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## Somali Refugee Students in Canadian Schools: Pre-Migration Experiences and Challenges in Refugee Camps

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# **Somali Refugee Students in Canadian Schools: Premigration Experiences and Challenges in Refugee Camps**

## **Les élèves réfugiés Somaliens dans les écoles canadiennes : Les expériences de prémigration et les défis dans les camps de réfugiés**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the premigration challenges experienced by Somali refugee students in refugee camp before resettling in Canada. The findings were drawn from a qualitative research that was designed to investigate the premigration and postmigration experiences of Somali refugee students attending English public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada. The method of data collection in the study was semi-structured one-on-one interviews. A total of six Somali refugee students were interviewed. The exploration into the participants' experiences revealed that they faced many premigration challenges in refugee camps. Members of the school community, including educators, administrators, and students have a major role to play in supporting Somali newcomers with their integration.

### **Résumé**

Le but de cet article est de faire la lumière sur les défis de prémigration expérimentés par les élèves réfugiés Somaliens dans les camps de réfugiés avant de se réinstaller au Canada. Les résultats sont tirés d'une étude qualitative qui a été conçue afin d'investiguer les expériences de prémigration et de post-migration des élèves réfugiés Somaliens qui fréquentent des écoles publiques anglophones dans une ville du Sud-Ouest en Ontario, au Canada. La méthode de collecte de données dans cette étude était des entretiens semi-structurés en tête-à-tête. Au total, six élèves réfugiés Somaliens ont été interrogés. L'exploration des expériences de ces participants a révélé qu'ils ont fait face à beaucoup de défis de prémigration dans les camps de réfugiés. Les membres de la communauté scolaire, y compris les éducateurs, les administrateurs et les élèves, ont un rôle majeur à jouer afin d'aider les nouveaux venus Somaliens à s'intégrer.

**Key words:** Somali refugee; premigration experience, challenges

**Mots-clés :** réfugié Somalien, expérience de prémigration, défis

### **Introduction**

Thousands of people worldwide are forced to flee their homes every year to save their lives and search for safety and protection. More than 43 million people worldwide are currently displaced as a result of armed conflicts or natural disasters (United Nations [UN], 2015). In recent years, the devastating and destructive war in Syria that started in 2011 has forced thousands of Syrians to flee their country and seek refuge in safer locations. The responsibilities among the developed countries to settle Syrian refugees became a significant political issue last year, and soon enough, the education of the refugee children will emerge as one of the key concerns of those countries that have accepted the refugees.

Every year, Canada sponsors thousands of world refugees to resettle in the country to provide them with a safe haven. According to the Government of Canada (2016), "Refugees are people who have fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution, and who are therefore unable to return home" (The refugee system in Canada section). By sponsoring and protecting thousands of refugees every year, Canada maintains its well-respected humanitarian tradition on the international stage. In the last decade, Canada has welcomed thousands of refugee

families from countries affected by war or natural disasters, including Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, and most recently Syria (Government of Canada, 2015).

After resettlement in Canada, refugee students are likely to experience higher risk of academic underachievement than immigrant students in part due to untreated psychological trauma and educators' lack of understanding of refugee children's premigration experiences and current needs. Teachers and social workers have been documenting the needs of refugee children to improve resettlement services, yet not enough is known about how refugee children are adapting to Canadian school system in order to inform pedagogical approaches and school measures for the benefits of these children. Research on the needs of refugee children in school is lacking documentation on the children's direct experiences (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010). As a result, their special needs are not well understood by educators and the school community in their host country. This study begins to fill this gap by asking six children between ages 12 to 14 from one of the largest refugee groups (Somali) settling in Canada about their premigration and postmigration challenges and experiences as they adapt to a new culture and school system in a southwestern city in Ontario.

### **Background Information**

Somalia is located in the northeast region of the African continent with its population estimated at 10.8 million in 2014 (World Population Review, 2015). Most people in Somalia are Muslim (Middle East Policy Council, 2005), and the country's two official languages are Somali and Arabic. As a result of a long and ongoing civil war that started in Somalia in 1991, and major droughts that hit the country in recent years, thousands of Somalis are displaced and forced to flee their country. According to Nilsson, Barazanji, Heintzelman, Siddiqi, and Shilla (2012), "citizens originating from Somalia compose the third largest group of refugees under the United Nations' responsibility" (p. 240).

Canada has sponsored thousands of Somali refugee families to resettle on Canadian land. Although Somali-Canadian communities have been established in major Canadian provinces and cities such as Montreal, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, the majority of those families have resettled in the province of Ontario. According to Canadian Friends of Somalia [CFS] (2016), "it is estimated that there are around 140,000 Somalis living in Toronto, and followed by Ottawa (20,000)" (Somali Canadian Facts section). Somali-Canadian communities have also been established in other major cities in Ontario including the one in the southwest region of the province where this study took place. Based on the 2011 National Household Survey, the Somali-Canadian population (based on ethnic origin) in the region where this research took place was 875 (Statistics Canada, 2015). It is important to note that these population statistics include not only Somali refugees, but also Somali immigrants and Canadian-born Somalis who were identified as Somali.

Once in Canada, Somali refugee children begin a new chapter of challenges with settlement and integration into Canadian society and the school system. In addition to the traumatic experiences that refugee children faced in their country of origin or in refugee camps, they also face difficulties of integration in their host country (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). One of the biggest challenges for Somali children newcomers is dealing with emotional distress and issues related to mental health resulting from the premigration experiences and complex integration process.

