzing participants' reflections on their school experiences, three consistent themes emerged: (a) a call to revisit persistent monolingual instructional practices in school; (b) a call to address anti-immigrant sentiment in the general school culture and; (c) a call to provide opportunities for refugee students to engage in leadership roles that will benefit the refugee student communities and beyond.

Revisit Persistent Monolingual Instructional Practices

For over 100 years of second language pedagogy, the use of students' first language in a second language learning context has been being mildly discouraged, outright banned, or treated using some other language-as-deficit practice (Cook, 2001). Monolingual instructional principles or English-only practices are largely unsupported by empirical evidence and are inconsistent with current theory in areas of cognitive psychology and applied linguistics (Author, 1998; Cummins, 2007). Such practices tend to reinforce subtractive bilingualism where support for the first language is weaned to the point of extinction. Methods of subtractive bilingualism have been equated to linguistic and cultural genocide (Skuttnabb-Kangas, 2000). Decades of research have demonstrated the multiple social, cognitive, and affective benefits of consecutive and additive bilingualism (see for example, Ben-Zeev, 1977; Bialystok, 1997, 2001; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Cook, 1997; Cummins, 1979; Freeman, 2004; Genesee, 1989; Ianco-Worrall,

1972; Latham, 1998). More recently, research demonstrates the positive impact that a "language as resource" (Fishman, 1966; Ruiz, 1984) pedagogy has on student identity formation and expression (Cummins & Early, 2011; Norton, 2000).

Participants reported that English literacy development teachers and general content area teachers either explicitly or implicitly promoted monolingual instructional practices. For example, Lucy reported, "teachers don't like it when students speak different languages" and Stephanie reported, "The teacher is like, we are not allowed to talk [our] language." While many of the participants accepted this rule as something being done for their "own good" so that they could "practice English," some expressed frustration with the English-only rule because it negatively impacted how they viewed themselves as thinkers and learners and impeded their participation in the classroom. For example, Lucy noted,

> Sometimes I am scared to express myself or ask questions in business class. I am comfortable in other classes because teachers understand me and what I am trying to express. Some teachers are able to understand and know what is in the heart, but some don't know.

Lucy also expressed her frustration with her mathematics course because she felt that she knew the content, but she believed she was forced to take the course because she couldn't communicate her knowledge: "I know what the teacher is teaching because I already learned it in Ethiopia, but I cannot express myself in English, and it is hard for the teacher to understand me." Although the teacher was likely trying to teach content through a developmental language approach (see for example, Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008), the student's perception was that the teacher would not acknowledge her mathematical abilities simply because she could not articulate her content knowledge. The student may have been

experiencing further frustration because of the dissonance between educational expectations—her "home" system heavily relying on computation and the host system on problem solving, which requires greater command of expressive language abilities. Furthermore, the student was potentially unaware of the teacher's intention to teach academic language through a familiar subject area and this miscommunication of intention served to alienate the student from the instructional context. If a teacher directly or indirectly communicates to students that they are not valued or their behavior is unwelcome or rejected, they are more likely to show patterns of withdrawal or aggression (Osterman, 2000). It is possible that Lucy's frustration could have been averted or, at least, reduced if she was encouraged to communicate her knowledge about mathematics in a variety of ways that are proven to support English language learners. For instance, Lucy may have benefitted from working with a same language peer who could help her share her ideas with greater ease. With such changes, Lucy may have been brought to understand the teacher's pedagogical practice, rather than continue to experience frustration.

In many ways, the English-only rule perpetuates a deficit model of learning and development by emphasizing students' linguistic deficiencies, instead of viewing the students' first language as an asset that can serve to validate students' sense of self. Monolingual language practices do not view language as resource and while many participants accepted the English-only rules in the context of the classroom, they would seek assistance from a person from their language and cultural group when they experienced difficulty negotiating socially and/or academically. For example, Marcus noted, "I can't speak....I can't speak nothing that's what was very difficult because can't understand me. I make new friends from my language and they help me." While, another student, Lucy, noted that when she needed help she would ask her neighbor:

[I get help from my neighbor] who is in college right now. And it's like because I

> am in high school and I am in grade 10, and he is in college, he know[s] because he pass[ed] high school to college and he know[s] how high school is. And I just ask him. He tell[s] me how to do, and how to work this thing. How to study very hard, to work very hard in school. Yeah. And he gives me advice.

Among linguistically diverse populations, monolingual language practices nurture individualism and competition, rather than community and collaboration, which may contribute to a students' poor sense of school belonging. Viewing language as resource and encouraging students to use their first language to support their learning will provide them with opportunities to exercise autonomy both inside and outside of the classroom, which can foster feelings of belonging rather than alienation within the school community (Osterman, 2000).

Privileging monolingual practices in school may impact students' sense of confidence in their emerging English language abilities, which may lead them to avoid participating in school-related social activities. Lucy, for example, specifically noted,

> I would like to get involved [at school], but I am not comfortable because I cannot express myself well due to limited English skills. I speak broken English and no one will understand. I want to get involved but will wait until I am able to express my thinking the way I want to.

Students who experience a greater sense of acceptance by peers and teachers are more likely to be interested in and enjoy school and their classes (Osterman, 2000). Although teachers may be well intentioned when promoting monolingual language practices in the classroom, this approach may deteriorate a student's sense of self and motivation to learn to the point that students withdraw from both academic and social aspects of school.

Need to Promote Positive School Climate by Addressing Anti-immigrant Sentiment

In schools, refugee students are targets of anti-immigrant views (Bigelow, 2010; Stewart, 2010). The students in the study reported that their peers would often respond to overt forms of discrimination by fighting back. They also reported to form social cliques with peers from the same and/or similar ethnic backgrounds for protection from being harassed at school. The participants reported to have been harassed at school for wearing non-Western clothes, speaking accented English, and/or for simply being newcomers to Canada. For example, Nancy noted, "Bullying in school makes it difficult, for example, one time people didn't like the clothes I wore. That day I wore the traditional Muslim clothes—a long robe and a long hijab." Students also believed that anti-immigrant racist words uttered toward them were not adequately addressed by the administration; Nancy explained: "The hardest part about Canadian schools is the amount of bullying that happens and how often *they* [emphatically stated] get away with it."

In his examination of factors that shape students' sense of school belonging, Ma (2003) noted that that if students perceive school disciplinary rules as unfair, they were more likely to develop a negative sense of belonging at school. Participants in this study reported a mismatch between what they perceived as effective and reasonable punishment for misbehavior and the type of discipline implemented at the school. Specifically, when the refugee students experienced varying degrees of harassment, they did not believe that the school administration responded adequately to those who were in the wrong.

Initially, students in this study reported that they tried following the school's protocol when confronted with anti-immigrant racism and acts of bullying; however, when they perceived their compliance to be futile, the participants took it upon themselves to handle the perceived injustices both in and out of school contexts. For example, Nancy noted,

I kept going to the office and teacher to complain about the bullying, but

> eventually I grew tired of it as they [the administration and teachers] did not help with my situation. So, I started hanging out with other Somali girls and boys. That was good because the boys would help the girls when we were getting bullied by scaring off the bully. For example, they say 'if you make fun of her one more time I will...' and then the bully goes away.

Marcus noted, "If you told the principal [nothing happens]...[but] when we fight, [it] is finished, it stops. No more fighting." The refugee students interpreted the administration's methods to deal with behavioral infractions "as not doing anything" and therefore students felt their only option was to address such situations outside of the classroom in ways they perceived as effective.

Furthermore, the participants did not differentiate between acts of physical violence and acts of verbal violence and related disciplinary actions instituted by the administration. For example, Nancy noted, "In Kenya, it is OK to hit back when you are bullied, but here you can get in trouble for hitting back, but other [Canadian] students don't get in trouble if they make fun of you." The refugee students generally believed that they received the brunt of the negative disciplinary consequences even when they perceived themselves to be the victims and thought that others should be punished for injustices served. The refugee students in this study lacked faith in the administration's disciplinary approaches.

Participants in this study believed that the Canadian disciplinary system was "too soft," particularly when they perceived punishment was well deserved for verbal and/or physical acts of bullying. Many participating students came from school systems where immediate corporal punishment was not only acceptable, but expected by the students for any type of misbehavior (e.g., inappropriate behavior in the classroom, failing to submit homework, performing poorly on a test and/or assignment, or name calling). Refugee students perceived the indirect disciplinary

methods used in Canadian schools, such as verbal warnings, detentions, and suspensions, as ineffective—they were not viewed as adequate punishments or deterrents to misbehavior. While such disciplinary methods are considered good practice in mainstream schooling, the participants perceived that their safety and well being in the school was disregarded and therefore, many felt they had to "fight in order to make [the bullying] stop."