The emotional challenges Somali refugee students deal with are caused by the difficult situations and hardships they experienced in Somalia or in refugee camps. Refugees are admitted and allowed to resettle in their host country because of fear of violence and persecution in their country of origin (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Prior to resettlement in Canada, Somali refugee students and their families lived in conflict zones or have spent most of their life living in a refugee camp. They struggled with access to basic human needs such as shelter, food, water and clothing, and as a

result of war, some children may have experienced bereavement or separation from family members. Consequently, there is a risk that these children might develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after resettlement in Canada, a severe condition caused by exposure to traumatic events such as the loss of family members or the threat of death.

Somali refugee students also deal with many academic challenges in Canadian schools. Before resettlement in Canada, these children may have received very little education as a result of living in conflict zones or refugee camps for years; their weak literacy and numeracy skills may cause academic underachievement in Canadian schools. As Taylor and Sidhu (2012) emphasized, refugees who are fortunate to resettle in a host country experience educational challenges as a result of receiving limited or no formal education during the long time spent in refugee camps.

The premigration and postmigration challenges experienced by Somali refugee students and their special needs are not fully understood by educators and the school communities in their host country. Educators are often not aware of their past experiences, learning challenges and emotional distress, which have a detrimental effect on their mental health and academic achievement. In addition, much of the available research on the experiences of refugee students is devoid of the children's voices and stories. As Prior and Niesz (2013) noted, less research explores refugee children's experiences from their own stories and perspectives as they adapt to a new culture and school system in their host country.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the premigration and postmigration challenges and experiences of a group of Somali refugee students attending public schools in a southwestern city in the province of Ontario. We chose Somali refugee students as subjects of this study because the first author who has been a teacher of Somali refugee students for many years, learned through daily experiences about the challenges they experienced with settlement and integration in Canadian schools. His colleague teachers often expressed difficulties in understanding these students' various needs and how to best support them.

This paper focuses on the participants' premigration experiences and challenges in the refugee camps before resettlement in Canada. The study findings about participants' postmigration experiences and challenges will be reported in another paper. In the following sections, we will provide literature review and theoretical framework, describe our methods and procedures, present our findings, and conclude with a discussion that offers strategies and approaches for educators and school professionals working with Somali refugee students.

## **Literature Review**

Since we found very few examples pertaining to Somali refugees in our literature review, we explored the literature on refugee and immigrant students from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. The following themes emerged from the extant literature: differences between refugees and immigrants, premigration experiences, and challenges for educators.

### ***Refugees and Immigrants: The Differences***

Although immigrant and refugee students are similar in the way that they are both new arrivals to the country, and are in the process of settling and integrating into a new culture and school system, the challenges experienced by refugee students may differ largely from immigrant students. Refugee families usually come from countries affected by war and severe conflicts, and upon arrival to their host country, a refugee status protects them from being returned to their country of origin (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006).

While refugee families are forced to escape, immigrant families choose to emigrate to other countries to search for better living conditions. As Kirova (2010) explained, “unlike most immigrants who had given the decision due consideration, and who had time to physically and emotionally prepare themselves for the resettlement process, refugees had not intended to leave their country of origin” (p. 75). Immigrant families including parents and children are usually intact when they come into the country, whereas refugee families may resettle in a host country without some of their family members who were unable to escape the war or conflict zones.

Immigrant children’s education in the home country usually continues uninterrupted. However, according to the Ministry of Education of British Columbia (2009), the education of refugee children may be interrupted or postponed due to strife in their home country or a long wait in a refugee camp. As a result of learning interruptions and missed-school time in the country of origin or refugee camps, refugee children do not develop the necessary academic foundation to perform well in school in the host country. After resettlement, the risk of academic underachievement with refugee students is likely to be higher than with immigrant students.

The profound psychological affects in refugee students brought about by experiences of war and trauma may not be necessarily present within immigrant children. According to Segal and Mayadas (2005), challenges experienced by refugees in their home country may include separation from family and relatives, loss of personal property, and exposure to violence. In addition, as a result of spending many years in refugee camps without proper nutrition, shelter, and medical assistance, many refugees develop physical problems and psychological challenges (McBrien, 2011). This sense of loss and trauma may have a psychological impact on refugee children for long periods of time even after resettling in a host country.

### ***Premigration Experiences***

Children living in countries affected by war and violence experience many hardships and difficulties. These challenges are referred to as premigration experiences because they occur in the country of origin or in refugee camps before refugees resettle in a host country. Families who escaped the war may live in refugee camps for months or years where they face further challenges while awaiting resettlement in a host country (Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

Among the many challenges faced by refugee children in their country of origin or in refugee camps are issues associated with receiving education. Due to conflict and lack of resources, they receive little or no education before resettling in their host country. It is also possible that “many resettled refugee students have no past experience with schools” (McBrien, 2011, p. 76). These students may have little or no formal school experiences, which results in innumeracy and illiteracy in their first language as well as in English. Even if schools exist in refugee camps, they are often poorly constructed and lack resources. In describing schools in refugee camps, Mareng (2010) noted that due to the lack of a conventional school building, students are often sent home due to heavy wind, dust or rain; the shortage of resources stalls students’ education progress and results in poor performance.

Children living in countries with war or in refugee camps may also be deprived of healthy foods and proper nutrition. Among African countries, “the ongoing conflict in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo has contributed significantly to the level of hunger in the two countries” (World Food Programme, 2016, What causes hunger? section). Children in Somalia suffer from shortage of food while the water they drink is often contaminated; this raises major concerns with respect to their health and proper nutrition. The ongoing fight as well as long periods of drought “forces millions of people to flee their homes, leading to hunger emergencies as the

displaced find themselves without the means to feed themselves” (World Food Programme, 2016, What causes hunger? section). Refugee students who came from war-torn countries or refugee camps may also have serious physical concerns as a result of poor nutrition and/or experience with violence. At times during their journey to a safer place or a refugee camp, they would run out of food and water and they would have to squeeze whatever moisture they could from the muddy ground to keep from dying of thirst (Vongkhamphra, Davis, & Adem, 2011).

The children may also be exposed to torture or sexual abuse. Refugee students may have experienced violence as a result of the war in their country, which often leads to emotional and psychological challenges. Refugee children who have experienced severe traumatic experiences, such as the loss of a family member or their home, will experience emotional difficulties (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). These difficult traumatic experiences lead to deep emotional challenges for refugee children, putting them at risk of developing mental health problems and PTSD that have a major impact on their health and well-being.

### ***Challenges for Educators***

While refugee students face their own challenges of settlement and integration into their host country, educators working with them also experience challenges in understanding their specific needs. Teachers are often not fully aware of the premigration and postmigration challenges that refugee students deal with when they go to schools in their host country. As Taylor and Sidhu (2012) emphasized, understanding the reasons why people are forced to escape their country of origin and recognizing the barriers to social inclusion for young refugees are crucial for educators.

The student population in Canadian and U.S. public schools continues to increase in diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, and language. As stressed by Roxas (2011a & b), an important priority for teachers today is to provide an education program that is responsive to the different cultures represented in their class. This is a challenging task for teachers since refugee students enter their classrooms with many learning needs and various degrees of English language proficiency. In addition to meeting the specific needs of refugee students who have had limited formal schooling experiences, teachers have to find the best ways to effectively teach both refugee students and native English speakers in the same classroom (Roxas, 2008).

Often, educators are uncomfortable and not ready to support refugee students in coping with frustration and stress. As Szente, Hoot, and Taylor (2006) explained, “one of the major outcomes of our interviews with teachers was that they did not feel prepared to address the emotional stress experienced by refugee children” (p. 16). Teachers may not have all the tools or necessary training to meet the emotional needs of refugee children to help them deal with their traumatic experiences.

As Loerke (2009) suggested, it is essential for teachers to receive mentoring and in-service training on the best education practices to ensure newcomers are integrated successfully into the schools. Training provided to teachers will increase their knowledge and understanding of the challenges experienced by refugee children. Some ministries of education also stress the importance of providing educators with mentoring and professional learning opportunities. The Ministry of Education of British Columbia (2009) emphasizes that school staff needs to be presented with professional development opportunities geared toward understanding and meeting the unique needs of refugee students. Also, in discussing how to best support the mental health of refugee students, the Ministry of Education of Ontario (2013) stresses the importance for school staff to participate in programs that train educators how to teach social and emotional skills, and strategies that enhance resilience.

## **Theoretical Framework**

We relied on the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy to guide this study. This theory values cultural knowledge and different ways of knowing, and stresses the importance of using this knowledge in the classroom to promote good educational experiences for all students (Howard, 2003). Culturally responsive teachers take the time to learn and become familiar with their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in order to help meet their needs. In a culturally responsive classroom, students' cultural backgrounds, languages spoken, and different ways of knowing are celebrated and valued by educators and other students.

This theory provided us with perspectives that helped understand the children's premigration and postmigration experiences, and served as a lens for data analysis and interpretation. Examining the participants' stories and perspectives through a culturally responsive pedagogy lens helped us understand their past and current school experiences and allowed us to design strategies that will support their settlement, integration and inclusion in the classroom and school system.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### ***Research Design***

This research investigated the premigration and postmigration challenges experienced by Somali refugee students in public schools in a southwestern city in Ontario, Canada. It was designed to investigate and understand those challenges from the perspectives of the participated Somali refugee students through their life stories. As explained by Creswell (1998), this type of qualitative research is designed to understand the experiences of individuals from their own perspectives using their own words. The researchers in this study were active learners who would describe the participants' experiences from the perspectives of the later rather than passing their own perspective and judgment on the study participants.

This qualitative study employed methods from multiple-case study and ethnographic research approaches. According to Berg and Lune (2012), ethnography research focuses on "the study of culture" and places researchers "in the midst of whatever it is they study to examine various phenomena as perceived by participants and represent these observations as accounts" (p. 197). Somali refugee students who participated in this research share a similar cultural background as well as previous experiences living in refugee camps. They were also bounded by the same system since they attended schools in the public board of education. The study cases in this investigation were individual Somali refugee students who participated in the research. This study was conducted between 2013-2014 and took one year to complete.

### ***Research Setting***

This research was conducted in a Somali community organization in the southwestern region of Ontario. This organization offers support to the Somali-Canadian community through various programs and activities. After presenting the research proposal to the organization's president, the organization was interested in supporting the research and granted access to some of its programs involving Somali refugee children. These programs focused on supporting the children with school-related work, and provided opportunities for recreation and sports activities.