Provide Opportunities for Students to Engage in Leadership Roles

Another factor associated with students' sense of school belonging is engagement and participation in school culture. The refugee students in this study were enthusiastic to explore leadership opportunities within their school; in fact, they craved leadership opportunities. However, the students felt that no worthwhile opportunities were available to them or that they were not supported to create opportunities for themselves. The one organized extracurricular activity at the school that focused on newcomers to Canada or students from diverse ethnic and cultural heritages was the annual multicultural fashion show. While the multicultural fashion show can help celebrate students' ethnic and/or cultural heritages, the event can also perpetuate ethnic and cultural stereotypes because it does not address critical questions about race, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and/or language. All of the participants interviewed in this study said that they wanted to become more involved in helping their communities within the school. They offered suggestions such as creating a homework lunch club or a newcomer peer helper program where students who are more familiar with the sociocultural and academic norms and expectations of school can support and mentor newcomers. A formal structure for such mentorship opportunities within the school day would provide students with time and space to offer and receive support on homework, assist with cross-cultural and linguistic translations and interpretations, and facilitate general school orientation. School support for such a peer

group could validate the skills and abilities of many of the students and encourage them to take on leadership roles. For example, the participants in this study collectively spoke over 10 different languages. Encouraging students to use their language skills to support others within their school would be one way to bring a "language as resource" perspective on schooling to an environment that is typically dominated by monolingual language practices.

The participants went on to explain that they would be willing to help form such a support network. They also thought that his type of an organization would help refugee students complete the Ontario Secondary Schools community involvement graduation requirement, which requires all students complete a minimum of 40 hours of community involvement activities. Collectively, the refugee students identified the value of and desire for creating a peer support network as a way to foster leadership opportunities among the refugee youth. Such leadership opportunities might facilitate peer outreach across the school.

Implications for Educational Contexts Servicing Students with Limited Prior Schooling

The findings from this study provide insight into factors that may contribute to or detract from creating a positive sense of school belonging among refugee youth at the secondary school level. As presented here, students' sense of school belonging influences academic motivation, engagement, and participation. These factors are directly related to school retention. As noted by Ryan and Stiller (1991), developing school community is not just "misplaced warm fuzziness" but an essential component in promoting school retention, academic achievement, and graduation, especially among youth at risk of school attrition. Schools need to create spaces that help students succeed in school socially, emotionally, and academically.

In the corporate model, when a service provider wants to better serve its clients, but does not exactly know how to go about doing so, one solution is to bring together an advisory board to

guide policy and make decisions that impact policy implementation. Oddly enough, the "clients" of the education system rarely get a voice in ways to make their school experiences more meaningful. In seeking to improve the school experiences of refugee students, not only would it be ethical to seek advice from educational system stakeholders, but it would behoove administrators and faculty to actually listen to the voices of refugee students.

Insights gleaned from the stories refugee students told about their experiences in school confirm that schools need to be safe and inviting spaces. Based on the study's findings, three recommendations are proposed for school administrators, teachers, and staff to consider when explicitly planning ways to improve refugee students' sense of school belonging: (a) provide administrators, teachers, and staff with opportunities to examine, critique, and challenge spoken or unspoken language policies in the school; (b) consider alternative methods to respond to conflict that impacts students' sense of school safety and; (c) create space for refugee youth to take up leadership roles and engage with the larger school community.

Examine, critique, and challenge school language policies. Engage ELD, ESL, and content area teachers in professional development sessions that help them critique the assumptions behind English-only policies and understand ways in which the notion of language as resource could enhance the English literacy development experiences of students with limited prior schooling. It should be noted that the Ontario ELD curriculum supports the strategic use of students' first languages in the classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Explore alternative methods to respond to school conflict. Within the framework of anti-racist and anti-bullying programming widespread in most schools in Ontario, there is a need to authentically address the anti-immigrant sentiments that refugee students encounter. Refugee students should feel that their concerns have not only been acknowledged, but addressed.

Educators need to step back and evaluate the disciplinary practices of the school so that the focus be on treating students equitably instead of trying to treat a diversity of students in the same way. The disciplinary climate needs to be culturally responsive and seek to positively contribute to cross-cultural relationships. If the refugee students view that their concerns are being addressed within the school's disciplinary climate they may be more likely to accept established rules and norms.