### ***Volunteering in the Setting***

Before any participant recruitment took place, the first author volunteered in some of the programs offered by the organization. He mainly provided learning support with homework to the children who attended the programs after regular school hours. He also helped supervise recreation and

sports activities. This allowed the first author to establish positive relationships with the students, their parents, program organizers, and other organization members, to create interactions and connections based on trust and respect. Volunteering in the setting helped the first author to begin the process of recruiting participants by identifying children who fit the selection criteria.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

With the support of a key informant, the first author began to identify children in the organization who fit the selection criteria. According to Creswell (1998), key informants are individuals who can provide useful insights and information about potential participants in the study. The key informant in this study was the Somali community organization president who worked very closely with the Somali community and the programs offered by the organization. She helped the first author in identifying children who fit the selection criteria and potential participants for the study.

The first author and the Somali community organization president met with potential participants, explained the study purpose and procedures, and answered any questions the children had. The children were then provided with a letter of information and a consent form to share with their parent(s)/guardian(s). Most of the children's parent(s) attended the programs offered by the organization with their children. This gave the first author the opportunity to explain the research in person and answer any questions the parents had. A couple of the parents who did not attend the programs with their children contacted the first author by telephone to inquire about the study after receiving the letter of information.

It is important to note that since the first author is of Lebanese-Canadian origin and only communicates in English and Arabic, he was only able to use these two languages to communicate with the parents. Most of the children's parents spoke English well enough for the purpose of this study. For the parents who did not speak English, the first author was able to communicate with them either in Arabic, or through the translation of the organization president if they only spoke Somali. In addition to the consent provided by the children's parents, all the children who participated had to provide their own assent to participate since they were old enough to understand the objectives of the study.

### ***Sampling Method***

According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2011), when sampling in a qualitative study, the researcher almost always follows a purposive sampling approach. The specific purposive sampling technique used in this study was criterion sampling. With the help of the Somali community organization president, the key informant in this study, the children who met the selection criteria were identified and recruited to participate in the research. With consent from the children's parents, all students who provided their assent to participate were selected to conduct the semi-structured one-on-one interview.

### ***Participants***

The selection criteria for the participants were based on culture, gender, age, and language proficiency. The total number of participants in this study was six: three girls and three boys. All the children were Somali refugee students attending public schools in a southwestern region in the province of Ontario. The students' ages ranged from 12-13 years old. Three participants came from refugee camps in Kenya and three from refugee camps in Eritrea. Three participants had been in Canada for seven years and three for five years. Three students reported that they spoke

Somali and a little bit of Arabic when they came to Canada, while three participants only spoke Somali when they came.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

To understand the experiences of the participants, a semi-structured one-on-one interview was performed with each participant in their natural setting at the Somali community organization. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews took place in March and April 2014. All the interviews were conducted in English since the participants were comfortable with communicating in the language. During these interviews, the participants were asked to answer some open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. As described by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), the semi-structured approach in conducting the one-on-one interviews allowed the researcher to include additional questions based on the answers and stories shared by the participants.

An interview protocol with a set of open-ended questions was used to guide the interview process. The questions were developed using student-friendly language, easy for the participants to understand and carefully worded to avoid unnecessary discomfort. The first section of the interview focused on demographic information such as age, languages spoken, length of time in Canada, and premigration experiences before resettlement in Canada. The questions prompted the students to share stories and knowledge about their previous schooling experiences in their country of origin or in refugee camps as well as the challenges they experienced in meeting their basic human needs, such as food, shelter, medical assistance, and safety before arrival in Canada. The other sections of the interview focused on postmigration experiences in Canada specifically related to their socio-cultural, emotional, and learning challenges at school. The last section focused on existing systems in the school that the participants felt were supportive to their settlement, integration process, and success in school. As mentioned before, this paper only focuses on the participants' premigration experiences in refugee camps before they resettled in Canada.

With consent from the parents and the participants, all the interviews were audio recorded in digital format in order for the data to be transcribed and analyzed. Conducting the interviews during program times at the organization allowed enough time for each interview to be completed. On average, each semi-structured one-on-one interview took about 40 minutes to complete.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected from each participant, we employed the process of member checking. After the data was collected and transcribed, the first author met with each participant to ensure they were comfortable with all the information they had provided. This process also gave them an opportunity to reflect on the content of their interview, to make changes, or to elaborate on a specific topic. When they asked for any data to be changed, modified or removed, we carried out the requests and made the necessary changes.

After the interviews were performed, and the process of member checking to ensure credibility of the data was completed, the first author continued to volunteer in the programs at the Somali community organization for a short period of time as part of an exit plan. The participants needed to feel and know that they were important and valued, and that their participation was greatly appreciated.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data collected was transcribed, organized, and analyzed through a content analysis approach. The data analysis process started with open coding and marking units of text with codes. With an abundance of available codes, we grouped similar codes together to form themes. Each theme was then divided into subcategories. This process helped reduce the large amount of data to a small

set of themes. The data analysis phase generated a deep understanding of the premigration challenges experienced by the participants.

### **Findings**

Findings from the semi-structured one-on-one interviews revealed four themes on premigration experiences: (1) lack of basic necessities of life, (2) no formal education, (3) violence and abuse, and (4) refugee camp memories.

#### ***Lack of Basic Necessities of Life***

The children reported that they had a very difficult life in refugee camps before arriving in Canada. The stories they shared suggest that children living in these camps struggle in receiving the basic necessities of life. The participants had limited access to food, clean water, financial support, clothes, shelter, and medical assistance.

#### ***Shortage of food***

All of the children said that they only ate once in the morning and once at night in the refugee camps due to shortage of food. One participant shared, “My mom used to buy few food and we used to eat in the morning and at night only because the food is a lot of money and you can’t buy that much, and we didn’t have much money.”<sup>1</sup> According to the children, the mothers did their best in dividing the available food equally between all family members so they could all share the food. However, at times when the children became very hungry, the mothers were placed in difficult situations, and were forced to beg for food. One child described this situation as followed:

Whenever I cry for food, my mom says, “We don’t have enough,” she yells at me like, “I can’t do nothing, are you guys gonna eat me now? I am human. . . .” I said, “No, I don’t wanna eat you, I just want food, I’m gonna die if I don’t eat.” So she says, “Okay, I’m gonna go and beg for food, all the people beg for food.”

Dealing with hunger was very difficult for the young children; some of them said they had no other options but to steal food in order to survive. In the words of one child, “sometimes I had to steal because I was hungry; my mom didn’t know, if I saw someone eating, I would say, ‘Can I have some?’ If they say, ‘No, sorry it’s little,’ I had to steal their food and run.” Unsurprisingly, this child was well aware that stealing is bad and inappropriate, as he added, “I only stole because I had to survive, I had to make it, I didn’t want to die; I never wanna go back to that, I never wanna have to steal food again.”

Some of the children shared sad stories relating to hunger and shortage of food. One participant recounted the following event: “My great-granduncle died because of hunger, he used to live with us in the tent, and then I was worried for my life because I always used to be hungry, not enough food, I was scared.” Another participant reflected on having to clean some of the food that was made available to his family; as he described, “The food they used to give us had stuff in it sometimes, like little insects or bugs. It wasn’t always clean and you had to take it out.” Having limited food, the children did their best to survive and were well aware that they had to share whatever food available to them with the rest of their family members.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to keep the original dialogues intact without interfering the flow of the sentences, the participants’ dialogues cited in the text were kept in their original transcripts without correction of grammar

### ***No clean water***

The children expressed that people living in refugee camps have to walk to a well and wait in line to get water. One student remembered the following event: “We gotta go to this place and pour water and take turns. We had to wait in a big line. It was like a well. . .and we had to carry the water. It was heavy bringing it back.” At times, water was not available in the camp and it was the responsibility of the men to bring water to everyone. As one child described, “sometimes there’s no water, the well runs out, people will beg each other for water, and like 10 men that are strong they have to go to the city and get water and then give it to everyone.” Some of the participants said it was difficult to get water and sometimes they had to dig their own water. One participant said that when he was thirsty, he drank whatever water was available. He explained, “the water was right from the ground, we just picked it up and there’s dirt in it, and we drank it because we needed to drink, that’s why Somali people are not healthy, and they need more medical stuff.”

### ***No financial support***

The children shared that their families had difficult financial situations and that their parents only had a small amount of money. One participant reported, “My mom didn’t have that much money to put us in school, she used all the money for food, and so we did not go anymore,” and another added, “My sister got kicked out of school because of not being able to pay the money.” When discussing toys and games that were available for children in the refugee camps, the participants said there were some toys, but they were too expensive and a lot of people could not afford them. One child remembered when his mother bought him a toy, “My mom only bought me a toy once in Eid (Muslim holiday) because she had money that time; she was happy, and then I was happy.” Most of the participants were worried that their relatives still living in refugee camps or Somalia might not have enough money; one of them shared, “My relatives called my mom and said, ‘We need money, because there’s no food and we live in a refugee camp.’” Struggling with money in the refugee camps has influenced the way some refugee parents manage their money when they first came to Canada; one participant discussed how his mother was careful in spending the money when they first came to Canada because she was afraid that it will all be gone, as he explained,

My mom now thinks it is safe to spend money, but first time when she came here she used to keep this money. She says, ‘If I buy this thing, this whole money will be like gone’, and she thinks it is still the same like in refugee camp, because it takes time to relax and learn to say: Here [in Canada] it is safe.

### ***Clothes in bad condition***

Participants talked about having to wear clothes that were in bad condition and not being able to buy new clothes. One of the children shared the following: “In refugee camp, no one had nice clothes. . .The clothes we have is like ripped or like they’re half ripped.” A number of the students said they never went shopping for new clothes; one child added, “Over there [refugee camp] we wouldn’t go buy like clothes and stuff we need.” Although the children had to wear clothes that were sometimes ripped, they did not raise this issue as much as they did for the problem they had with hunger; it was evident that they were much more worried about having enough food to eat than having new clothes.