For example, a disciplinary method observed at the school was to have students analyze their misbehavior through writing. When a student was sent to the vice-principal's office he or she was asked to "write out her/his story and explain why she/he was sent to the office." This method encourages students to own the infraction, engage in self-reflection, and also be able to advocate for themselves. While the method is pedagogically sound for the majority of students, the writing task is unreasonable for a student who has limited to no literacy skills in her or his first language and for a student whose English language and literacy skills are emerging. In such a situation, this "mainstream" disciplinary technique would only serve to embarrass and further alienate an already marginalized student from the school community. A different type of disciplinary climate might be considered to ensure that the refugee students feel their school space is safe and that they can believe in the rules and formal structure of the school. For example, programs that encourage conflict resolution (see for example, Bodine & Crawford, 1998; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006) or restorative justice (see for example, Hopkins, 2004; Morrison, 2009; Van Ness & Strong, 2010) that work to address the roots of the issue(s) so that all stakeholders can identify and implement mitigating factors. The oral and community based nature of these activities may also help students overcome language barriers and feelings of isolation.

Provide refugee students with in-school leadership opportunities. The wide range of school-based extra-curricular activities includes academic (e.g., debate club, science club, journalism/school newspaper), athletic (e.g., varsity sports teams, intramural sports teams), recreation (e.g., school choir, chess club, drama club), and social groups (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliance group, language clubs, yearbook club). Refugee students do not necessarily see that they have space in the more traditional types of extracurricular activities found at school, but many crave opportunities to take on leadership roles and contribute to the overall school culture. Refugee students also want to interact with mainstream students in positive ways in order to overcome the feelings of segregation that can accompany enrolment in a sheltered academic program. The findings presented herewith challenge educators to reanalyze what counts as participation and engagement in school. By increasing support for leadership opportunities amongst refugee students, such as the newcomer peer helper program mentioned earlier, educators can help interested students contribute to positive change within the school community.

Concluding Thoughts

Educators have the responsibility to help students develop English language and literacy skills, critical thinking skills, content area knowledge, and academic language proficiencies within the context of the school day. Such knowledge and skills will provide students with the credentials to further their formal education and/or enter the labor market in hopes of achieving economic, cultural and social freedom for themselves and their families. However, educators need to be equally concerned with students' level of engagement and participation at school because such issues impact school retention, particularly for those at greater risk of dropping out of or disappearing from school. There is not a one-size-fits all program that will encourage

students' positive sense of school belonging; however, effective programming can be achieved by asking students questions about their experiences, listening to what they have to say, and creating partnerships with students to help change school practices and culture to meet their specific socioemotional needs. Educators have the responsibility to find ways to make school an inviting and welcoming space where learning is not only expected, but encouraged. This call to action is about more than just increasing school retention rates; it is about providing students with a space to gain and share the social, cultural, and academic knowledge they need to become active and successful participants in local and global economic, cultural, and social landscapes.

References

Author, (2012).

Author, (2010).

Author et al., (2009).

Author. (1998).

Ben-Zeev, S. (1977). The influence of bilingualism on cognitive strategy and cognitive development. *Child development, 48,* 1009-1018.

Bialystok, E. (1997). Effects of bilingualism and biliteracy on children's emerging concepts of print. *Developmental Psychology, 33*(3), 429-440.

Bialystok, E. (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy, and cognition*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Bigelow, M. H. (2010). *Mogadishu on the Mississippi*. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.

Bodine, R. J., & Crawford, D. K. (1998). *The handbook of conflict resolution education: A guide to building qulity programs in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cenoz, J., & Genesee, F. (Eds.). (1998). *Beyond Bilingualism: Multilingualism and multilingual education*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Multilingual Matters.

Chamot, A. U., & O'Malley, M. (1994). *The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2009). Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents. Retrieved from http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/research-stats/facts2008.pdf

Cook, V. (1997). The consequences of bilingualism for cognitive processing. In A. de Groot & J. F. Kroll (Eds.), *Tutorials in bilinguals: Psycholinguistic perspectives* (pp. 279-300). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cummins, J. (1979). Cognitive/academic language proficeincy, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. *Working papers on bilingualism, 19*, 121-129.

Cummins, J. (1994). The acquisition of English as a second language. In K. Spangenberg-Urbschat, & Pritchard, R. (Ed.), *Kids come in all languages: Reading instruction for ESL students* (pp. 36-62). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J., & Early, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Identity texts: The collaborative creation of power in mulitlingual schools*. Stoke-on-Trent Staffordshire, UK: Trentham Books Ltd.

DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2010). Students with limited or interrupted formal education in US classrooms. *Urban Review, 42*(2), 159-173.

Deutsch, M., Coleman, P. T., & Marcus, E. C. (Eds.). (2006). *Handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Echevarría, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D. J. (2008). *Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP model* (3rd ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.

Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59*(2), 117-142.