### ***Inadequate shelter***

All the participants reported that they lived with their family in a tent: “You know how in Canada, houses are made from bricks, it wasn’t like that, our house was made with sticks, wood, rocks, and

things like that. It wasn't comfortable because when it rains hard the rain goes in my house." The children expressed that they didn't feel safe sleeping in the tents. One student said, "It wasn't safe back then because we used to sleep outside at the refugee camp on the ground and were scared spiders might eat us or something or snakes, and the weather was hot." The same student added, "my brother was hurt back home; he got eaten by a tarantula spider or something when he was sleeping. . . my dad picked him up on his shoulder and ran with him to the hospital because there wasn't ambulances." One child expressed how he never wants to sleep on the ground again in a refugee camp: "I don't wanna go back to sleeping on the ground. That hurts. The ground was bumpy, there's rocks."

### ***Very limited medical assistance***

Lastly, some participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the medical service provided for refugees living in the refugee camps. They have noticed a big difference between the medical service provided to them here in Canada and the medical service in refugee camps. One participant described how hospitals in the refugee camp do not emphasize on the patient's records as much as the hospitals do in Canada: "There [refugee camp] you don't have to go to the hospital, and if you go to hospital they don't ask too much about stuff like your birthday; all they have is needles, all pills, that's it." All the children reported full satisfaction and happiness with the medical service they are receiving in Canada.

### ***No Formal Education***

Although all the participants expressed a passion for education, they all reported that they had limited or no formal school experiences in the refugee camps before arriving in Canada. One participant shared, "I never went to school in Kenya [refugee camp], I never learned math, English, and other subjects." Some of the children did not go to school because they did not meet the age requirement; you had to be older than 10 years old to attend school. One girl stated, "I didn't go to school in refugee camp; school isn't like here. . . If you're 10 years old or younger you don't go to school, you stay home. . . if you're older than 10 years you go to school", and she added, "when we came here I was seven years old [Grade 1] and that was the first time I went to school." Some of the children shared that they had to pay to attend school but their parents could not afford it: "I didn't go to school there [refugee camp]; my mom couldn't afford school, so we just stayed home." Others shared that there was no school building in their location in the refugee camp; instead they attended Somali language classes or Quran (Islam's central religious text) classes that were offered in a tent. One girl explained, "I didn't go to school there [refugee camp] because they didn't really start school there, they didn't start building the school, so little kids were just learning Quran in this tent place." One boy said he went to school for a bit, but the learning was often interrupted, "the school used to close a lot, and sometimes open only on Saturdays and Sundays."

The few participants who experienced going to school in the refugee camps reported that hitting was used as a form of discipline in the school: "The school that we go to in the camp used to whip us, they hit us if you couldn't read. . . and they don't bring you to a hospital if you're hurt, all they do is to send you home." One participant explained that in the refugee camp, students had to be quiet in school during eating time, as he explained, "when it is time to eat, you have to be quiet and stuff, if you don't, they're gonna rock you, they're gonna take a stick and rock you with it." One participant admitted that when he first attended school in Canada, he was scared the teachers might hit him; he did not know that teachers in Canadian schools do not hit students: "I was afraid of the teachers, I thought they would hit me, I just couldn't believe that these teachers

wouldn't hit me." Due to his past experiences in the refugee camp, it took this student a long time to finally believe that teachers in Canada will not hit him; he added,

Until like I was here [in Canada] four years, I stopped thinking about the teachers are gonna hit me, and I'm like now I know Canada is safe, now I know the teachers will not hit me, and I can tell them about my problems.

Another student pointed out that when Somali refugee students come to Canada and attend school, they have to learn that teachers in Canada do not hit students. He stated, "When new Somali kids come to my school [in Canada], they are scared. They ask me: 'Is the teacher gonna beat me up?' and I'm like: 'No, there's no such thing as getting beat up here, you're okay.'"

### ***Violence and Abuse***

Most participants recalled sad stories or events of family members or relatives being hurt in the refugee camps or during the war in Somalia. One girl shared, "My mom was like hurt because of the problems that happened in Somalia, she had a bad injury, I don't know what happened." A boy reported that some of his relatives died in the Somali war, and he added, "my mom's brother, there was the war, and some bad people gave him food, but it is actually not food. It has something that makes your stomach fat and your stomach explodes, and that's how he died." Another girl stated that her dad was hurt and shared the following event: "My dad was hurt back home, I think he was getting food for our family or something, and he got shot in his leg, and you can see like he has this scar in his leg."

One of the participants reported issues relating to rape; he recalled the following incident from the refugee camp:

If you're a girl, the military boys might rape you. . . I know this because it happened to my sister. She almost got raped, and my brother was there with her. My sister and my brother started running and he ran after them, and they came back to the refugee camp and were safe.

The same boy added, "sometimes they [military boys] might try to come in the refugee camp and rape people in the camp even though the government said you can't do that." For the participants, the refugee camp was not a safe place, and one child described it by saying "everything that happens there [refugee camp] was all about violence, there's like never peace."

### ***Refugee Camp Memories***

The participants repeatedly referred back to events that took place in the refugee camp and most of their memories were revolved around events that made them sad. One boy reported how his mom and baby sister were separated when his mom escaped Somalia to a refugee camp; he explained, "when my mom escaped from Somalia to Eritrea [refugee camp] she left my baby sister in Somalia with my grandma because she was worried in the camp there is no food. . . we talk to her by phone sometimes." Another participant said, "most of the time I used to feel alone", and he continued to say, "I remember when I got sick because there was no water, I was crying and like if you were there you would get sick often every time because there is no one that cares about your health." One participant shared how he got in trouble once for stealing bread to feed his hungry siblings:

They put me in jail [in refugee camp] because I stole a piece of bread, okay, okay, a whole bag of bread [smiled], and I gave it to my brothers because like even our stomachs, our bones were showing and all that, and my mom paid to get me out.

It is important to mention that this child went on to express his regret for stealing and said, “I would never do that again, I just had to do that because my brothers were very hungry and I wanted to get them food.” Some of the students talked about how the refugee place was a sad place to be in. One participant described the refugee camp by saying, “in refugee camp, no one was happy, no one had a smile, no one had money or nice clothes.” Another child shared the following thoughts on the camp: “There's no peace, I don't wanna go back to getting hurt almost every day and sleeping on the ground that hurts. . . I don't wanna go back to my mom crying, I never saw her happy there.”

One participant, however, pointed out one aspect of the refugee camp that he felt was positive, as he explained,

Something that I liked very much and some people have it here [in Canada] was all of us that were in the camp used to help each other. They used to be one. . . . When one person needs help, they gather around, everyone pays money and tries to get them food, that's what I liked.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the premigration experiences of Somali refugee students. The exploration of the participants' experiences showed that they faced many challenges in refugee camps before they resettled in Canada. The discussion that follows will situate our findings in the literature and body of knowledge on refugee children. First, we will discuss the challenges the students experienced in refugee camps with the intent to provide descriptions and explanations for the experiences. Second, we will recommend some strategies and approaches for educators to help Somali refugee students experience a successful settlement and integration process into the school system.

### ***Premigration Challenges in Refugee Camp***

The Somali refugee students and their families we interviewed in this study experienced many challenges in refugee camps before arriving in Canada. Life in refugee camps was very difficult for the children because they had limited or no access to basic necessities of life; they did not have enough food, water, clothes, or adequate shelter. This aligns with the views that refugee children often experience psychological and physical problems as a result of the lack of nutrition and medical service (McBrien, 2011; World Food Programme, 2016).

Most of the students did not attend school in the refugee camps. The few children who did attend school recalled that hitting was used as a form of punishment, and their education was often interrupted because the school was often closed. This finding validates the discussion in the literature about the many challenges and difficulties refugee children experience when receiving education in refugee camps (Mareng, 2010; McBrien, 2011; Ministry of Education of British Columbia, 2009).

Most of the children remembered incidents where family members or relatives were hurt as a result of the violence that took place either in the refugee camps or in Somalia. Most of the students' memories of events were situations that made them feel sad, worried, or scared. The stories and memories shared by the children were very similar to the existing knowledge in the body of literature that discusses the refugee children's emotional challenges resulting from exposure to violence, separation from family members, and loss of their home (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

The premigration challenges and experiences of Somali refugee students led to issues and problems that emerge when students first attended school in Canada. For example, they came to school with limited or no formal education experiences; they experienced challenges in

establishing social connections; and they worried about family members or relatives still living in the refugee camps or in Somalia. These discoveries substantiate the explanation given by Pine and Drachman (2005) regarding the many issues that may emerge for refugee students in their host country including concerns for those left behind, adjustment to a new way of life, and post-traumatic stress for people who witnessed violence. These findings suggest that Somali refugee students need lots of emotional, social, and academic support when they first come to Canadian schools. Without these types of support, it would be difficult for them to make any academic progress or experience success in school.

### **Strategies and Approaches for a Successful Settlement and Integration in School**

The school community, including educators, administrators, and students, plays a major role in supporting Somali refugee students to help them settle and integrate into the school system. Educators need to develop some strategies and approaches to welcome Somali refugee students into their classrooms.

*Create a welcoming environment.* Since Somali refugee students experienced many difficulties and hardships in refugee camps, they need to feel safe, welcomed, and cared for by educators working with them. In order for the children to successfully integrate into the school system, it is essential for educators to adopt a welcoming approach, to work with the students to nurture positive attitudes when dealing with their challenges.

As stressed in the literature, educators working with refugee children should provide a classroom environment that is responsive to the students' cultural backgrounds and needs (Roxas, 2011a & b). Teachers should strive towards establishing culturally responsive classrooms that promote multicultural respect and tolerance by teaching about the different cultures and traditions represented in their class. In culturally responsive classrooms, students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and different ways of knowing the world are valued and respected. Educators should promote the different perspectives and unique ideas that refugee students bring to the classroom to enrich the learning process. By allowing children to bring their own identities and experiences to the classroom and to make connections with their home life, culturally responsive teachers can help refugee students feel included (Iddings & Katz, 2007). It is also important for other students to understand the experiences of refugee children in their classes so they could help them experience feelings of belonging and care.

*Understand the specific needs.* Since Somali refugee students come to school with many premigration challenges, it is the best for educators to work with them as an initial step to understand their specific needs. The literature emphasizes the need for educators to work with refugee students to understand the reasons behind their escape from their country of origin and their experiences living in refugee camps (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). With knowledge of the students' needs, teachers could develop comprehensive student profiles that accurately describe the academic, social, and emotional needs or challenges of each child. With these profiles, teachers can apply specific strategies or approaches to meet the specific needs of each child. These profiles should be shared with all educators working with Somali refugee students for the purpose of providing proper support to meet their specific needs.