Fishman, J. (1966). *Language loyalty in the United States: The maintenance and perpetuation of non-English mother tongues by American ethnic and religious groups.* The Hague: The Netherlands: Mouton.

Freeman, R. (2004). *Building on community bilingualism: Promoting multilingualism through schooling.* Philadelphia: Caslon.

García Coll, C., & Magnuson, K. (1997). The psychological experience of immigration: A developmental perspective. In A. Booth, A. C. Crouter & N. Landale (Eds.), *Immigration*

and the family: Research and policy on U.S. immigrants (pp. 91-131). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Genesee, F. (1989). Early bilingual development: One language or two? *Journal of Child Language, 16*(1), 161-179.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967/1999). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education, 62*(1), 60-71.

Gunderson, L. (2007). *English-only instruction and immigrant students in secondary schools: A critical examiniation*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hopkins, B. (2004). *Just schools: A whole school approach to restorative justice*. New York: Jessica Kingsely Publishers.

Ianco-Worrall, A. (1972). Bilingualism and cognitive development. *Child development, 43,* 1390-1400.

Kaprielian-Churchill, I. (1996). Refugees and education in Canadian schools. *Review in Education, 42*(4), 349-365.

Kia-Keating, M., & Ellis, B. H. (2007). Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: Young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 12*(1), 29-43.

Latham, A. S. (1998). The advantages of bilingualism. *Educational Leadership, 56,* 79-80.

Lomong, L. (2002). *Running for my life: One lost boy's journey from the killing fields of Sudan*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Ma, X. (2003). Sense of belonging to school: Can schools make a difference? . *Journal of Educational Research, 96*(6), 340-349.

Matthews, J. (2008). Schooling and settlement: Refugee education in Australia. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 18*(1), 31-45.

May, S., & Sleeter, C. E. (Eds.). (2010). *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis*. New York: Routledge.

McBrien, J. L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States. *Review of Educational Research, 7*(3), 329-364.

Morrison, B. (2009). Restorative justice in schools. In E. Slliott & R. M. Gordon (Eds.), *New directions in restorative justice: Issues, practice, evaluation* (pp. 26-52). Portland, OR: Willan Publishing.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity, and educational change*. New York: Longman.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). The Ontario curriculum, grades 9 to 12, English as a second language and English literacy development. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/esl912currb.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008). Support English language learners with limited prior schooling: A practical guide for Ontario educators, grades 3 to 12. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/ELL_LPS.pdf

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(3), 323-367.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

QSR International Pty Ltd. (2007). NVivo 9. Cambridge, MA: QSR International.

Radwanski, G. (1987). *Ontario study of the relevance of education, and the issue of dropouts*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Ministry of Education.

Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal, 8*(2), 15-34.

Ryan, R., & Stiller, J. (1991). The social contexts of internalization: Parent and teacher influences on autonomy, motivation, and learning. In P. Pintrich & M. Maehr (Eds.), *Advances in motivation andachievement* (Vol. 7, pp. 115-149). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Sánchez, B., Colón, Y., & Esparza, P. (2005). The role of sense of school belonging and gender in the academic adjustment of Latino adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*(6), 619-628.

Skuttnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Stewart, J. (2010). *Supporting refugee children: Strategies for educators*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Strekalova, E., & Hoot, J. L. (2008). What is special about special needs of refugee children? Guidelines for teachers. *Multicultural Education, 16*(1), 21-24.

Tadesse, S., Hoot, J., & Watson-Thompson, O. (2009). Exploring the special needs of African refugee children in U.S. schools. *Childhood Education, 85*(6), 352-356.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2010). *2009 Global Trends: Refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, internally displaced and stateless persons*. Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html

Van Ness, D. W., & Strong, K. H. (2010). *Restoring justice: An introduction to restorative justice* (4th ed.). New Providence, NJ: Matthew Bender & Company.

Waniganayake, M. (2001). From playing with guns to playing with rice: The challenges of working with refugee children. *Childhood Education, 77*(5), 289-294.

Watt, D., & Roessingh, H. (2001). The dynamics of ESL drop-out: Plus ça change... *Canadian Modern Language Review, 58*(2), 203-222.

Wilkinson, L. (2002). Factors influencing the academic success of refugee youth in Canada. *Journal of Youth Studies, 5*(2), 173-193.

APPENDIX A

Interview guide

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about any particular successes and/or challenges you have experienced or are experiencing at school?
3. Tell me about a typical school day.
4. Tell me about any school activities in which you are involved.
5. Tell me about your learning experiences within the English literacy development (ELD) program/course.
6. Tell me about a time when you needed help/assistance at school.