*Provide emotional and mental support.* Due to past experiences in refugee camps, many Somali refugee students may suffer emotional and mental stress that can influence their integration into

the class. The lack of sense of belonging is central to putting these students at risk. Educators working with refugee children may not be aware of many of the emotional challenges experienced by the students. Literature shows that many teachers working with refugee children experience challenges in supporting the newcomers with their emotional stress (Szente et al., 2006). In order for Somali refugee children to experience successful integration into the school system, it is important for the educators to learn about their emotional challenges and to think about how to best support them. Culturally responsive teachers treat their students as “people” by demonstrating care and interest in their well-being (Gay, 2000). It is imperative for educators to listen to the newcomers’ stories and challenges, and provide them with care, compassion, and support in solving problems and making social connections at school.

### **Critical Reflections as a Qualitative Researcher**

By volunteering in the Somali community organization—the setting where this study was conducted, the first author was able to support the participants on their learning and to establish a positive connection with them. He treated the children with respect and care, and valued their feelings. The students trusted him, and had a clear understanding that the purpose of this research was to support their school experiences. Therefore, they were comfortable sharing their experiences with him during the semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and they opened up to express their challenges and concerns.

By performing this research, the first author was able to fulfill a long-time dream since his childhood. This dream started 22 years ago when he emigrated from Lebanon to Canada with his family. He was in Grade 7 at that time and was enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. His first couple of years in Canada was very difficult; he experienced many challenges at school with settlement and integration. He experienced being bullied, teased, and called names by other students. In addition, it was difficult to integrate into the mainstream school culture while trying to fulfill his parents’ expectations of maintaining their home culture. These feelings, memories, and experiences remain with him today. As a result of these past experiences, his dream was to perform research on the challenges of refugee children; his intent was to put those challenges and experiences into an academic perspective. His identity helped him appreciate what the study participants shared with him about their experiences.

### **Conclusion**

This paper focuses on Somali refugee students’ premigration experiences in refugee camps before they resettled in Canada. The participants’ experiences revealed that they faced many challenges in refugee camps. Life in refugee camps was very difficult for the children because they had limited access to food, water, clothes, and adequate shelter. Most of the students in this study did not attend school in refugee camps and they come to Canada with limited or no formal education experiences. These discoveries were consistent with the findings discussed in various literature on the challenges refugee children faced related to trauma, health, and learning before resettlement in a host country (Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Vongkhamphra et al., 2011). The premigration challenges experienced by the participants were the main cause of the social, emotional, and academic challenges that emerged when they attended school in Canada.

Members of the school community including educators, administrators, and students, have a major role to play in helping Somali refugee students integrate into the school system. Since Somali refugee students experienced many difficulties and hardships in refugee camps, educators working with them need to create a welcoming environment in which the students would feel safe, welcomed, and cared for. It is also best for educators to become familiar with the students’

premigration challenges in order to provide assistance tailored to their specific needs. Particularly, it is essential for educators to provide Somali refugee students with emotional and mental support to help them deal with challenges of resettlement, and the stress and frustrations caused by their experiences in refugee camps.

To this end, we attempted to disseminate the findings from this study as widely as possible. We presented this research at the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada Annual Conference. The final report of this research was shared with professionals at the board of education and schools to which the participants belong. Where possible, the final report was specifically shared with superintendents, administrators, teachers, school support staff, social workers, special education coordinators, school psychologists, school nurses, and other professionals working with refugee students in the southwestern region of Ontario where this research took place. The first author presented a staff manual, which consists of findings, stories, and recommendations at school professional development and workshop events.

To implement these strategies and recommendations, it is imperative for educators working with Somali refugee students to adopt a culturally responsive approach to education. Such approach will help educators learn about the newcomers' premigration and postmigration experiences, to tailor support to meet their needs. As Ladson-Billings (1995) described, a culturally responsive approach to education will help educators in learning about the students' background experiences and cultural practices, and will assist the newcomers in feeling welcomed, appreciated, and included in the education process.

This study has benefited directly and indirectly the students who participated in the research. One direct benefit to the participants was giving them an opportunity to share their experiences and challenges with someone. As a result of this research, the participants' challenges and experiences will be understood by educators working directly with them; the strategies and recommendations shared in this paper will help improve the experiences of Somali refugee students in schools. The findings from this research could also help teachers develop additional approaches and strategies to meet the needs of refugee students in their classes. Since various literature shows that there is a need for teachers training for those who are working with refugee students (Loerke, 2009; Ministry of Education of British Columbia, 2009; Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2013), the findings from this research could help develop workshops and professional development opportunities geared towards understanding the experiences of refugee students and help provide training on effective education practices.

This study demonstrates a need for further research to explore effective ways of helping refugee students to deal with issues such as stress, mental health, and frustration associated with settlement and integration into school in their host country. Educators working with Somali refugee students may have in their classroom other refugee students who came from different countries throughout the world. The experiences, challenges, and needs of all these newcomers may be similar or different. It would be important to determine in a future study whether refugee students from different countries and background experience similar premigration challenges. This will help educators understand and deal with the specific needs of refugee students from different countries.

Finally, through the stories and perspectives of the refugee students, especially those with Somali background, this study contributes to the existing literature by filling the gap of the missing voices of refugee students (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010; Prior & Niesz, 2013). With the current influx of refugees, particularly Syrian refugees, in Canada and other host countries, the findings

from this research and the strategies shared will be of great interest to educators working with refugee children from different regions of the world.

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